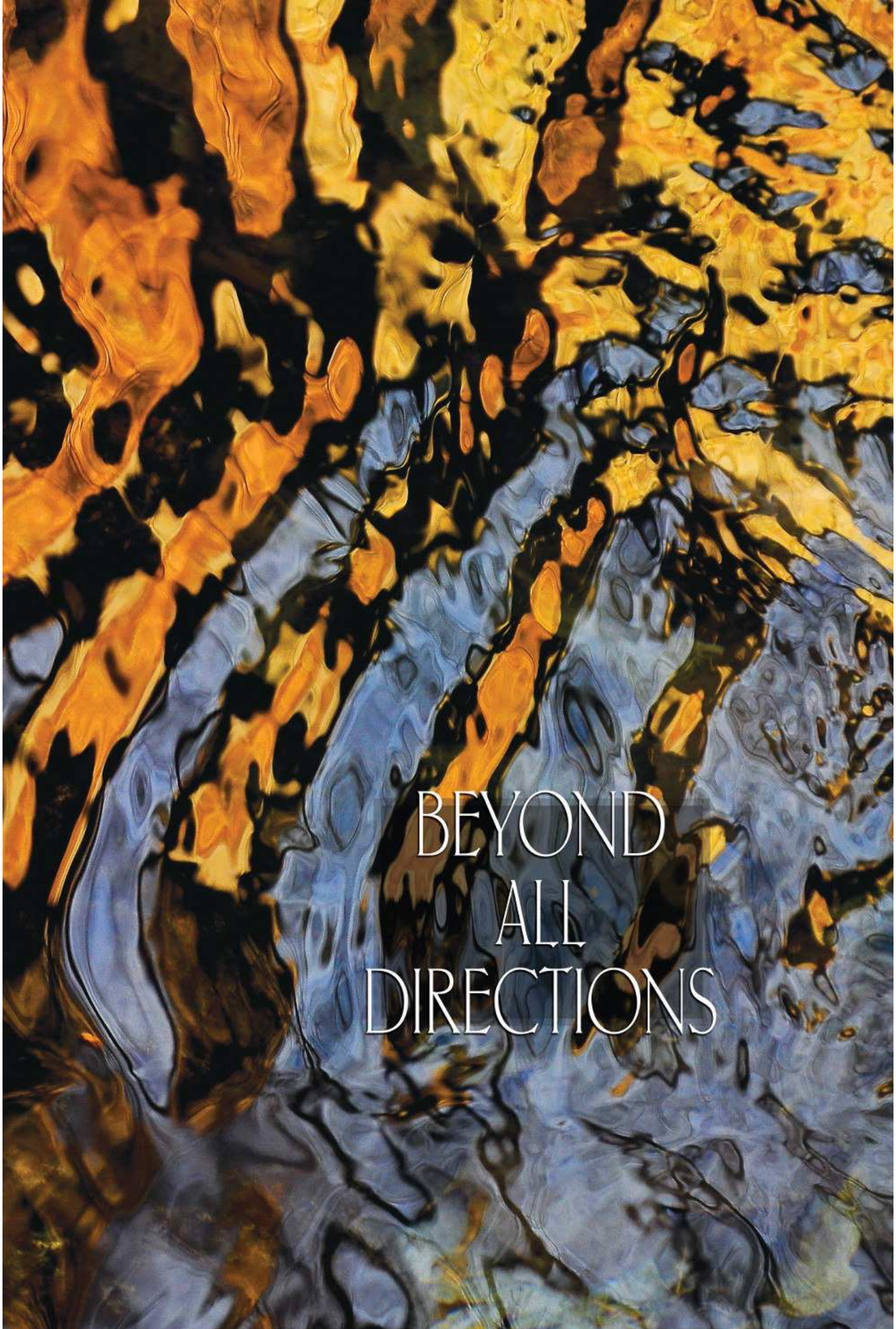
BEYOND
ALL
DIRECTIONS

Beyond All Directions

Essays on the Buddhist Path

by

ṬHĀNISSARO BHIKKHU
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f o r f r e e d i s t r i b u t i o n

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These and other essays on Buddhist practice are available on the Internet at www.accesstoinsight.org and www. dhammatalks.org.

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Beyond All Directions

refuge in the buddha, dhamma, & sangha

If you'd had the opportunity to approach the Buddha and ask to be his student, he would have expected a few things of you: to be honest and observant, to show him respect, to pay him careful attention, and to try your best to master the skills he taught. When you met these conditions, he in turn would have felt some obligations to you: to give you thorough instructions, to test you to make sure you understood the instructions, and—most interestingly—to provide what he called, "protection in all directions."

The idea that teachers should offer protection to their students was apparently common in ancient India. This is one of the reasons why people would seek out teachers. It also explains why many people, on becoming convinced that the Buddha was the teacher they wanted, would take refuge in him, in his Dhamma (his teachings), and in his Saṅgha of monks. They wanted the protection offered by him, his teachings, and those who also lived by those teachings.

The type of protection offered by different teachers in ancient India would depend on the skills they taught and the dangers from which they felt those skills would offer protection. This was not simply a cultural oddity from the Buddha's time. Researchers have found that people are most likely to master skills when they have a keen sense of the dangers that come from *not* mastering those skills, and of the safety that comes when the skills are thoroughly mastered.

In the Buddha's case, the skill he taught led to the safety of nibbāna, free from the dangers of aging, illness, and death. In fact, although we think of nibbāna as *the* name for the final goal of his teachings, it was only one of many names he gave to that goal. Some of those names—*shelter, island, harbor, security,* and *refuge* itself—make the point that his teaching is aimed at safety. Others—*the ageless, the undecaying, the beyond, the deathless, the ultimate*—indicate that this safety is of an extraordinary sort: the ultimate protection

from any and all dangers, the ultimate refuge to which anyone might go. Once you've reached this refuge, the Buddha has more than fulfilled his responsibility to protect you in all directions, for he's pointed you to a refuge that goes beyond all directions, a protection transcending the confines of space and time.

However, the Buddha also saw two types of dangers within space and time that can stand in the way of your achieving this refuge: outside dangers and inside ones. The world around you is a dangerous place; and your mind, a dangerous mind. Outside dangers come in the form of other people's examples and teachings that might discourage you from making the effort to follow the path to nibbāna. Inside dangers come from your own greed, aversion, and delusion, which can totally block any desire to follow the path.

In fact, these inside dangers are what leave you susceptible to unskillful outside influences to begin with. If you were innately trustworthy and good, bad outside influences would have no power over you. But, as the Buddha pointed out, the mind is capable of anything. And although he was a master of finding apt analogies, he had to admit that he could find none to adequately describe how quickly the mind can reverse itself. Love can turn to hate, good qualities to vicious ones, and even "the flash of an eye" is slow by comparison. Only when trained can the mind become its own refuge, and only when gaining a sense of heedfulness—the realization that its actions can cause harm, but that the harm can be avoided through careful effort—will it willingly undergo training. Only when it sees the dangers it's capable of producing will it look for external refuges under which to train.

This is why, in his capacity as a responsible teacher, the Buddha recommended that his students—after gaining a sense of heedfulness—take refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha as a first step in overcoming both the outside and inside dangers that stand in the way of the ultimate refuge of nibbāna.

When, having gone
to the Buddha, Dhamma,
& Saṅgha for refuge,
you see with right discernment
the four noble truths—
    stress,
    the cause of stress,

the transcending of stress,
& the noble eightfold path,
the way to the stilling of stress:
that's the secure refuge,
that, the supreme refuge,
that is the refuge,
having gone to which,
you gain release
from all suffering & stress. — *Dhp 190–192*

To offer protection against outside dangers to that supreme refuge, the Buddha offered himself as what he called an "admirable friend." Through the example of his life and the content of his teachings, he made it possible for others to realize that nibbāna is an attainable and desirable goal. In a famous exchange, when his disciple Ānanda thought it was generous to say that having admirable friends is half of the holy life, the Buddha replied No: It's the whole. Of course, given the nature of the path to nibbāna, the Buddha couldn't tread the path for his students. He wasn't a sufficient cause for their awakening, but he was a necessary one. Only by having his example and his teachings would his students possess a reliable touchstone against which they might measure other examples and teachings as to what human beings can and should attain. Without that touchstone, they could easily fall prey to teachings that would lower their sights—and to their own internal qualities that would be happy to keep their sights low. Having that touchstone would allow them to expand their horizons and raise their aspirations to a higher level.

Because he wouldn't live forever, the Buddha also trained his students so that they could be admirable friends for succeeding generations. This is why the Saṅgha—in both its traditional forms, *monastic* and *noble*—is counted as one of the three refuges. The monastic Saṅgha has kept the teachings alive; and the noble Saṅgha—the Saṅgha of the Buddha's awakened disciples, both lay and ordained—have kept his example alive to the present day. (The modern sense of *saṅgha*, as any group that meditates, cannot provide these sorts of refuge, which is why a wise policy would be to revive the traditional name for such a group—*parisā*—to avoid confusion.) It's because of both types of Saṅgha that admirable friends on the path are still with us.

As for the Dhamma, it offers external protection in making clear what

should and shouldn't be done if you want to follow the path to nibbāna. The basic operating principle of the Dhamma is that your actions—thoughts, words, and deeds—make a difference, and that the difference can range from long-term suffering through long-term happiness, and on to the happiness of nibbāna, which, because it's beyond space and time, is beyond long-term.

This is why the teachings on action, or karma, are so central to the Buddha's message. Contrary to popular belief, the Buddha did not teach fatalism. In fact, he was extremely critical of fatalism—the belief that your experiences are already determined from causes in the past—because fatalism denies that your present actions can make a difference. In one of his discourses, he notes that fatalism leaves you without protection, for it allows no foundation for even the idea of what should and shouldn't be done. If everything is predetermined, there's no way of saying that one action is good and another bad. Everything is just the way it has to be.

The Buddha's teaching on karma, however, focuses on the fact that while your experiences are influenced to some extent by actions from the past, the way you experience those influences depends on what you do with them in the present. In fact, without the karma of your present actions, you wouldn't experience anything at all.

So the Buddha's teaching on karma is one of the ways in which the Dhamma offers external protection: It emphasizes the importance of your present actions—providing for the possibility of "should be done" and "shouldn't be done"—at the same time offering clear guidelines for figuring out, in any situation, where the shoulds and shouldn'ts lie. This is one of the ways in which the Buddha's Dhamma offers external protection in all directions. It gives you tools to discern, regardless of time or place, which actions always lead to long-term suffering, which ones always lead to long-term happiness, and then lets you decide for yourself which path you want to follow.

In choosing to follow the Buddha's path to happiness—both long-term and beyond long-term—which you've learned from the external level, you begin to take refuge on the internal level. In other words, you internalize the examples provided by the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha, developing them in your own thoughts, words, and deeds. This is a form of refuge in that you protect yourself from the dangers that would come from following unskillful actions and habits of mind.

Internalizing the refuge of the Buddha means developing the three main qualities he embodied: discernment, compassion, and purity. To do this, you look to the Dhamma for advice on how to foster these qualities within yourself. Discernment, it says, comes from trying to find an answer to the question, "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" Compassion comes from realizing that other beings love themselves as much as you love yourself, and so your happiness should never depend on causing them harm. Otherwise, it won't last. Purity comes from examining the actual results of each action—before, during, and after the action—to see if it will cause, is causing, or has caused anyone any affliction. If it *will* cause affliction, you don't do it. If it *is* causing affliction, you stop. If it *has* caused affliction, you talk it over with a reliable friend and then resolve never to repeat that mistake. If it didn't cause any affliction, you take joy in being harmless and continue with your training in skillful actions.

The beauty of these basic instructions for cultivating discernment, compassion, and purity is that they harness our desire for genuine happiness. From the Buddha's point of view, the pursuit of happiness doesn't have to be narrow or selfish. When conducted intelligently, it can lead to noble, expansive qualities of mind. At the same time, these instructions show that the virtues of the Buddha grow within you, not by denying your desire for happiness, but by training it to be truly effective. Although this training requires doing battle with the greed, aversion, and delusion within you, it doesn't require that you deny what, deep down inside, you really want: a happiness you can trust. This is what helps to make your inner refuge secure.

Internalizing the refuge of the Saṅgha means developing these same three qualities of discernment, compassion, and purity, for these are the qualities that the noble Saṅgha have developed as they themselves have internalized the refuge of the Buddha. The noble Saṅgha also provide the added dimension of showing the advantages of practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma as the Buddha taught it, and not in line with their own preconceived notions. In other words, instead of revising the Dhamma to fit in with their preferences, they put their preferences aside and adjust themselves to fit with the Dhamma. When you follow this example, you gain an internal refuge of reliable conduct.

You're also internalizing the refuge of the Dhamma. All the good qualities taught by the Dhamma, when you develop them in your thoughts, words, and deeds, provide protection on the internal level. But most interesting in this

regard are the teachings that the Buddha specifically cited as offering protection. In one discourse (AN 7:63), he compares the qualities of mind developed in the practice to the requisites of a well-defended frontier fortress. In another (AN 10:17), he lists ten external habits and inner qualities, calling each of them a "protector." In yet another (Sn 2:4), he answers a question about protective charms by citing 38 habits and qualities—from avoiding fools to attaining nibbāna—as genuinely effective protective charms.

These three discourses, which follow this article, describe in detail the principles to internalize to give yourself protection. But as an overview, it's important to note that protection touches on all aspects of your thoughts, words, and deeds—the way you engage with other people, the way you look after your livelihood, and the qualities you develop within yourself in dealing with your own mind. You avoid causing harm while, at the same time, mastering skills that allow you to be truly helpful to others and to look after yourself with ease. As you do this, you—through your thoughts, words, and deeds—*become* Dhamma. Taking refuge in the Dhamma on the internal level allows you to begin to rely on yourself.

> *Your own self is*
> *your own mainstay,*
> *for who else could your mainstay be?*
> *With you yourself well-trained*
> *you obtain the mainstay*
> *hard to obtain. — Dhp 160*

Only when you've thoroughly trained yourself to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma can you reliably act as your own refuge. Your mind becomes less quick to reverse itself, and less inclined to cause harm. This is why, in the Buddha's injunction to be your own refuge, he equates it with taking the Dhamma as refuge, defining both in internal terms: the practice of the four types of right mindfulness, which in turn function as the themes of right concentration, the culminating factor of the path.

> *"And how does a monk live with himself as his island, himself as his refuge, with no other as his refuge; with the Dhamma as his island, the Dhamma as his refuge, with no other as his refuge? There is the case where a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself—ardent, alert, & mindful*

—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings in & of themselves… mind in & of itself… mental qualities in & of themselves—ardent, alert, & mindful— subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. … For those who, now or when I am gone, live with themselves as their island, themselves as their refuge, with no other as their refuge; with the Dhamma as their island, the Dhamma as their refuge, not with another as their refuge, will be my foremost monks: those who are desirous of training." — *DN 16*

Once the path is completely internalized and developed, it opens to the ultimate refuge of the deathless. The path doesn't *cause* the deathless—if the deathless were caused, it wouldn't be deathless, for it would die when its causes ran out—but the practice of the path leads to the deathless, in the same way that a road leading to the Grand Canyon doesn't cause the Grand Canyon to be, but following it can take you there. That's why the path is called the path: It takes you to where you want to go.

So, all in all, the act of going for refuge occurs on three levels: external, internal, and—beyond external and internal—the level of nibbāna. These three levels can be summarized in two different ways: in terms of what they protect you from, and in terms of what they depend on to protect you.

In terms of what they protect you from: The first level protects you from the unskillful actions of others; the second level, from your own unskillful actions; and the third level, from the results of all actions, skillful and not. After all, even skillful actions don't last forever. They can provide long-term happiness, but long-term isn't forever. Only when you've reached the dimension beyond time are you totally free from the vagaries of time. Only then is your happiness totally secure.

In terms of what the three levels depend on: In the first level, you learn to choose others you can reliably depend on. In the second level, you learn to make yourself reliable so you can depend on yourself. In the third level you abandon both "self" and "others," for you've found something that, because it's unconditioned, doesn't need to depend on anyone or anything at all.

Once your happiness is secure in this way, you can engage in the world without being exposed to its dangers—for your mind is free from the dangers it used to pose for itself. And you pose no dangers to the world. Because you don't need others for your happiness, your relationships with them can be pure.

In fact, now that you are a member of the noble Saṅgha, you can offer them an external refuge as well, in the example of your thoughts, words, and deeds.

In this way, the act of going for refuge is a gift not only to yourself. It's a gift—an offering of safety and protection—that extends to everyone in every direction.

READINGS

"Just as the royal frontier fortress has a foundation post—deeply rooted, well embedded, immovable, & unshakable—for the protection of those within and to ward off those without; in the same way a disciple of the noble ones has conviction, is convinced of the Tathāgata's [Buddha's] Awakening: 'Indeed, the Blessed One is worthy and rightly self-awakened, consummate in knowledge & conduct, well-gone, a knower of the cosmos, an unexcelled trainer of those persons ready to be tamed, teacher of human & divine beings, awakened, blessed.' With conviction as his foundation post, the disciple of the noble ones abandons what is unskillful, develops what is skillful, abandons what is blameworthy, develops what is blameless, and looks after himself with purity. ...

"Just as the royal frontier fortress has a moat, both deep & wide, for the protection of those within and to ward off those without; in the same way, the disciple of the noble ones has a sense of shame. He feels shame at [the thought of engaging in] bodily misconduct, verbal misconduct, mental misconduct. He feels shame at falling into evil, unskillful actions. With shame as his moat, the disciple of the noble ones abandons what is unskillful, develops what is skillful, abandons what is blameworthy, develops what is blameless, and looks after himself with purity. ...

"Just as the royal frontier fortress has an encircling road, both high & wide, for the protection of those within and to ward off those without; in the same way, the disciple of the noble ones has compunction. He feels compunction about [the suffering that would result from] bodily misconduct, verbal misconduct, mental misconduct. He feels compunction about falling into evil, unskillful actions. With compunction as his encircling road, the disciple of the noble ones abandons what is unskillful, develops what is skillful, abandons what is blameworthy, develops what is blameless, and looks after himself with purity. ...

"Just as the royal frontier fortress has many weapons stored, both arrows & things to be hurled, for the protection of those within and to ward off those without; in the same way, the disciple of the noble ones has heard much, has retained what he has heard, has stored what he has heard. Whatever teachings are admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end, that—in their meaning & expression—proclaim the holy life that is entirely complete & pure: those he has listened to often, retained, discussed, accumulated, examined with his mind, and well-penetrated in terms of his views. With learning as his weapons, the disciple of the noble ones abandons what is unskillful, develops what is skillful, abandons what is blameworthy, develops what is blameless, and looks after himself with purity. ...

"Just as the royal frontier fortress has a large army stationed within—elephant soldiers, cavalry, charioteers, bowmen, standard-bearers, billeting officers, soldiers of the supply corps, noted princes, commando heroes, infantry, & slaves—for the protection of those within and to ward off those without; in the same way a disciple of the noble ones keeps his persistence aroused for abandoning unskillful mental qualities and taking on skillful mental qualities, is steadfast, solid in his effort, not shirking his duties with regard to skillful mental qualities. With persistence as his army, the disciple of the noble ones abandons what is unskillful, develops what is skillful, abandons what is blameworthy, develops what is blameless, and looks after himself with purity. ...

"Just as the royal frontier fortress has a gatekeeper—wise, experienced, intelligent—to keep out those he doesn't know and to let in those he does, for the protection of those within and to ward off those without; in the same way a disciple of the noble ones is mindful, endowed with excellent proficiency in mindfulness, remembering & able to call to mind even things that were done & said long ago. With mindfulness as his gatekeeper, the disciple of the noble ones abandons what is unskillful, develops what is skillful, abandons what is blameworthy, develops what is blameless, and looks after himself with purity. ...

"Just as the royal frontier fortress has ramparts—high & thick & completely covered with plaster—for the protection of those within and to ward off those without; in the same way a disciple of the noble ones is discerning, endowed with discernment of arising & passing away—noble, penetrating, leading to the right ending of stress. With discernment as his

covering of plaster, the disciple of the noble ones abandons what is unskillful, develops what is skillful, abandons what is blameworthy, develops what is blameless, and looks after himself with purity. ...

"These are the seven true qualities with which he is endowed.

"And which are the four jhānas—heightened mental states that provide a pleasant abiding in the here-&-now—that he can obtain at will, without difficulty, without trouble?

"Just as a royal frontier fortress has large stores of grass, timber, & water for the delight, convenience, & comfort of those within, and to ward off those without; in the same way the disciple of the noble ones, quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities, enters & remains in the first jhāna —rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation—for his own delight, convenience, & comfort, and to alight on Unbinding.

"Just as a royal frontier fortress has large stores of rice & barley 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 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—for his own delight, convenience, & comfort, and to alight on Unbinding.

"Just as a royal frontier fortress has large stores of sesame, green gram, & other beans 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 fading of rapture, remains equanimous, mindful, & alert, and senses pleasure with the body. He enters & remains in the third jhāna—of which the noble ones declare, 'Equanimous & mindful, he has a pleasant abiding'—for his own delight, convenience, & comfort, and to alight on Unbinding.

"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 joy & distress, 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.

"These are the four jhānas—heightened mental states that provide a pleasant abiding in the here-&-now—that he can obtain at will, without difficulty, without trouble.

"When a disciple of the noble ones is endowed with these seven true qualities and can obtain at will—without difficulty, without trouble—these four jhānas, heightened mental states that provide a pleasant abiding in the here-&-now, he is said to be a disciple of the noble ones who can't be undone by Mara, can't be undone by the Evil One." — *AN 7:63*

"Live with a protector, monks, and not without a protector. He suffers, one who lives without a protector. And these ten are qualities creating a protector. Which ten?

"There is the case where a monk is virtuous. He dwells restrained in accordance with the Pāṭimokkha [the basic code of monastic rules], consummate in his behavior & sphere of activity. He trains himself, having undertaken the training rules, seeing danger in the slightest faults. And the fact that he is virtuous... seeing danger in the slightest faults, is a quality creating a protector.

"Then again, the monk has heard much, has retained what he has heard, has stored what he has heard. Whatever teachings are admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end, that—in their meaning and expression—proclaim the holy life that is entirely complete and pure: those he has listened to often, retained, discussed, accumulated, examined with his mind, & well-penetrated in terms of his views. And the fact that he has heard much... well-penetrated in terms of his views, is a quality creating a protector.

"Then again, the monk has admirable friends, admirable comrades, admirable companions. And the fact that he has admirable friends, admirable comrades, admirable companions is a quality creating a protector.

"Then again, the monk is easy to speak to, endowed with qualities that make him easy to speak to, patient, respectful to instruction. And the fact that he is easy to speak to ... respectful to instruction, is a quality creating a protector.

"Then again, the monk is adept at the various affairs involving his fellows in the holy life; is vigorous, quick-witted in the techniques involved in them, is up

to doing them or arranging to get them done. And the fact that he is adept at… doing them or arranging to get them done is a quality creating a protector.

"Then again, the monk is one who desires the Dhamma, endearing in his conversation, greatly rejoicing in the higher Dhamma & higher Discipline. And the fact that he is one who desires the Dhamma, endearing in his conversation, greatly rejoicing in the higher Dhamma & higher Discipline, is a quality creating a protector.

"Then again, the monk keeps his persistence aroused for abandoning unskillful qualities and for taking on skillful qualities. He is steadfast, solid in his effort, not shirking his duties with regard to skillful qualities. And the fact that he keeps his persistence aroused… not shirking his duties with regard to skillful qualities, is a quality creating a protector.

"Then again, the monk is content with any old robe cloth at all, any old alms food, any old lodging, any old medicinal requisites for curing sickness at all. And the fact that he is content with any old robe cloth at all, any old alms food, any old lodging, any old medicinal requisites for curing sickness at all, is a quality creating a protector.

"Then again, the monk is mindful, endowed with excellent proficiency in mindfulness, remembering & recollecting what was done and said a long time ago. And the fact that he is mindful, endowed with excellent proficiency in mindfulness, remembering & recollecting what was done and said a long time ago, is a quality creating a protector.

"Then again, the monk is discerning, endowed with discernment of arising & passing away—noble, penetrating, leading to the right ending of stress. And the fact that the monk is discerning, endowed with discernment of arising & passing away—noble, penetrating, leading to the right ending of stress, is a quality creating a protector.

"Live with a protector, monks, and not without a protector. He suffers, one who lives without a protector. These are the ten qualities creating a protector." — *AN 10:17*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A mind that, when touched

by the ways of the world,
is unshaken, sorrowless, dustless, secure:
    This is the highest protective charm.

Everywhere undefeated
when acting in this way,
people go everywhere in well-being:

    This is their highest protective charm." — *Sn 2:4*

Lost in Quotation

Many people who don't know much about old Buddhist texts often know one passage from the Pali Canon: the part of the Kālāma Sutta (AN) 3:65) stating that old texts can't be trusted.

Quotes from this passage come in many shapes and sizes. Some of them are short sound bites, like the message that was rubber-stamped on the envelope of a letter I once received:

> *Follow your own sense of right and wrong. — The Buddha*

There's also the desktop wallpaper:

> *Believe nothing, no matter who said it, not even if I said it, if it doesn't fit in with your own reason and common sense. — The Buddha*

Even scholarly citations of the sutta give the same message. Here's the entire quote from the sutta in a recent book:

> *"When you know for yourselves that these things are wholesome… these things, when entered upon and undertaken, incline toward welfare and happiness—then, Kālāmas, having come to them you should stay with them."*

Taken together, these quotes justify our tendency to pick what we like from the old texts and throwing the rest away. No need to understand the larger context of the Dhamma they teach, the Buddha seems to be saying. You're better off rolling your own.

But if you look at the entire passage in the Kālāma Sutta, you discover that these quotes give only part of the picture. The Buddha's skepticism toward reliable authorities extends inside as well as out:

> *"So in this case, Kālāmas, don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture,* by logical deduction, by inference, by analogies, by

agreement through pondering views, by probability, *or by the thought, 'This contemplative is our teacher.'"*

Notice the words in plain face, the ones that usually get dropped from the quote or sloughed over when they're included. When the Buddha says that you can't go by logical deduction, inference, or analogies, he's saying that you can't always trust your sense of reason. When he says that you can't go by agreement through pondering views (i.e., what seems to fit in with what you already believe) or by probability, he's saying that you can't always trust your common sense. And of course, you can't always trust teachers, scriptures, or traditions. So where *can* you place your trust? You have to put things to the test in your own thoughts, words, and deeds, to see what actually leads to suffering and what leads to its end.

"When you know for yourselves that, 'These dhammas are unskillful; these dhammas are blameworthy; these dhammas are criticized by the wise; these dhammas, when adopted & carried out, lead to harm & to suffering'—then you should abandon them."

"When you know for yourselves that, 'These dhammas are skillful; these dhammas are blameless; these dhammas are praised by the wise; these dhammas, when adopted & carried out, lead to welfare & to happiness'—then you should enter & remain in them."

The word "dhamma" in these passages means three things in one: teaching, mental quality, and action. Teachings are naturally related to the mind states and actions they inspire, so they should be judged by the results they give when put into action. True dhamma is what works in leading to genuine well-being. False dhamma is what doesn't.

But even when judging the results of your own actions, you can't simply take your own ideas of "what works" as a trustworthy standard. After all, you can easily side with your greed, aversion, or delusion, setting your standards too low. So to check against this tendency, the Buddha recommends that you also take into consideration the views of the wise, so that you can raise your standards to theirs.

Now, if you're expecting quick access to a totally reliable authority, this may sound like a catch: If you're not wise enough to trust your own judgment, how can you recognize who's really wise? But it's not a catch. It's simply the

way we have to operate when developing any kind of skill—your appreciation of good carpentry, for example, grows as you master carpentry yourself—and the Buddha is making the point that this is how to approach the dhamma: as a skill to be mastered. As with any skill, your inner sensitivity and assurance as to who's truly wise in the skill grows only through your willingness to learn.

In giving advice on how to learn this skill, the Buddha is speaking, not with the authority of your creator who can tell you what you have to believe, but with the authority of an expert in his field, one who knows from experience what does and doesn't work. If you want to learn from him, you're wise to accept his observations on how it's best done. The first thing to recognize is that there are others who have mastered the skill before you and that they have some important things to teach.

Among the things they'll teach you, of course, is what they've learned from the wise before them, going back to the Buddha. Some of this knowledge can be passed on in words, but in a list of the qualities to look for—and to learn from—the wise, the Buddha shows that there's more to wisdom than just words. A person worthy of respect, he says at AN 7:64, should have a sense of seven things: the dhamma, its meaning, oneself, enough, the right time and place, social gatherings, and how to judge individual people.

What's striking about this list is that only the first two qualities deal with verbal knowledge. *Having a sense of the dhamma* means knowing what the Buddha did and didn't say; *having a sense of meaning* means knowing how to explain the dhamma's difficult concepts and ideas: the general principles that express its values, and the basic techniques for implementing them. These are things we can pick up from dhamma talks and books.

But the Buddha didn't teach a one-size-fits-all-in-every-situation technique. Even his seemingly abstract principles are meant for particular stages in the training. "Not-self," for example, is useful in some instances, and harmful in others. This is why the Buddha added the last five members of the list: the sensitivities that turn the techniques and principles into genuine skills.

Having a sense of oneself means knowing your strengths and weaknesses in terms of conviction, virtue, learning, generosity, discernment, and quick-wittedness. In other words, you know which qualities are important to focus on, and can assess objectively where you still have more work to do.

Having a sense of enough applies primarily to your use of the requisites of life

—food, clothing, shelter, and medicine—but it can also apply to intangibles, such as when you need less desire, effort, concentration, or thinking in your practice, and when you need more.

Having a sense of time means knowing when to listen, when to memorize what you've heard, when to ask questions, and when to go off into seclusion and practice on your own.

Having a sense of social gatherings means knowing how to speak and behave with people from different backgrounds and classes of society.

Having a sense of individuals means knowing how to judge which people are worthy of emulation in their pursuit of the dhamma and which ones are not.

Even though we can talk about these last five qualities, we can't embody them through words. They're habits, and the only way to pick up good habits is by being around good examples: people who've already been trained to embody these qualities in the way they live.

This is why the Buddha—in trying to establish the dhamma for future generations—didn't just leave a body of teachings. He also set up the monastic saṅgha and organized it to carry on the tradition of all seven of these qualities: his habits as well as his words. To ensure that the standard of the dhamma would last over time, he first made it clear that he didn't want anyone tampering with his teachings.

> *"Monks, these two slander the Tathāgata. Which two? One who explains what was not said or spoken by the Tathāgata as said or spoken by the Tathāgata. And one who explains what was said or spoken by the Tathāgata as not said or spoken by the Tathāgata. These are the two who slander the Tathāgata."* — *AN 2:23*

It's easy to understand why the Buddha phrased this so strongly. He had chosen his words with great care, and wanted the same level of care in those who quoted him. Fidelity, in his eyes, was an act of compassion. He intended his words to be taken as a standard for what was and wasn't dhamma—anything consistent with his words was to be accepted as dhamma; anything inconsistent, to be rejected as not—so it's only natural that he'd warn his followers not to muddy the standard. Otherwise, later generations would have no trustworthy guide in their search to end suffering.

So in addition to establishing principles for determining what he did and

didn't teach, he also set up protocols for how the saṅgha should settle disagreements on this issue when they arose.

To ensure that the meaning of the dhamma would be passed on, he established the principle that teachers should be open to questioning. He didn't want them to engage in what he called bombast: empty words "the work of poets, the work of outsiders, artful in sound, artful in expression." He encouraged his students to focus on teaching the end of suffering, and to encourage their students to dissect those teachings to make their meaning clear. Understanding occurs best when there's an opportunity for an open dialogue in good faith.

To transmit the habits of the dhamma, the Buddha designed the ideal teacher-student relationship on the model of an apprenticeship. You live with the teacher for a minimum of five years, attending to the teacher's needs, as a way of observing—and being observed by—the teacher in all sorts of situations.

And to allow for the fact that your sense of judgment develops over time, the Buddha didn't force you to commit to a teacher for life. You look for someone who, as far as you can see, has integrity, but if you sense with time that integrity is lacking, you're free to look for a new teacher.

At the same time, the Buddha realized that not everyone would have the time or inclination to undergo this apprenticeship, so he arranged a division of labor. The monks and nuns who had passed through apprenticeship were to live, not in cloisters, but in places where lay people would be free to come and learn from the fruits of their training.

So it's obvious that the Buddha didn't have a casual or cavalier attitude toward the preservation of his words and habits. Knowing the difficulties he'd encountered in discovering the dhamma, he didn't trust us—with our greed, aversion, and delusion—to discover it on our own. He knew we'd need help. And although he foresaw that his teachings would someday disappear, he didn't simply resign himself to change or trust that it would always work out for the best. He established a wide range of safeguards to ensure that reliable words and models of behavior would survive as long as possible.

But in the cut-and-paste Buddhism developing around us in the West, many of these safeguards have been dropped. In particular, the idea of apprenticeship—so central in mastering the habits of the dhamma as a skill—is almost totally lacking. Dhamma principles are reduced to vague generalities,

and the techniques for testing them are stripped to a bare, assembly-line minimum.

We reassure ourselves that the changes we've made in Buddhism are all for the best—that Buddhism has always adapted itself to every culture it enters, and we can trust it to adapt wisely to the West. But this treats Buddhism as if it were a conscious agent—a wise amoebic force that knows how to adapt to its environment in order to survive. Actually, Buddhism isn't an agent, and it doesn't adapt. It gets adapted—sometimes by people who know what they're doing, sometimes by people who don't. Just because a particular adaptation survives and prevails doesn't mean that it's genuine dhamma. It may simply appeal to the desires and fears of its target audience.

Certainly we in the West are easy targets for the idea that the Buddha wants us to cut and paste his dhamma as we like. Many of us have been burned by religious authorities and we don't want to risk getting burned again. There's also our cultural pride: We like to think that we can see more clearly than Asian Buddhist what's of genuine value in their traditions and what's simply cultural baggage—as if we didn't have cultural baggage of our own. And how do we know what's "just baggage"? A beat-up old suitcase might contain your jewelry and keys.

So is a designer dhamma what we really want? As the Buddha noted, one of the natural reactions to suffering is to search for someone who can give good advice on how to put an end to it. When offered the choice, wouldn't you prefer reliable guidance on how to end your suffering rather than a do-it-yourself kit with vague instructions and no guarantees?

Or are there those who would benefit if you bought the kit? People sometimes argue that in our diverse, postmodern world we need a postmodern Buddhism in which no one's interpretation can be criticized as wrong. But that's trading the possibility of total freedom from suffering for something much less: freedom from criticism. And it ignores the other side of the postmodernist equation: that our perceived wants can be overwhelmingly shaped by the interests of institutions who want something out of us. One of the common ruses of privatization is to offer us less, dress it up as more, so that we'll pay more for it. Is that what's happening here?

The Buddha wasn't so naïve as to think that we can always know what's in our own best interest. He saw long before the postmoderns that there's plenty

to mistrust both in old texts and in our own ideas of what seems reasonable. Yet he did the postmoderns one better by offering a solution to this dilemma. It would be a shame if, sold on the idea of designing our own Dhamma, we let his solution die.

An All-around Eye

We live in a culture that likes to reduce things to soundbites, catchwords, buzzwords, quick and easy ways of boiling things down. As a result, when we come to the Dhamma, we find soundbite Dhamma, catchword and buzzword Dhamma. We're told that Buddhism boils down to one particular practice, like noting, mindfulness, or spreading thoughts of lovingkindness. Sometimes we're told that it teaches just a handful of basic principles: letting go, equanimity, emptiness, contentment, compassion. If that's all we know of the Dhamma, we miss the fact that it has many dimensions. It does contain all of these things, but it also contains more. It can't be reduced to just one principle.

When you approach the practice, you have to be alert to its many dimensions: sensitive not only to how you deal with your own mind, but also to how dealing with your own mind affects your relationships to other people and to the things you depend on for life. When you want to gauge how the practice is going, and to gain a sense of which teachings really are useful when applied in a particular way, you have to look at things from several angles. Just as the Buddha was said to have an "all-around eye," you have to look at your practice from all sides.

The Buddha taught his stepmother, Mahāpajāpatī, this multiple perspective, giving her a list of eight tests for what counts and what doesn't count as Dhamma and Vinaya (AN 8:53). "Dhamma," here, means teachings, actions, and mental qualities. "Vinaya" means the healthy, effective way of disciplining those actions and qualities. You want to make sure that your actions pass all eight tests if your practice is going to stay on the path.

The list falls into three parts. It starts with two principles focused primarily on the goal: being dispassionate and being unfettered. It also includes two principles concerning inner attitudes that help you reach the goal—persistence and contentment—as well as four principles governing the way you interact with other people as you practice: being modest, shedding your pride, finding seclusion, and being unburdensome. When you gauge any teaching, action, or

mental quality, you have to look at it from all three of these angles if you want to know whether it's true Dhamma or not.

The qualities of the goal—dispassion and being unfettered—are first in the list to show where all the others are aimed. This is what the practice is all about: learning dispassion, learning to free the mind from the ways in which it fetters itself. These two qualities are closely connected. The passion that we feel for the objects of the senses, including objects of the mind, is the fetter that keeps us tied down. The objects themselves don't tie us down. We're the ones who latch onto them, and our clinging is what keeps us trapped.

This fact is reflected in the image the Buddha uses to talk about passion, the way we cling. The word for clinging—*upādāna*—applies not only to holding on, but also to taking sustenance, the way a fire takes sustenance from its fuel. In feeding on the fuel, the fire has to cling to it; in clinging, it's trapped. Only when the fire lets go is it released.

The same with the mind: When we learn how to let go of our passion for sensual obsessions, and then on a deeper level our passion for experiences of forms or formless phenomena in strong concentration, only then are we truly free.

In following this program, the way you practice is going to have an impact on other people. You've got to take that into consideration, along with your responsibility for the material things you depend on. This is why the Buddha includes other tests in his list as well.

In terms of your interactions with others, the Buddha says that true Dhamma teaches you to be modest, to shed your pride, to find seclusion as much as you can, and to be unburdensome. These principles are mutually reinforcing. If you learn to be modest, it helps with seclusion. In other words, you're working on good qualities of the mind to cure yourself. You're not trying to show off. You're not trying to impress people. You're practicing because the mind is like a sick person. It needs medicine to cure its illnesses of greed, aversion, and delusion. Practice is like going to the doctor and taking the medicine he prescribes. You're not doing it to impress anybody. You go because you've got an illness and you need a cure.

These principles tie in with the remaining two, which deal directly with inner attitudes. The first of the two is persistence: putting right effort into practice, the effort of developing skillful qualities that foster the health of the

mind and abandoning the unskillful ones that keep it diseased. This effort, in addition to leading to dispassion, also needs to make use of whatever dispassion you can muster. That's because we all tend to view our unskillful qualities as our friends—we like our greed, aversion, and delusion—and only by developing dispassion for them can we see through that their friendship is false.

The second inner attitude is contentment with the physical conditions surrounding you: the food you eat, the clothes and the robes you wear, the shelter you have. You realize that whatever you get is enough for practice. Contentment fits in with being unburdensome and unentangled, because when you're content, there's less need to be a burden on other people—and less need to be involved with them as well. If you're constantly wanting something, you're going to be looking for someone to provide it. If you learn to be content with what you've got, it's easier to stay in seclusion.

So these eight principles reinforce one another. They also balance out possible imbalances that could occur if you pursued one principle on its own. For instance, being dispassionate and being content, taken on their own, could be interpreted as letting things be as they are without trying to change anything. But simply lying around in total acceptance accomplishes nothing. Persistence, though, balances this.

The Buddha made a clear distinction between physical contentment and contentment with the state of your mind. Physical contentment is a good thing; contentment with your practice can lead to complacency. One of the primary factors that led to his awakening, he said, was that he didn't allow himself to be content with the level of skillfulness he had attained until he reached the ultimate. That's why he used the image of the person whose head is on fire to illustrate the proper attitude toward your unskillful qualities. You rouse all your mindfulness and ardency to put the fire out immediately. You can't just watch with dispassion or contentment when your hair is in flames. If there are problems in the mind, you've got to deal with them as quickly as you can.

There's also the relationship between contentment and being unburdensome. The discourse on the traditions of the noble ones (AN 4:28) lists four qualities, starting with contentment with food, clothing, and shelter. Knowing that there are four requisites, you'd expect that contentment with medicine would be the fourth quality, but it's not. The fourth quality is taking delight in developing, taking delight in abandoning. What happened to

medicine? Looking after your health is a part of being unburdensome. There are many rules in the Canon about which medicines and treatments are allowed to the monks: so many that when Buddhism moved from India to other cultures, it carried Indian medicine along with it. Monks are expected to know how to care for one another when they're ill, to treat one another's diseases. If the body gets diseased, it becomes a burden to other people, especially now that medicine and treatments are so expensive. One of our responsibilities as practitioners is to make sure that we stay healthy—although we have to fight the tendency to get passionate about perfecting the body and being really fit. That's one way you have to look for a balance so that contentment and being unburdensome follow the middle way of moderation.

Another set of balancing qualities are contentment on the one hand, and shedding pride and being modest on the other. Some people like to make a show of how frugal they are. This, the Buddha said, is the danger of developing contentment for the wrong motive. You have to develop modesty and work at shedding any pride around your contentment. Again, the reason for contentment is not to show off. It's medicine for the mind's diseases. And as with many medicines, if you misuse it, it can make your illness even worse.

There many stories from the forest tradition about teachers making sure that their students look at things from many sides, or in Ajaan Lee's words, that the students aren't people with an eye just on one side. There's the story of Ajaan Maha Boowa taking on the ascetic practice of not accepting any food after his alms round. He was very strict with himself about that. He couldn't help noticing, though, that other monks who had taken the same vow at the beginning of the Rains retreat were, one by one, beginning to give in to pressure from lay people who would come late and say, "Please accept our food." This monk gave in, that monk gave in, but Ajaan Maha Boowa didn't give in—and was very proud of the fact. He was going to stick to his vow no matter what. Two or three times during the Rains retreat, though, while he sat waiting for the meal to begin, his bowl in order, his eyes closed, Ajaan Mun would appear out of nowhere with food in his hand to place in the bowl: food that had been brought by late-coming donors. He didn't do it so often that people would think that sticking to the vow was wrong—just enough to warn Ajaan Maha Boowa to watch out for pride.

Another story deals with Ajaan Chah surveying the damage in his monastery after a storm, discovering that one of the huts had half its roof

blown off by the wind. He asked the monk living in the hut, "Why aren't you fixing the roof?" The monk replied, "I'm practicing equanimity, sleeping in the half of the hut that's still sheltered." Ajaan Chah said, "That's the equanimity of a water buffalo. Fix the roof."

So when you're looking at the practice, you have to look at it from many sides. In Ajaan Chah's case, he was pointing out the need to balance contentment with the duty of persistently caring for the fruits of other people's generosity. People have been kind enough to provide you with food, clothing, and shelter. You've got to look after these things. You have to be responsible. You can't let your contentment make you lazy, or your desire to be unfettered make you apathetic. Taking good care of things is part of being unburdensome.

As a living human being, there are many dimensions to what you're doing. Your actions have an impact on your own mind, on other people, and on your physical environment. You have responsibilities in all these areas. Learn how to keep them in balance.

One common misunderstanding is that the Buddha instituted rules to please lay people, so that whatever lay people want, the monks should oblige. That was not always the case. There are many cases where people wanted the monks to behave in a particular way, and the Buddha said No. When monks went out of their way to be smiley, friendly, and perform services for lay people in ways the Buddha felt were inappropriate, he accused them of "corrupting families." In other words, you corrupt them by giving them all the wrong ideas about the role of monks. So despite what the lay people wanted, the Buddha instituted rules against that sort of thing.

Ajaan Fuang talks about being a young boy living in a village temple back in the days when village monks were expected to be doctors for the villagers—even though there are rules against monks performing that sort of service. Ajaan Fuang lost count of how many times someone in the village would fall sick at night, and the abbot had to go look after that person. Ajaan Fuang was the temple boy who had to tag along to carry the medicines. People got used to that kind of service from the monks, and the monks ended up with no time to practice. The forest traditions are really strict about this. The monks are here primarily to cleanse their minds, to put forth the effort to get rid of passion and to unfetter their minds. We don't want to tie them down with responsibilities that get in the way of their primary duty.

This is why the Buddha didn't institute meditation retreat centers. He instituted communities that would live together, look after their surroundings, interact with lay people and, at the very least, be dependent on them for food. This was designed to provide an environment in which both the lay people and the monastics could become sensitive to all these different dimensions of the practice. This way, what might look good from a one-dimensional point of view gets put into a multidimensional perspective, and from this all-around perspective you can see when there's a defilement lurking somewhere in the shadows, like the pride that can come in being overly modest or content, or the laziness that can hide behind being content or dispassionate.

So, remember that the Buddha didn't teach in soundbites. He taught an all-around training. We benefit all-around when we keep these multiple dimensions in mind.

Metta Means Goodwill

Ajaan Fuang, my teacher, once discovered that a snake had moved into his room. Every time he entered the room, he saw it slip into a narrow space behind a storage cabinet. And even though he tried leaving the door to the room open during the daytime, the snake wasn't willing to leave. So for three days they lived together. He was very careful not to startle the snake or make it feel threatened by his presence. But finally on the evening of the third day, as he was sitting in meditation, he addressed the snake quietly in his mind. He said, "Look, it's not that I don't like you. I don't have any bad feelings for you. But our minds work in different ways. It'd be very easy for there to be a misunderstanding between us. Now, there are lots of places out in the woods where you can live without the uneasiness of living with me." And as he sat there spreading thoughts of *metta* to the snake, the snake left.

When Ajaan Fuang first told me this story, it made me stop and reconsider my understanding of what metta is. Metta is a wish for happiness—true happiness—and the Buddha says to develop this wish for ourselves and everyone else: *"With metta for the entire cosmos, cultivate a limitless heart." (Sn 1:8)* But what's the emotional quality that goes along with that wish? Many people define it as "lovingkindness," implying a desire to be there for other people: to cherish them, to provide them with intimacy, nurture, and protection. The idea of feeling love for everyone sounds very noble and emotionally satisfying. But when you really stop to think about all the beings in the cosmos, there are a lot of them who—like the snake—would react to your lovingkindness with suspicion and fear. Rather than wanting your love, they would rather be left alone. Others might try to take unfair advantage of your lovingkindness, reading it as a sign either of your weakness or of your endorsement of whatever they want to do. In none of these cases would your lovingkindness lead to anyone's true happiness. When this is the case, you're left wondering if the Buddha's instructions on universal metta are really realistic or wise.

But as I learned from Ajaan Fuang's encounter with the snake, metta is not

necessarily an attitude of lovingkindness. It's more an attitude of goodwill—wishing the other person well, but realizing that true happiness is something that each of us ultimately will have to find for him or herself, and sometimes most easily when we go our separate ways.

This understanding of metta is borne out in the Pali Canon, first of all in the word itself. The Pali language has another word for love—*pema*—whereas *metta* is related to the word *mitta,* or friend. The Buddha never recommends developing universal pema—for, as he notes, love can easily lead to hatred when the people you love are ill-treated by others—but he does recommend developing universal metta: friendliness for all. The fact that this friendliness equates with goodwill is shown in the four passages in the Canon where the Buddha recommends phrases to hold in mind when developing thoughts of metta. These phrases provide his clearest guide not only to the emotional quality that underlies metta, but also to the understanding of happiness that explains why it's wise and realistic to develop metta for all.

The first set of phrases comes in a passage where the Buddha recommends thoughts to counter ill will. These phrases are chanted daily in Theravada communities the world over:

> *"May these beings—free from animosity, free from oppression, and free from trouble—look after themselves with ease."* — *AN 10:176*

Notice that last statement: "May they look after themselves with ease." You're not saying that you're going to be there for all beings all the time. And most beings would be happier knowing that they could depend on themselves rather than having to depend on you. I once heard a Dhamma teacher say that he wouldn't want to live in a world where there was no suffering because then he wouldn't be able to express his compassion—which when you think about it, is an extremely selfish wish. He needs other people to suffer so he can feel good about expressing his compassion? A better attitude would be, "May all beings be happy. May they be able to look after themselves with ease." That way they can have the happiness of independence and self-reliance.

Another set of metta phrases is in the *Karaṇīya Metta Sutta.* They start out with a simple wish for happiness:

> *Happy, at rest,*
> *may all beings be happy at heart.*

Whatever beings there may be,
weak or strong, without exception,
long, large,
middling, short,
subtle, blatant,
seen & unseen,
near & far,
born & seeking birth:
May all beings be happy at heart.

But then they continue with a wish that all beings avoid the causes that would lead them to unhappiness:

Let no one deceive another
or despise anyone anywhere,
or through anger or resistance
wish for another to suffer. — *Sn 1:8*

In repeating these phrases, you wish not only that beings be happy, but also that they avoid the actions that would lead to bad karma, to their own unhappiness. You realize that happiness has to depend on action: For people to find true happiness, they have to understand the causes for happiness and act on them. They also have to understand that true happiness is harmless. If it depends on something that harms others, it's not going to last. Those who are harmed are sure to do what they can to destroy that happiness. And then there's the plain quality of sympathy: If you see someone suffering, it's painful. If you have any sensitivity at all, it's hard to feel happy when you know that your happiness is causing suffering for others.

So again, when you express goodwill, you're not saying that you're going to be there for them all the time. You're hoping that all beings will wise up about how to find happiness and be there for themselves.

The *Karaṇīya Metta Sutta* goes on to say that when you're developing this attitude, you want to protect it in the same way that a mother would protect her only child.

As a mother would risk her life
to protect her child, her only child,

even so should one cultivate a limitless heart
with regard to all beings.

Some people misread this passage—in fact, many translators have mistranslated it—thinking that the Buddha is telling us to cherish all living beings the same way a mother would cherish her only child. But that's not what he's actually saying. To begin with, he doesn't mention the word "cherish" at all. And instead of drawing a parallel between protecting your only child and protecting other beings, he draws the parallel between protecting the child and protecting your goodwill. This fits in with his other teachings in the Canon. Nowhere does he tell people to throw down their lives to prevent every cruelty and injustice in the world, but he does praise his followers for being willing to throw down their lives for their precepts: *"Just as the ocean is stable and does not overstep its tideline, in the same way my disciples do not—even for the sake of their lives—overstep the training rules I have formulated for them."* — *Ud 5:5*

The verses here carry a similar sentiment: You should be devoted to cultivating and protecting your goodwill to make sure that your virtuous intentions don't waver. This is because you don't want to harm anyone. Harm can happen most easily when there's a lapse in your goodwill, so you do whatever you can to protect this attitude at all times. This is why, as the Buddha says toward the end of the sutta, you should stay determined to practice this form of mindfulness: the mindfulness of keeping in mind your wish that all beings be happy, to make sure that it always informs the motivation for everything you do.

This is why the Buddha explicitly recommends developing thoughts of metta in two situations where it's especially important—and especially difficult—to maintain skillful motivation: when others are hurting you, and when you realize that you've hurt others.

If others are harming you with their words or actions—*"even if bandits were to carve you up savagely, limb by limb, with a two-handled saw"*—the Buddha recommends training your mind in this way:

> *"Our minds will be unaffected and we will say no evil words. We will remain sympathetic, with a mind of goodwill, and with no inner hate. We will keep pervading these people with an awareness imbued with goodwill and, beginning with them, we will keep pervading the all-encompassing world*

with an awareness imbued with goodwill—abundant, expansive, immeasurable, free from hostility, free from ill will." — *MN 21*

In doing this, the Buddha says, you make your mind as expansive as the River Ganges or as large as the earth—in other words, larger than the harm those people are doing or threatening to do to you. He himself embodied this teaching after Devadatta's attempt on his life. As he told Mara—who had come to taunt him while he was resting from a painful injury—*"I lie down with sympathy for all beings." (SN 4:13)* When you can maintain this enlarged state of mind in the face of pain, the harm that others can do to you doesn't seem so overwhelming, and you're less likely to respond in unskillful ways. You provide protection—both for yourself and for others—against any unskillful things you otherwise might be tempted to do.

As for the times when you realize that you've harmed others, the Buddha recommends that you understand that remorse is not going to undo the harm, so if an apology is appropriate, you apologize. In any case, you resolve not to repeat the harmful action again. Then you spread thoughts of goodwill in all directions.

This accomplishes several things. It reminds you of your own goodness, so that you don't—in defense of your self-image—revert to the sort of denial that refuses to admit that any harm was done. It strengthens your determination to stick with your resolve not to do harm. And it forces you to examine your actions to see their actual effect: If any of your other habits are harmful, you want to abandon them before they cause further harm. In other words, you don't want your goodwill to be just an ungrounded, floating idea. You want to apply it scrupulously to the nitty-gritty of all your interactions with others. That way your goodwill becomes honest. And it actually does have an impact, which is why we develop this attitude to begin with: to make sure that it truly animates our thoughts, words, and deeds in a way that leads to a happiness harmless for all.

Finally, there's a passage where the Buddha taught the monks a chant for spreading goodwill to all snakes and other creeping things. The story goes that a monk meditating in a forest was bitten by a snake and died. The monks reported this to the Buddha and he replied that if that monk had spread goodwill to all four great families of snakes, the snake wouldn't have bitten him. Then the Buddha taught the monks a protective chant for expressing

metta not only for snakes, but also for all beings.

I have goodwill for footless beings,
goodwill for two-footed beings,
goodwill for four-footed beings,
goodwill for many-footed beings.
May footless beings do me no harm.
May two-footed beings do me no harm.
May four-footed beings do me no harm.
May many-footed beings do me no harm.
May all creatures,
all breathing things,
all beings
—each & every one—
meet with good fortune.
May none of them come to any evil.

Limitless is the Buddha,
limitless the Dhamma,
limitless the Saṅgha.
There is a limit to creeping things:
snakes, scorpions, centipedes,
spiders, lizards, & rats.
I have made this safeguard,
I have made this protection.
May the beings depart. — *AN 4:67*

The last statement in this expression of metta takes into consideration the truth that living together is often difficult—especially for beings of different species that can harm one another—and the happiest policy for all concerned is often to live harmlessly apart.

These different ways of expressing metta show that metta is not necessarily the quality of lovingkindness. Metta is better thought of as goodwill, and for two reasons. The first is that goodwill is an attitude you can express for everyone without fear of being hypocritical or unrealistic. It recognizes that people will become truly happy not as a result of your caring for them but as a result of their own skillful actions, and that the happiness of self-reliance is

greater than any happiness that comes from dependency.

The second reason is that goodwill is a more skillful feeling to have toward those who would react unskillfully to your lovingkindness. There are probably people you've harmed in the past who would rather not have anything to do with you ever again, so the intimacy of lovingkindness would actually be a source of pain for them, rather than joy. There are also people who, when they see that you want to express lovingkindness, would be quick to take advantage of it. And there are plenty of animals out there who would feel threatened by any overt expressions of love from a human being. In these cases, a more distant sense of goodwill—that you promise yourself never to harm those people or those beings—would be better for everyone involved.

This doesn't mean that lovingkindness is never an appropriate expression of goodwill. You simply have to know when it's appropriate and when it's not. If you truly feel metta for yourself and others, you can't let your desire for warm feelings of love and intimacy render you insensitive to what would actually be the most skillful way to promote true happiness for all.

On Denying Defilement

The concept of defilement *(kilesa)* has a peculiar status in modern Western Buddhism. Like traditional Buddhist concepts such as karma and rebirth, it has been dropped by many Western Buddhist teachers. But unlike those concepts, people rarely mention that it's been dropped. Either it's not mentioned or—if it is—it's dismissed as *always* having been dismissed in the Buddha's teachings. Few Western Buddhists realize that the concept ever played much of a role in traditional Buddhism at all.

The denial of defilement is especially striking when you realize how central it has been to the history of Buddhist practice. One of the Pali Canon's primary images for the path of practice is that of cleansing and purifying the mind of defilements, which MN 14 lists as greed, aversion, and delusion. MN 5 contains a similar list of defilements, replacing greed with the more general defilement of passion. MN 128 contains a long list of derived defilements—such as doubt, fear, inattention, sloth and torpor—that obscure the mind's inner vision and its ability to gain steady concentration. Dhp 277–279—along with many other passages in the Canon—describe the path to the end of suffering as the path to purity.

In the centuries since the Buddha's time, teachers who follow the canon have adopted the vision of the path as purification, stressing the need to cleanse the mind of its defilements if awakening is to occur. In the Thai Wilderness tradition, for instance, teachers frequently describe Dhamma practice as an attempt to outwit the defilements so as to end their obscuring influence in the mind. To practice, they say, is to learn how little you can trust the mind's urges and ideas because they're darkened with the defilement of delusion, whose darkness in turn can allow greed, aversion, and all the other derived defilements to grow. Only by questioning the mind's urges and ideas can you free yourself from the influence of these defilements, leaving the mind totally pure.

But many modern Western teachers—anticipating that their listeners would react unfavorably to hearing their minds called defiled—have abandoned

the concept entirely. Even when discussing the problems of greed, aversion, and delusion, they tend to avoid describing them as "defilements." The closest they come is calling them "poisons," whose source they trace, not to the mind, but to its external conditioning and its mistaken belief that these poisons are real. Awakening, in this view, is a matter not of washing away defilement, but of accepting the mind as it is, realizing that it's already pure.

There are several reasons for why modern teachers are probably correct in anticipating a negative reaction to the idea of the mind as defiled, the primary reason coming from modern Western psychology. Many psychotherapists have identified low self-esteem as a prime cause of mental suffering, and the ability to silence the voice of the inner hypercritic as the prime way to end that suffering. Because the notion of defilement is critical of such normal mind states as greed, aversion, and delusion, they see it as unhealthy: a cause of suffering rather than a tool to bring suffering to an end.

This view is sometimes bolstered by appeals to Western cultural history. People coming to Buddhism are often reacting to the doctrine of original sin, which tells them that the nature of their mind is basically depraved. Many—unaware of the source—have adopted the standard Western counter-arguments to this doctrine. One is the idea advanced by European Romantics and American Transcendentalists that the urges in the mind are essentially divine in origin and thus basically good. Another is the postmodern idea that any discourse of defilement or depravity is a political attempt to gain power over others by telling them that their minds are so defiled that they can't trust themselves to think straight, and so need outside help.

However, the most powerful support for the idea that there's nothing wrong with greed, aversion, and delusion comes from modern marketing. Advertising, which has become our most pervasive source of cultural norms, trades almost entirely on the notion that people should gratify their greed, aversion, and delusion. So a great deal of money has been spent to turn people into consumers who feel good about cultivating these tendencies. The result is that people are accustomed to having these tendencies indulged, and so would resist hearing that they are in any way defiled.

For these reasons, the resistance to the idea of mental defilement is so pervasive that even when Western Buddhists encounter the Buddha's most emphatic statement on the need to understand the way in which the mind is defiled, they interpret it to say that defilement is basically unreal.

The Buddha's statement is this:

> *"Luminous, monks, is the mind. And it is defiled by incoming defilements. The uninstructed run-of-the-mill person doesn't discern that as it has come to be, which is why I tell you that—for the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person—there is no development of the mind."*
>
> *"Luminous, monks, is the mind. And it is freed from incoming defilements. The well-instructed disciple of the noble ones discerns that as it has come to be, which is why I tell you that—for the well-instructed disciple of the noble ones—there is development of the mind."* — *AN 1:51–52*

The standard modern approach in interpreting these passages is to focus on the first two sentences in each paragraph. The first sentence is read as implying that the original nature of the mind is basically pure. The second sentence is read as implying that because defilements are incoming visitors (the word *āgantuka* means both *incoming* and *visitor),* they are essentially unreal. When you realize the unreality of the defilements, you see that they never really were a problem.

But what these passages actually say is something else entirely: that the mind is *both* luminous *and* defiled. There's nothing about the luminosity being "original" or the defilements being unreal. After all, as the Buddha states in AN 2:30, it's because the mind is defiled that it doesn't gain release. So the defilements are real enough, and the mind defiled enough, to cause genuine trouble. And as the concluding statements in AN 1:51–52 make clear, if you don't understand how the mind is both bright and defiled, you can't effectively train it. From the Buddha's point of view, the idea of defilement has to be taken seriously if you want to train the mind to gain release.

To understand what's defiling about the defilements, and what's bright about the mind, it's instructive to look at the Buddha's most basic instructions in mental training, which he gave to his son, Rāhula, when Rāhula was only seven. He starts by telling Rāhula to inspect his bodily, verbal, and mental actions as he would inspect his face in a mirror. In other passages in the Canon (such as MN 20), the Buddha uses the simile of a mirror to describe people inspecting their faces to make sure that they're clean and pure. The conclusion of the Buddha's instructions to Rāhula indicates that the same message is being conveyed here: What the Buddha is teaching is a method of purification.

Here's how purification is achieved: Instead of simply going with the flow of a desire to act in thought, word, and deed, you stop to ask yourself questions about your action and its consequences. First, before you act, ask yourself what results you anticipate from your action. If you anticipate any affliction for yourself, to others, or to both, don't do it. If you don't anticipate affliction, you can go ahead and do it. But, because your anticipations might be clouded by delusion, you don't stop questioning there. While you're engaged in the action, try to notice if it's causing affliction. If it is, then stop. If it isn't, you can continue with it. Finally, after the action is done, question it again. If you notice that it *did* cause affliction, then if it was a bodily or verbal action, confess it to someone who is more experienced in the practice than you are, both to develop the habit of admitting your mistakes and to gain advice from the other person as to how to avoid that mistake in the future. If the action was mental, there's no need to confess it, but you should develop a healthy sense of shame around mental actions of that sort. In every case, though, you should resolve not to make that mistake again.

If the action didn't cause any immediate or long-term affliction, then you should take joy in that fact and continue your training.

As the Buddha states at the end of these instructions, this is how all people in the past, present, and future have purified, are purifying, and will purify their actions in thought, word, and deed.

These instructions teach three important lessons about the nature of mental defilement. The first is that defilement is a quality, not of the innate nature of the mind, but of its intentions and actions. The Buddha is not addressing the question of whether the mind has an innate nature, or—if it does—whether that nature is basically bright or defiled. He's simply pointing that the *actions* coming from the mind can be defiled but they can be cleansed of that defilement.

The second lesson is that actions are defiled to the extent that they cause affliction. The training recommended by the Buddha deals with the two basic ways in which this affliction can happen: out of outright ignorance, when you don't even know that your actions are afflictive; and out of willed ignorance, when you know but don't care—you simply decide to turn a blind eye to the affliction you cause. In both cases, the ignorance is what darkens and defiles the mind.

The third lesson from the Buddha's instructions relates to the luminosity of the mind mentioned in AN 1:51–52. In the context of the training the Buddha recommends to Rāhula, this luminosity refers to the mind's ability to see when its actions are defiled, and to train itself to act in ways that are undefiled and pure. In other words, the image of luminosity is not a statement of the innate goodness or purity of the mind. After all, as the Buddha states in AN 4:199, the idea that "I am good" expresses as much craving for identity as the idea that "I am bad." Instead, the luminosity of the mind is simply its ability to perceive affliction, to see how that affliction is related to its actions, and—when it's willing—to stop engaging in actions that cause affliction. If the mind were dark, it wouldn't be able to do any of these things.

These three lessons, taken together, show how central the concept of defilement is to the Buddha's teachings, for they relate directly to his most fundamental teaching, the four noble truths. Because defilement is a matter of affliction, and because affliction is a type of suffering and stress, the fact of defilement relates directly to the first noble truth: the fact of suffering. The fact that defilement is caused by actions relates to the second noble truth, that suffering is caused by actions in the mind. The mind's ability to see this happening is what allows for the fourth and the third noble truths: that the mind is able to develop qualities that can abandon any actions that cause suffering, and so bring suffering to an end.

These three facts in turn show why the general Western resistance to the concept of defilement is a serious obstacle to reaching the end of suffering and stress and to reaping the benefits of the practice along the way. In light of the first two facts—that defilement is a quality of actions measured by the extent to which they cause affliction—an unwillingness to accept the idea of defilement translates into an unwillingness to examine your own actions to see if they cause harm. This is a form of narcissism that makes it impossible to see the connection between the second and first noble truths. If you refuse to accept the idea that your thoughts, words, and deeds cause suffering, you won't be able to see the sources of suffering coming from within the mind.

In light of the third fact—that the brightness of the mind is its ability to recognize defilement and do something about it—an unwillingness to accept the idea of defilement translates into a willed ignorance around one's own actions and their effects. This is a form of repression that stands in the way of developing the fourth noble truth. In other words, resistance to the idea of

defilement is itself a defilement—delusion—that compounds the darkness of other defilements and protects them so that they can continue to flourish and grow.

The further fact that resistance to the idea of defilement is a form of narcissistic repression turns the tables on the argument drawn from modern Western psychology that the idea of mental defilement is unhealthy, for even in the vocabulary of modern psychology, narcissism and repression are recognized as unhealthy states. Any sense of self-esteem based on narcissism and repression is dangerous and deluded, whereas the Buddha's teaching on defilement offers a way to develop healthy self-esteem. This way is based both on healthy self-criticism—the inner critic isn't always bad—and a habit worthy of esteem: the willingness to learn from your mistakes. To follow the Buddha's way also develops the healthy confidence that comes from seeing your behavior improve as a result. This form of self-esteem and confidence is good not only for you, but also for all people affected by your actions.

As for the Western cultural arguments against the teaching on defilement, the Buddha's instructions to Rāhula show that those arguments are all beside the point. Because his teaching on defilement doesn't deal with the innate nature of the mind, it's in no way related to the idea of original sin. Because it points to the fact that greed, passion, aversion, and delusion cause affliction, it calls into question the Romantic/Transcendentalist notion that these natural and normal tendencies can be trusted as divinely inspired. And because it explains why the mind can train itself to end its self-induced afflictions by learning to question them, the teaching on defilement is not an attempt at gaining control over anyone. It's meant to empower you and give you control over yourself.

In fact, the Buddha's teaching on defilement is one of the most effective strategies for freeing the mind from the influences of mass marketing and other modern methods of thought-control. When you learn to recognize your greed, aversion, and delusion as defilements and are able to free yourself from their influence, no one can pander to them in an attempt to control your thoughts and actions. A mind without defilement is liberated not only from its own unskillful influences, but also from the unskillful agendas—and defilements—of anyone else.

So even though the narcissistic repression of the idea of defilement is a pervasive darkness in modern Western society, it's not inescapable. Because it's

a defilement, it's an incoming visitor. As a visitor it's not unreal, but it *is* unnecessary. When you decide that it's outstayed its welcome, you can usher it to the door. You can then begin working on making the mind fully pure.

This is because the mind's potential for brightness—its ability to recognize the harm caused by its actions and to stop causing harm—is always there. Simply apply that brightness to any mental action that attempts to deny the fact of defilement. When you see the harm caused by that action, along with the fact that it's optional, then you're that much closer to being rid of it and all the other defilements it's been protecting. Then keep on following that brightness until it leads you to the even greater clarity that comes with total freedom from suffering and stress. When you've reached the pure clarity of that freedom, you'll see that the greed, aversion, and delusion that obscured it really were defilements, for you're now in a position to know what genuine purity really is.

Virtue Without Attachment

Sīla—a term that can be translated as "virtue," "precept," or "habit"—is the first of the three trainings that lead to the end of suffering. The other two are concentration and discernment. In the noble eightfold path, sīla covers three factors: right speech, right action, and right livelihood. Right speech involves abstaining from telling lies, from speaking divisively, from speaking harshly, and from engaging in idle chatter. Right action involves abstaining from killing, from stealing, and from engaging in illicit sex. Right livelihood involves abstaining from harmful or dishonest ways of making a living.

However, attachment to sīla and *vata*—which means "practice" or "protocol"—is one of the three fetters abandoned when all the factors of the noble eightfold path come together in a fully mature way and yield a first glimpse of awakening. And the path leading from the first glimpse of awakening to full awakening also contains the factors of right speech, right action, and right livelihood. This means that the path requires practicing sīla in a way that at the same time frees you from attachment to sīla.

So how is that done? If you picture the path as a trail through a sandstone wilderness, this is a section where the path follows a narrow ledge. On the one side is a pile of boulders that block your progress; on the other is a sheer drop-off into a chasm. The boulders represent attachment; the chasm, a practice without the protection offered by the three sīla factors of the path. If you don't negotiate this section carefully, you won't get safely beyond it.

I've encountered three different answers to the question of how to practice sīla without being attached to sīla, and their differences hinge on two issues. The first issue concerns what, in the practice of sīla, can act as a fetter. This, in turn, depends on the second issue: what the word *sīla* means in the name of the fetter, "attachment to sīla and vata."

Two popular answers to the question of how to practice sīla without attachment both treat *sīla* in the name of the fetter as meaning "precept," but they differ in their interpretation of what in the practice of the precepts can act

as a fetter. The first interpretation holds that the precepts can often be too narrow and one-dimensional in the guidance they provide: If you follow them too strictly, you limit your ability to respond to any given situation in a wise and compassionate way. This interpretation often cites examples where it claims that a wise or compassionate response would involve breaking a precept derived from the sīla factors of the noble eightfold path, such as killing termites that threaten to destroy a home, killing an individual who threatens to kill many other people, lying to authorities who plan to torture a person sequestered in your attic, or stealing a loaf of bread from a wealthy family to feed a starving child. In this interpretation, practicing sīla without attachment to sīla means weighing the precepts against the principles of wisdom and compassion, and being willing to break a precept when it runs counter to those principles.

The second interpretation agrees that the precepts can often be too narrow a guide to compassionate action, but it also sees another danger in the practice of the precepts: the judgmental pride that can develop around adhering strictly to the precepts. According to this interpretation, pride in your precepts creates a strong sense of self that makes you harsh in judging others. It also stands in the way of the total letting go that leads to awakening. The way to avoid this fetter, it says, is consciously and deliberately to break the precepts in a way that removes all pride around your behavior. This, from the second interpretation's point of view, is what practicing without attachment to sīla means.

However, the Buddha's own answer to this question, as recorded in the Pali Canon, differs radically from both of these interpretations. To begin with, the context that surrounds his primary discussion of this issue (in MN 78) shows that *sīla* in sīla-and-vata doesn't mean precept or virtue. It means *habit,* for the passage discusses both skillful sīla and unskillful sīla. In other words, the fetter abandoned at the first glimpse of awakening deals with attachment not only to the good, virtuous habits of the precepts, but also to bad habits that break the precepts. And this makes sense. Why would attachment to bad habits be any less of a fetter than attachment to good?

Secondly, the Buddha states that the danger of being fettered to a habit occurs on two levels. One, if the habit is unskillful, the habit itself poses dangers to the person following it. When you act unskillfully, you harm both yourself and the living beings around you. Two, regardless of whether the habit is skillful or unskillful, your *attitude* toward the habit can fetter you as well. In

particular, the Buddha points to two dangerous attitudes: (a) seeing the habit as the essence and goal of your practice (Sn 4:9); and (b) fashioning a sense of identity around the habit, using it to define who you are (MN 78) or to exalt yourself over others (Sn 4:5).

The Buddha's solution to both levels of attachment is terse: to be endowed with the virtues of the precepts, but not to be fashioned of those habits. In other words, you follow the precepts strictly but don't create a sense of self around them.

The implications of this explanation are worth teasing out, for they help you see not only how deft the Buddha's solution is, but also how deficient the other two interpretations are. His answer leads you across the narrow ledge; theirs takes you off the cliff.

To ensure that you don't expose yourself to the first danger of attachment to habits—i.e., attachment to unskillful habits—the Buddha notes that all awakened people consistently behave in line with the basic precepts of the path. This, in fact, is one of the defining characteristics of the awakened ones: that they would never intentionally break those precepts. AN 3:87 states that awakened ones might break some of the minor rules of the monastic discipline, but as for the precepts basic to the holy life, their virtue is pure. And in Ud 5:5, the Buddha praises the monks who are willing to hold to their precepts even when it might cost them their life.

So the precepts of the noble eightfold path are not simply a temporary standard of behavior to be dropped when reaching awakening. They're a training in how awakened people behave and encourage others to behave as well.

By encouraging this standard of behavior, the Buddha is providing you with safety both on external and on internal levels. On the external level, if you follow his encouragement, you gain a share of the universal safety that comes when you give safety universally to all beings: safety in terms of their lives, their possessions, their spouses and children, their access to the truth, and from the careless things you might do when intoxicated. In this way, you avoid creating the negative karma that would create needless harm around you, placing needless difficulties in your path. This also protects you from the regrets or denial that would eventually develop if you intentionally broke the precepts simply to prove to yourself that you weren't attached to them.

On the internal level, the practice of holding strictly to the precepts creates the conditions for the right mindfulness and right concentration that lead to liberating discernment. If you have no reason to feel hounded by remorse over having harmed yourself or others, it's easier to be mindful at all times. If you have no reason to engage in denial—because none of your actions have caused harm—it's easier for discernment to use the clarity and stability of concentration to penetrate the walls of ignorance in the mind.

The practice of holding strictly to the precepts with full conviction fosters discernment in two main ways. To begin with, the conviction that these precepts are the standards of awakened behavior forces you to confront the attitude that would otherwise look forward to awakening as an opportunity to do whatever you—the unawakened you—would want to do. If you believe that non-attachment to precepts means being able to break them, you foster the belief that when awakening arrives, you'll be free to break the precepts as you like. Practice in the meantime becomes simply a matter of biding your time. The underlying dishonesty of this attitude makes it impossible to take the precepts seriously, or to allow them to genuinely challenge your unskillful tendencies.

At the same time, the practice of holding strictly to the precepts even when your mind tells you that it has compassionate motives for breaking them brings to the surface all the mind's unskillful tendencies that would go against the precepts. Knowing that you can't give in to the rationalizations of compassion allows you to see those rationalizations for what they are: defilements that cloud your understanding of what's going on in your mind. You're forced to acknowledge the lust, aversion, or delusion that lurk behind those rationalizations. While the simple fact of confronting these unskillful tendencies may not always be enough to keep you from falling for them, it's an important first step in helping to protect you from them—i.e., in protecting yourself from yourself.

This point is in sharp contrast to the first of the two alternative approaches to practicing sīla without attachment: breaking a precept when you feel that compassion requires you to do so. Unlike the Buddha's approach, the simple fact that this alternative allows for other considerations to override the precepts means that it provides ample room for dishonest intentions to slip into a motive that on the surface presents itself as a wise and compassionate approach to an exceptional situation.

Human history is littered with examples of unskillful behavior that justified itself as an exceptional response to an exceptional situation—even though a quick look back further in history would have shown that the situation was not exceptional at all. Most wars, for instance, are proposed as a wise and compassionate strategy to prevent a potentially destructive group from causing even more destruction. Yet the outcome is that those who present themselves as wise and compassionate end up causing as much or more destruction themselves. So why did they refuse to take that quick look back into the past before causing harm? Historians have shown repeatedly that what passed as "wise and compassionate" in the original motivation often masked motives that were far less noble.

So it's not the case that holding to the precepts fetters compassion; it fetters the defilements of greed, aversion, and delusion. Only when people are intent on following the precepts strictly are they forced to turn around and question their own motives, looking for their own defilements and taking responsibility for their own actions before trying to take on the defilements and actions of others.

The practice of holding to the precepts also encourages the discernment of ingenuity. The first interpretation may claim that the precepts are narrow, but actually they force you to expand your sense of the range of responses available in a given situation. If you stick to your promise not to kill, lie, or steal, then when faced with a person who threatens to kill others, you have to see if there's a way to stop him without killing him. If evil authorities want to search your attic, you have see if there's a way to dissuade them that doesn't involve lying. If a child is starving, you have to find a way to feed her that doesn't involve stealing. The ways are there, but only if you take responsibility for the integrity of your actions will you feel the necessity to look for them. If the human race had taken the ingenuity used in developing weapons and had devoted it instead to finding ways to survive *without* killing one another, we'd be living in a much more humane human world.

Following the precepts strictly also forces you to expand the range of time you consider when weighing the potential results of your actions. The Buddha formulated the precepts as he did because he saw that, over the long term, actions that go against the precepts eventually end up doing more harm than good. In following the precepts, you align your actions with the conviction that the immediate benefits that might come from breaking the precepts shouldn't

blind you to the harm that such actions will create over a very long term: the course of many lifetimes. Killing a potential killer might bring a short respite from his unskillful actions, but it will set in motion a string of consequences that will ultimately do more harm. This is why it's wisest to exercise your ingenuity in preventing unskillful behavior in ways that don't require your being unskillful, too.

So it's clear that there's nothing narrow about adopting the precepts as standards of behavior. By expanding your understanding of your actions and their results, the precepts help you avoid the dangers that come from lower or looser standards of behavior. They also promote positive benefits, such as the inner safety of sharpened discernment into the workings of your own mind, and the opportunity to provide a much-needed example for the rest of the world.

As for the second level of danger that comes from attachment to habits—concerning your *attitude* toward your habits—the Buddha's approach tackles both types of unskillful attitudes at once. In other words, he confronts both the attitude that your habits are an end in themselves and the pride that can develop around skillful habits. He does this through his constant reminders that there is much more to the path than skillful habits, and the primary value of the precepts is in the way they foster the path's higher factors. As he says, the happiness fostered by the precepts is only a small fraction of the happiness fostered by meditation (Iti 27). So rather than contenting yourself with the precepts, you should focus on the qualities of mind engendered by following the precepts that can be devoted to the meditative development of concentration and discernment.

For concentration, these qualities are three: the *ardency* that makes the effort to stick with the precepts, the *mindfulness* that remembers your commitment to the precepts even in difficult situations, and the *alertness* that keeps watch over your actions so that they actually conform to the precepts. In focusing on these qualities and applying them to the practice of mindful concentration, you have no time to exalt yourself over your precepts—or to view them as ends in themselves—for you realize how much stronger you need to make these three qualities if your concentration is to advance.

At the same time, as the practice of following the precepts forces you to confront the unskillful motivations lurking in the mind, you realize the need to develop much more discernment to become totally free from them. This

realization, too, keeps you from contenting yourself with your precepts.

Ultimately, when you develop the discernment that sees the deathless, unconditioned dimension at the first level of awakening, you realize that although the precepts are helpful in allowing you to gain that discernment, they are by no means the entire path and nowhere near constituting the goal. Because the goal is unconditioned, whereas the practice of the precepts is conditioned, there's no way you could ever define yourself around the precepts ever again.

This is how the first glimpse of awakening cuts through the fetter of attachment to habits and protocols for good.

The Buddha's approach to solving the dangers of attachment to habits may not be easy, but it is elegant and effective. You hold to the precepts to protect yourself from unskillful habits, and you focus on taking the mental skills developed by following the precepts and using them to make the path complete. Because those skills are nothing other than the discernment and concentration factors of the path—right view and right resolve in the case of discernment; and right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration in the case of concentration—this underlines a simple but often overlooked point: The practice of sīla without attachment to sīla doesn't require looking outside of the noble eightfold path for guidance. All you have to do is practice sīla fully and strictly in the context of the *entire* path, and attachment to sīla will not be a problem. In that way you provide a gift not only to yourself but also to the world at large in terms both of the harmlessness of your behavior and of the nobility of the example you set.

When we compare the Buddha's approach to that of the other two interpretations—advising you to break the precepts when you feel your motivation for doing so is compassionate, and advising you to break precepts to undercut any pride over your behavior—we can see clearly how inferior those interpretations are. By focusing on the dangers that come from being attached to the precepts, they leave you exposed to both levels of danger that can come from attachment to habits in general. On the one hand, both interpretations recommend exposing yourself to the needless bad karma that comes from breaking the precepts. This harms not only you, but also the world at large in terms of the direct results of your actions and in the compromised example you set. On the other hand, the two interpretations leave you exposed to the pride that can come from regarding yourself as above the precepts. This is a form of

pride much harder to abandon than pride over holding to the precepts, for when you try to let it go, you're faced with the harm you've caused to others by breaking the precepts. A sense of pride over causing no harm is easier to shed than a sense of pride that involved causing harm, because the act of dropping the first sort of pride leaves you safe from remorse and denial, while the act of dropping the second sort of pride leaves you with no defense.

So when you face the narrow ledge of practicing sīla without attachment to sīla, remember that not every trail guide is reliable. The Buddha's instructions —to follow the precepts strictly and to focus on devoting the inner qualities they foster to furthering your meditation—is the guidance that can get you safely across.

The Limits of the Unlimited Attitudes

THE BRAHMAVIHARAS ON THE PATH TO AWAKENING

The first meditation instructions given to a child raised in a Theravada Buddhist family usually focus on the practice of *mettā,* or goodwill. The parents teach the child to spread thoughts of goodwill—a wish for happiness—to all living beings every night before going to sleep.

As the child grows older, the instructions are expanded to include three other attitudes, which—along with mettā—are called the *brahmavihāras* when these attitudes are developed in an unlimited way. The term *brahmavihāra* is a combination of two words: *brahma,* which is a being on a high level of heaven, plus *vihāra,* which literally means "dwelling," and figuratively "attitude"—an attitude in which the mind habitually dwells. The brahmavihāras are the habitual attitudes of beings on a high plane of existence.

Unlimited mettā is the first of the four attitudes, the other three being unlimited *karuṇā,* or compassion—a wish that suffering and the causes of suffering will end; unlimited *muditā,* or empathetic joy—a wish that happiness and the causes of happiness will continue; and unlimited *upekkhā,* or equanimity—an impartial acceptance of what can't be changed.

These attitudes are unlimited in the sense that they're extended to all beings everywhere—including oneself—without bias. Because human beings aren't on the level of the brahmas, they don't automatically dwell in these attitudes in an unlimited way. They tend to feel them more strongly for some living beings than for others. However, human beings can make these attitudes unlimited through conscious practice, and in that way lift their minds to a higher level.

If the child doesn't take any further interest in meditation, he or she will probably equate mettā or the brahmavihāras with meditation throughout life. In fact, in Thailand, where the language has a tendency to string words of similar meaning together, the words *mettā* and *bhāvanā*—"meditation"—are a

common string. And the attitudes of the brahmavihāras are highly regarded throughout the culture. I've even known Thai Christians who insist that the brahmavihāras are not a specifically Buddhist teaching. Respect for the brahmavihāras is part of being Thai.

If the child *does* take further interest in meditation as he or she gets older, the development of the brahmavihāras provides the framework for whatever other practice he or she may specialize in. Ajaan Mun, the founder of the Wilderness tradition, specialized in contemplation of the body, but he is said to have spent time developing the brahmavihāras three times a day: when waking up in the morning, when waking up from his afternoon nap, and just before going to sleep at night. He taught one of his students, Ajaan Khao, a chant expressing the attitudes of the brahmavihāras directed to all the classifications of beings in all directions throughout the cosmos, a chant that takes a good half-hour to recite. Ajaan Lee, another of his students—who specialized in breath meditation—popularized another chant focused on the brahmavihāras that takes a similar amount of time to recite.

When you look into the Pali Canon—the source texts for the Theravada tradition—it's easy to see why the brahmavihāras are given so much importance in the living tradition, for there the brahmavihāras are connected to all three aspects of the path to the end of suffering: virtue, concentration, and discernment.

For virtue, the brahmavihāras provide the motivation. You undertake the precepts because both because you have compassion for others (Ud 2:3) and because you have goodwill for yourself (Ud 5:1). The Buddha once taught the brahmavihāras to a group of non-Buddhists—who weren't sure whether actions lead to results beyond this lifetime, or even if there was a life beyond this—telling them that if they practiced in line with these attitudes, they would have nothing to fear if actions did lead to results beyond this lifetime. If there was no life after death, they could still view themselves as pure in terms of their conduct here and now (AN 3:65). In another case, the Buddha taught that if you realize that you've harmed another person through your misconduct, you should realize that remorse will not undo the harm. Instead, you should recognize the mistake, resolve not to repeat it, and then develop the brahmavihāras as a way of strengthening your resolve (SN 42:8).

In developing concentration, the connection with the brahmavihāras is even more direct. The Buddha taught the brahmavihāras as themes on which the

mind can focus to develop strong states of mental absorption, called the four *jhānas*. One discourse (AN 8:63) suggest that each of the brahmavihāras can lead all the way to the fourth jhāna; two other discourses read in conjunction (AN 4:123 and 4:125) suggest that the first brahmavihāra can lead only to the first jhāna, the second only to the second, and so on up to the fourth. But in either case, because these jhānas count as right concentration in the noble eightfold path, any of the four brahmavihāras can play an integral role in the path to the end of suffering.

As for discernment, the Canon contains two types of discussions on how the concentration based on the brahmavihāras can act as a basis for discernment. The first type focuses on how a meditator should contemplate the concentration that results from any of the brahmavihāras. In two cases, the Canon recommends reflecting like this (taking goodwill as an example): "One reflects on this [state of concentration] and discerns, 'This awareness-release through goodwill is fabricated & intended. Now whatever is fabricated & intended is inconstant & subject to cessation.'" (MN 52; AN 11:17) In another case, the recommended reflection is this: "One 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." (AN 4:126)

In both cases, the realization that these refined states of concentration are inconstant, stressful, and not-self can give rise to a sense of dispassion and disenchantment not only for them, but also for all fabricated things. The sense of dispassion can then lead to all-around release.

The second type of discussion on the relationship between discernment and the brahmavihāras (SN 46:54) focuses on the mental qualities that can be combined with the concentration based on the brahmavihāras to lead it beyond the four jhānas. These qualities are the seven factors for awakening—mindfulness, analysis of qualities, persistence, rapture, serenity, concentration, and equanimity—brought to a heightened pitch so that they are "dependent on seclusion, dependent on dispassion, dependent on cessation, resulting in letting go." Ordinarily, the seven factors for awakening are used to give rise to jhāna, but the fact that in this case they are dependent on dispassion and cessation means that they have been refined through the contemplations mentioned in the first type of discussion: in other words, the sort of contemplation that leads through dispassion to release. For instance, you can develop a state of

jhāna based on one of the brahmavihāras and then—in light of your realization that it's fabricated or stressful—analyze its qualities as they're actually present to develop this knowledge to the level of insight where you're really willing to let go.

According to SN 46:54, when the brahmavihāras are combined with the seven factors for awakening to the point of letting go in this way, they can lead at the very least from the four jhānas to even higher stages of concentration. For example, empathetic joy in this combination can lead beyond the fourth jhāna to the a state of concentration called the "dimension of the infinitude of consciousness." Equanimity in this combination can lead even further to a state called the "dimension of nothingness." But SN 46:54 adds, without further explanation, that these combinations can lead still higher than that. Now, because other passages (such as MN 118) say that the seven factors for awakening dependent on seclusion, etc., can to lead all the way to full awakening, it's easy to conclude that when they're combined with the brahmavihāras they can lead that far as well.

So it's clear that Theravada, both in its living tradition and in its source texts, has long given a great deal of importance to the brahmavihāras, both as a basic set of attitudes to be practiced by all human beings who hope to raise their minds to a higher-than-human happiness, and as part of the path of practice leading to the highest happiness of all: nibbāna.

But recently a number of Western scholars and mediation teachers have advanced the claim that the tradition has underestimated the importance of the brahmavihāras; that the brahmavihāras are not just *part* of the path to nibbāna. They can act as the *whole* path. All you need to do is develop the brahmavihāras and they'll take you all the way to awakening.

This argument takes as its scholarly basis two passages in the Canon. In the first passage, which is found in DN 13, the Buddha teaches the brahmavihāras to two young brahmans who have asked him how to attain union with Brahma. The argument based on this passage states that the Buddha is here using the phrase "union with Brahma" as a synonym for nibbāna. This means that the brahmavihāras can lead all the way to nibbāna. People advancing this argument admit that this interpretation requires a fair amount of reading between the lines, for the Buddha nowhere states explicitly that union with Brahma is another term for nibbāna. However, they feel that the argument can be

justified by a knowledge of the context in which the Buddha taught—a context of which the living tradition has long been ignorant, but which has now been uncovered by modern scholarship. Once this reading of the first passage is accepted, the second passage (Sn 1:8)—which we will examine below—can be interpreted as supporting it.

This interpretation has profound implications for anyone wanting to reach the end of suffering. If it's true, there would be no need to bother with the contemplations of inconstancy, stress, and not-self; and no need to bother with the more advanced forms of the factors for awakening. If it's not true, though, then anyone who followed it would risk missing out on the opportunity to reach any of the stages of awakening in his lifetime. So it's important to examine the basis for this interpretation, as well as its consistency with the rest of the Canon, to see if what's read *between* the lines in DN 13 is consistent with what's stated *in* the lines of the other canonical discourses treating the brahmavihāras and the results to which they lead. If it is consistent, then the interpretation is worthy of credence. If not, it's not.

DN 13 is a long discourse that begins with an unusual incident. Two young brahmans, quoting different brahmanical teachers, are unable to agree on the path leading to union with Brahma, their highest religious goal. So they decide to take the question to the Buddha, for they have heard that the Buddha claims knowledge of this path. Now, according to brahmanical orthodoxy, this is something no good brahman would ever do, because the Buddha was not a brahman, and brahmans would never go to non-brahmans for spiritual advice. This point of orthodoxy has led some modern scholars to conclude that the entire discourse is meant to be ironical and tongue-in-cheek. However, the Pali Canon is full of brahmans coming to the Buddha for advice on spiritual matters of all sorts, and many became Buddhist monks or lay-followers as a result. So it would seem that brahmanical orthodoxy was not always strictly observed in the Buddha's time—which we know was a time of great spiritual upheaval—and the incident at the beginning of DN 13 might not have been as outlandish as brahmanical orthodoxy would make it seem.

On hearing the question of the two brahmans, the Buddha agrees to teach them the way to union with Brahma. He begins undiplomatically with a put-down of the brahmanical priesthood as a whole, saying that their tradition is no better than a string of blind people led by a blind person, or a man building a stairway to a palace whose location he doesn't know. In other words, none of

the brahman teachers who teach the path leading to union with Brahma have ever experienced union with Brahma, so they don't know what they're talking about.

The Buddha then launches into his discussion of that path. He starts with a detailed description of the precepts of a Buddhist monk—a description that parallels word for word a description that he gives in several other discourses (such as DN 2 through DN 12) on the path leading to awakening. But then, when coming to the topic of meditation, the description reaches a fork in the road. The parallel passages at this point include a discussion of the four jhānas, followed by the powers that can be developed based on the jhānas, including the development of insight into the four noble truths, followed by total release in the here-and-now. In DN 13, however, this account is replaced with an account of the four brahmavihāras, followed by the statement that if they are developed, then after death the meditator can expect to attain union with Brahma.

The traditional interpretation of this discourses takes it at face value: The Buddha is teachings the two brahmans how to reach the goal of their religion, even though their goal is inferior to nibbāna. Read in conjunction with DN 2 through DN 12, DN 13 is thus an obvious assertion of the Buddha's superiority to the brahmans. Not only does he know the path to their goal—a path that they themselves don't know—but he also knows the path to a superior destination: the ultimate goal of total release in the here-and-now.

The more recent interpretation of DN 13, however, is that it has to be read in conjunction with the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, a brahmanical text of which the Theravada tradition has long been ignorant. The *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* asserts that the brahma worlds are the ultimate spiritual goal, the only post-mortem destination from which the soul does not return. The Buddha, in using the phrase, "union with Brahma," is referring to these brahma worlds and is also adopting the idea that they are the ultimate goal, replacing the brahmanical conception of what constitutes that goal with his own. In other words, he's being ironic. When teaching the way to union with Brahma, he's actually teaching the way to nibbāna. This means that the brahmavihāras, on their own and without any other steps of meditation, lead all the way to nibbāna.

If this interpretation holds, then SN 1:8 could conceivably be read in support of it. This discourse gives a detailed description of how to develop the

first brahmavihāra, unlimited goodwill, followed by this passage:

> *Not taken with views,*
> *but virtuous & consummate in vision,*
> *having subdued desire for sensual pleasures,*
> *one never again*
> *will lie in the womb.*

The phrase "never again will lie in the womb" is a description of the result of the penultimate level of awakening, called non-return. A person who reaches this level will never again be reborn in this world, and instead will be reborn in one of the brahma worlds called the Pure Abodes, where only non-returners are born and where they all are destined to reach full awakening.

As for practices listed in this passage—not being taken with views, being virtuous, being consummate in vision, and having subdued desire for sensual pleasures—there is no explanation of how they relate to the practice of unlimited goodwill: whether they automatically happen as part of that practice, or have to be added on top of it to reach the level of non-return. The traditional interpretation of the passage adopts the second reading. Just as the description of the practice of unlimited goodwill in this discourse is prefaced by a number of practices that have to be done separately to provide a foundation for the practice of unlimited goodwill, that description is followed by a series of other practices that have to be done separately in addition to it to reach awakening. However, if we can accept the new reading of DN 13, then it's possible that the other interpretation could be right: Unlimited goodwill automatically encompasses these practices.

The problem, however, is that the new interpretation of DN 13 is drastically inconsistent with many other passages in the Canon that explicitly stress the limitations of the brahmavihāras and the brahma worlds to which they lead and where union with Brahma is attained.

To begin with, AN 4:125 states that each of the brahmavihāras, when practiced on its own, leads to rebirth in a particular brahma world, with goodwill leading to the lowest of the four—the Abhassarā, or Radiant brahmas—and equanimity leading to the highest, the Vehapphala, or Sky-fruit brahmas. DN 1 indicates that these levels are higher than the heaven of the Great Brahma, and although they are not destroyed with the destruction of the rest of the universe at the end of each cosmic cycle, the beings who live there

can still fall from there and be reborn elsewhere, usually on a lower plane in the universe. In fact, AN 4:125 states explicitly that a person who practices the brahmavihāras without having become a noble disciple—in other words, without having reached the first level of awakening—can, after having lived out the life span of a brahma in any of these four brahma worlds, be reborn in any of the lowest realms of the cosmos: in hell, as an animal, or as a hungry ghost. So from the testimony of these discourses, it's hard to see how the attainment of a brahma world could be equal to nibbāna, which constitutes total release from the cosmos as a whole.

The modern interpretation, however, asserts that these discourses shouldn't really be taken seriously because they were later additions to the Canon, composed by literal-minded monks who didn't understand the Buddha's ironic tone when referring to "union with Brahma" and "brahma worlds" in discourses like DN 13. However, there's no proof that DN 13 is any earlier or more authentic than DN 1 or AN 4:125, so the assertion of which discourses came first is nothing more than idle speculation.

But two other discourses show clearly that the difference between nibbāna and union with Brahma is anything but an idle issue, for it touches on the long-term consequences of choices made at the moment of death. Both discourses state clearly that if a dying person has his mind set on any of the brahma worlds, he should be told the drawbacks of those worlds so that he can set his mind on the higher goal of release.

The first discourse, MN 97, makes this point in a fairly poignant manner. The brahman Dhanañjānin, a former student of Sāriputta, is dying and asks for Sāriputta to visit him. Dhanañjānin has been negligent as a meditator, and Sāriputta, on arrival, reflects, "These brahmans are set on the brahma world. What if I were to teach Dhanañjānin the brahman the path to union with the brahmas?" So he teaches him the way to union with the brahmas, and Dhanañjānin, on dying, is actually reborn in a brahma world. However, when Sāriputta returns to the Buddha, the latter chides him for directing Dhanañjānin to an inferior goal at the moment of death when he could have directed him to a higher one.

This, of course, raises the question as to why the Buddha would have limited his discussion with the two young brahmans to this inferior goal, and yet criticizes Sāriputta for doing just the same thing. This question, though, ignores a crucial difference: Sāriputta's instructions were Dhanañjānin's last

chance to hear the Dhamma in this lifetime, whereas the Buddha, when teaching the young brahmans, could use his knowledge of the way to the brahma world to induce them to return to him later for more instructions on higher attainments.

The second discourse (SN 55:54) explains why the brahma worlds are an inferior attainment. In this discourse, the Buddha's cousin, Mahānāma asks the Buddha for instructions on how to advise a wise person who is about to die. The Buddha replies that if the dying person is plagued by worries about his family, he should be reminded that his worries at this point cannot help his family, so he should let those worries go. If he is fixated on human sensual pleasures, he should be told that human sensual pleasures are no match for the pleasures of the sensual heavens, so he should focus his mind on those heavens instead. If he's fixated on the pleasures of the sensual heavens, he should be told that even those are inferior to the pleasures of the brahma world, and he should instead focus his thoughts there.

If the dying person is fixated on the brahma world, he should be told that even the brahma world is "inconstant, impermanent, and included in identity." In other worlds, the brahma worlds are unstable, and the beings reborn there still have a sense of identification with the five clinging-aggregates: form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness. Because this identification is a fetter dropped even on the first stage of awakening, the brahman worlds are inferior to that level of attainment. For this reason, the dying person should be told to focus on the cessation of identification. If he can do that as he dies, then even though he may be a layperson, his release is in no way inferior to the release of a monk whose mind is released.

These two discourses show clearly that the Buddha regarded rebirth in a brahma world as a goal inferior to nibbāna. And because the distinction between nibbāna and the brahma world is such a serious, life-and-death matter, it's unlikely that the Buddha would have wanted to speak ironically about it, blurring the distinction when talking to the two brahmans in DN 13.

The limitations of the brahma worlds are directly connected to the limitations of the brahmavihāras as a path. This connection is especially clear when we read SN 55:54, the discourse just cited, in conjunction with AN 4:178. This latter discourse points out that it's possible to develop a state of concentration based on the brahmavihāras and yet still feel no interest in bringing an end to identification. This shows that the brahmavihāras on their

own are not enough to arouse that interest. Something more is needed—such as the reflection on the inconstancy, stress, and not-selfness of that state of concentration—to arouse the interest needed to bring identification to an end.

Another discourse—MN 106—makes a similar point: that it's possible to develop a strong state of equanimity in the higher levels of concentration and yet still cling to that equanimity. Only when there is the added determination not to fashion a sense of identification around the equanimity (MN 137) can that clinging be abandoned.

So it's obvious that the unlimited attitudes of the brahmavihāras do have at least one limit. On their own, they cannot lead to awakening. As a practice, they can't by themselves bring about dispassion of identification, and so they can lead only to an inferior goal in which identification is present as well.

This means that the new interpretation of DN 13 is unreliable as a guide to practice. It also means that the concluding passage of Sn 1:8 has to be interpreted in the traditional way, as a list of qualities to be developed *in addition to* the brahmavihāras if the concentration based on the brahmavihāras is to lead to any of the stages of awakening.

In other words, the traditional emphasis on the brahmavihāras as a path to awakening is neither too little nor too much. The brahmavihāras can function as part of the path to awakening, but only a part. To attain even the first level of awakening, you have to add other practices to induce the disenchantment and dispassion leading to genuine release.

The Essence of the Dhamma

One of the most striking features of the Buddha's teaching is the way he calls into question the substantiality of things, and in particular things that people at large regard as having substance. The primary example is our sense of self. Most people have a sense that there's something substantial inside them that constitutes their true self. But this sense, the Buddha shows, is nothing more than a fabrication. It's the result of clinging to physical objects, such as the body, or to mental activities—feelings, perceptions, thought-fabrications, and consciousness—none of which have any substance or essence.

In a famous passage (SN 22:95), he compares physical phenomena to globs of foam floating down a river; feelings to bubbles caused by rain falling on water; perceptions to a mirage; thought-fabrications to the trunk of a banana tree, devoid of heartwood; and consciousness to a magic show. He notes that all of these things—which are called *aggregates*—are empty, void, and without substance or essence. The purpose of this sort of contemplation is to induce a sense of disenchantment and dispassion for these things—and, by extension, for any sense of self built around them—so that the mind can let go of them and find release.

The Buddha recommends a similar approach to our sense of the world. This, too, he says, is best regarded as a fabrication, based on contact at the six senses—counting the mind as the sixth—along with the feelings that arise based on that contact, all of which are constantly disintegrating (SN 35:82). They're empty of self or anything pertaining to self (SN 35:85). Again, the purpose of this contemplation is to induce a sense of disenchantment and dispassion for any sense of the world. This, too, can lead to release.

Over the centuries, people have been struck by the radical nature of these contemplations, and many have come to the conclusion that the Buddha was a thoroughgoing anti-substantialist or anti-essentialist: someone who denies that there's any substance or essence to anything at all. From this conclusion comes a further conclusion: that the Buddha's Dhamma, or teaching, is also devoid of

essence. Aside from the core principle that nothing has any essence, this view holds, there is no unchanging substance or essence to define what's Dhamma and what's not.

Ever since this view was advanced, it has been used to justify changes in the Dhamma with the passage of time. Especially now that people in the West have taken an interest in the Dhamma, many of them have claimed that this view is not just a view. It's an established truth that supports the creative changes they feel the Dhamma requires. After all, they say, the Dhamma embraces change, and so the only authentic way to express the Dhamma is to foster what we see as positive changes in it.

Because this view has had an enormous impact on how Dhamma is taught and understood in the modern world, it's worth looking carefully at the arguments used to support it, to see if they actually are in line with the Dhamma. Otherwise, if the Dhamma really *does* have an essence, we risk losing something of essential value when we change it.

There are three principal arguments for an essence-free Dhamma. The first, which originated in ancient India, is derived from the Buddha's teaching on dependent co-arising—his map showing the causes of suffering and how they can be brought to an end. From this teaching, the argument concludes that all things exist in dependence on conditions. Because their existence is dependent on other conditions that are constantly changing, that existence isn't inherent. Because all things lack inherent existence, the theory goes, they have no inherent nature or substance. So, given that the Buddha's Dhamma came into existence dependent on conditions, it too is devoid of substance.

The second sort of argument comes from Western postmodern academic philosophy. It's based on the premise that no words in any language can point to anything outside of the language, for each word's meaning is totally determined by its relationship to other words and the rules of grammar in that language. As a result, no word can point to any unchanging essence, for the relationships among words is always changing. Because the Buddha's Dhamma is composed of words, it can point only to other words, and not to any substance or essence. It has to change every time a different person describes it.

The third sort of argument, like the second, also derives from current academic views, and in particular from the scholarly study of Buddhism as a force in human history. One of the underlying premises of this field of study is

that social forces are always taking on new identities and forms in response to changing conditions in their environment. To give a fair and unbiased treatment of these forces, one has to accept all their manifestations as equally valid. Any attempt to find an underlying essence in any social force is to fall into what is called the "essentialist fallacy," for that would favor one expression of that force in history over others. (Think, for example, of how pointless it would be to describe the past 150 years of American history by defining any particular political position as "essentially Republican" or "essentially Democratic.") Because Buddhism is a social force, it has no underlying essence. Dhamma is whatever a self-proclaimed Buddhist says it is. No single way of defining or expressing the Dhamma is more valid than any other.

Even though these latter two sorts of arguments take their premises from current academic views outside of the Buddhist tradition, they derive some of their force within the Buddhist community from their affinity with arguments of the first sort, which came from within the tradition itself. To say that language and social forces are without essence is simply to extend the principle that all conditioned things are without essence. For this reason, we are told, Buddhists should accept—as part of their acceptance of the Dhamma—the principle that the Dhamma is without essence as well. There are virtually no limits to how far it can change and still be Dhamma.

It's worth noting, though, that at least one voice from within the Buddhist tradition wouldn't agree with this view: the Buddha's own, as recorded in the Pali discourses, our oldest extant record of his teachings. By his own account, the Buddha was not a thoroughgoing anti-essentialist. An important aspect of wisdom, he noted, was recognizing that some things have essence and others don't, and clearly understanding which is which.

Those who regard
non-essence as essence
and see essence as non-,
don't get to the essence,
ranging about in wrong resolves.
But those who know
essence as essence,
and non-essence as non-,
get to the essence,

ranging about in right resolves. — Dhp 11–12

The whole point of his teachings was to help people get to the essence, so he had to teach them how to distinguish what was essence from what was not. Now, the Pali word for essence—*sāra*—also means heartwood: the part of the tree that's most useful and valuable because it's also the most lasting and impervious to change. So when the Buddha identified something as essence, he meant not only that it is impervious to change, but also that it had high and lasting value. To say that the Dhamma had no essence, in his eyes, would be to suggest that it had no lasting value at all. And although he did recognize that his teaching of the Dhamma wouldn't last forever (SN 20:7), he maintained that, as long as the teaching did last, it would lead those who followed it to something of essence. That something is release.

A discourse in the Canon, AN 4:245, identifies this release as the release touched with the right ending of *dukkha:* suffering or stress. Two other discourses, AN 8:83 and AN 10:58, state that all dhammas have release as their essence. A fourth discourse, AN 9:14, says the same of all thoughts and resolves: They have release as their essence. In other words, the extent to which any phenomenon or mental event has an essence depends on the extent to which it can lead to release.

The most extensive discussion of release as the essence of the Dhamma comes in MN 29 and 30, two discourses that explore the imagery of heartwood and essence by comparing different aspects of a monk's life to different parts of a tree. Material gain, honor, and fame are like the twigs and branches; consummation in virtue is like the outer bark; consummation in concentration, the inner bark; while knowledge and vision—the various powers that come with concentration—are like the sapwood.

MN 29 and 30 don't make the point explicitly, but if we compare their image of the tree with the statements about essence in AN 8:83 and 10:58, we can conclude that material gain, virtue, concentration, and knowledge and vision, when taken as ends in and of themselves, have no essence, just as twigs, etc., when taken from the tree, lose all connection with the heartwood. If, however, they stay with the tree and foster the heartwood, then to that extent they are connected with the essence of the Dhamma.

As for the actual heartwood of the Dhamma, MN 29 and 30 define it in two ways: as "non-occasional release" and "unprovoked awareness-release."

These two ways of describing release basically make the same point: that the release that counts as the essence of Dhamma isn't subject to change. The first description emphasizes that this release, once attained, is independent of specific occasions. It stands outside of time, so none of the changes of time can reach it.

The second description draws on a theory used in the Buddha's time to explain changes in nature: both in the physical world and within the mind. The theory is that physical and mental events occur when an underlying property *(dhātu)* is "provoked." Fires happen, for instance, when the fire property is provoked; wind storms, when the wind property is provoked. Within the mind, sensual desires flare up when the mental property of sensuality is provoked. In every case, an event caused by provocation ends when the provocation stops. This means that anything caused by provocation is destined, at some point, to cease. To say, however, that the release that comes with awakening is unprovoked means that it's not caused by provocation at all. It's not subject to conditions. Standing outside of time, it stands outside the possibility of ever ending.

This is why the way to release from suffering and stress is called, not the *cause* of release, but the *path* to release. The path is not a condition underlying the existence of release, but it does lead there. The Buddha himself made this point implicitly when he compared the path to an overgrown road through the jungle, and release to an ancient, abandoned city at the end of the road (SN 12:65). The road doesn't cause the city to be, but when cleared it enables people to enter and repopulate the city.

An important step in following the road to release is abandoning attachment to your sense of self and the world. This is why the Buddha focused so much of his teaching strategy on showing how our constructed sense of self and the world is without essence. To borrow the words of Dhp 11-12, he pointed out to people what non-essence is, so that they would abandon it and arrive at the essence.

But did this strategy entangle him in self-contradiction? By calling into question the essence of the self and the world, did he also inadvertently call into question the possibility that the Dhamma could have any essence? The Pali discourses contain no record of the Buddha's having been asked a question like this, but they do contain enough information on how he described release to show that the three sorts of anti-essentialist arguments carry no force against

his assertion that release is the essence of the Dhamma.

With regard to the first sort of argument, we can see that release is not caused by dependent co-arising; it's experienced only when dependent co-arising ceases (SN 12:2). When attained, release is known independently of the aggregates and sense media that provide the raw material of our sense of self and of the world. Although it is experienced as a form of consciousness (DN 11), this consciousness—unlike ordinary sensory consciousness—is not known through the six sense media (MN 49). Because it's outside of space and time, this consciousness doesn't come under the aggregate of consciousness, which applies only to the conditioned consciousness experienced in terms of space and time: near or far; past, present, or future (SN 22:59). Release is also experienced as the highest bliss, but this bliss is not classed as a feeling (SN 36:19).

Because release is outside of the aggregates and sense media, it's not subject to the Buddha's description of the aggregates and sense media as being without essence. This means that the first sort of argument fails the test provided by Dhp 11–12, in that it doesn't recognize what is essence and what's not.

Similarly, the Buddha would not have agreed with the premises underlying the second sort of argument, that the Dhamma is nothing more than language, and that language can point to nothing more than itself. As he maintains, the realm of all that can be described goes no further than the six senses (SN 35:23). However, it is possible to experience the dimension where the experience of the six senses ceases (SN 35:117). Because of the limitations of language, we can't say that anything remains or doesn't remain (or both or neither) in this dimension (AN 4:173). But the dimension itself does exist—you can say that much about it to indicate that it's not an impossibility.

> *"There is that dimension, monks, where there is neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor wind; neither dimension of the infinitude of space, nor dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, nor dimension of nothingness, nor dimension of neither perception nor non-perception; neither this world, nor the next world, nor sun, nor moon. And there, I say, there is neither coming, nor going, nor staying; neither passing away nor arising: unestablished, unevolving, without support [mental object]. This, just this, is the end of stress."* — *Ud 8:1*

In fact, if this dimension didn't exist, the ending of suffering wouldn't be

possible (Ud 8:3), and the Dhamma as a whole would be pointless. But one of the realizations on attaining this dimension is that it otherwise lies beyond the limits of what language can adequately describe (DN 15).

Yet language doesn't simply describe things. It can also be used to induce action. This is how the Buddha primarily used language with regard to release: to induce people to act in a way that will lead them to experience release directly for themselves. This is why he talked about release so often. Still, in doing so, he made heavy use of metaphor, paradox, and negation—focusing on what release is *not*—to show that it can't properly be captured in words.

What this means is that the Buddha claimed a range of experience lying outside the horizons of postmodern theories of language, which are based on the assumption that experience outside of space and time is impossible. However, postmodern theories can offer no proof that this assumption is true, which is why their claims have no force against the Buddha's. He might not be able to convince them when he claims that the word *release* refers to something outside of their range of experience, but their arguments against him can't invalidate his claim. The issue has to be settled by other means.

A similar point holds for the third sort of argument. When academics are talking about Buddhism and the Buddha is talking about Dhamma, they are talking about two very different things. Buddhism, for the majority of scholars, is a phenomenon of social history; Dhamma, for the Buddha, is release and the path to release.

The Buddha readily admitted that even though release isn't touched by time, his teachings on the path to release would, over time, be neglected and replaced by others. But he didn't regard that fact as a happy one. He compared changes to the teaching to changes in a drum whose wooden body is repaired by pegs every time it splits, to the point where the body is gone, and nothing but pegs remain (SN 20:7). Just as a drum of pegs would be useless for summoning people from far away, in the same way, "replacement Dhamma" *(saddhamma-paṭirūpa)* would be ineffective in leading to release.

Again, these are important claims, and they raise important questions: Did the Buddha actually reach release? Do his teachings actually lead there? Is he right in saying that other paths don't? The historical method, even though it has taught us many other useful things about Buddhism, is incapable of answering these questions, which—when you come right down to it—are the

most essential ones that anyone concerned about the end of suffering should ask about the Dhamma. To adopt the image of the tree, academics describing the history of Buddhism are, at best, reaching the twigs and branches. Just as it's impossible to tell from a tree's branches whether the trunk contains heartwood, it's impossible—using the historical method—to know whether the Buddha was right: that the Dhamma does have an essence, and that his teachings share in that essence to the extent that they really do lead to release. So, like the linguistic philosophers who are in no position to tell whether the word *release,* in the Buddha's mouth, points beyond language, historians are in no position to tell whether the Buddha actually attained release. The rules of the historical method have no force against his claim that he did.

When linguists and historians don't recognize the limitations of their methods and claim that the Dhamma has no essence, they are actually doing harm—discouraging themselves and others from testing the Dhamma in practice to see if the Buddha's claims about its essence is true.

So when we examine the three sorts of arguments maintaining that the Dhamma has no essence, we find that they have no affinity with the Buddha's original teachings, and actually get in the way of the practice. From the Buddha's point of view, thoughts and phenomena within the world of conditions *can* have essence to the extent that they point to the dimension outside. This is why his third noble truth—the total ending of suffering—is a truth; and why holding to this truth as an essential part of the practice. If, in line with the anti-essentialist arguments, you deny that the noble truths can have this sort of essence, then you close off the possibility of ever attaining release.

Of course, the mere fact that the Pali discourses make these claims about the Buddha and his teachings doesn't mean that they're true. But they do pose a challenge: Can you prove that they're not? If, in the Buddha's words, you're not looking for heartwood, and would rather see the discourses simply as old texts circumscribed by the horizons of your views of language and history, you're free to ignore their challenge.

But if you *are* looking for heartwood, for something of essence, then you'd be wise to respond to the challenge posed by the Buddha in the only way appropriate: by putting the Dhamma to the test in your own life. This means opening yourself to the possibility that essentialism is not always a fallacy, and that the Dhamma just might have an essence transcending your sense of self

and the world. Only by widening your horizons will you have any chance of seeing whether there's more to that essence than mere words.

The Middles of the Middle Way

In his very first sermon, the Buddha introduced his path of practice as a middle way that avoids two extremes: a commitment to sensual pleasures related to sensual desires, and a commitment to self-affliction. On the surface, this statement makes the path sound like a middling way, at a bland halfway point on the continuum between pleasure and pain. But if you read further in the Canon on the middle way, you realize that its middleness is much more complex than that.

To begin with, there are times when the Buddha recommends pursuing pleasant practice; and other times where he recommends painful practice. There are also times where he talks of the middleness of his middle way in different terms entirely. When discussing one of the more advanced stages of the first factor of the path, right view, he describes it as a perspective that avoids questions requiring an either/or response, where both the *either* and the *or* entangle you in issues that distract you from the task of putting an end to suffering and stress. This aspect of the path is middle in the sense that it cuts right through the middle of such questions and throws both alternatives off to the side.

This means that the Buddha chose his words carefully. The path doesn't necessarily *lie between* two extremes. It *avoids* two extremes. But exactly which directions it goes in avoiding them is up to the discernment of each practitioner to find out. Sometimes you avoid extremes by finding a point of moderation on a continuum running between them: a point that doesn't always stay right in the middle, and that can move unexpectedly. Sometimes you avoid extremes by leaving the continuum entirely. The Buddha's middle way has middles of both sorts.

In tracking down and sorting out the various middles of the middle way, you have to use your discernment in the same way you do when practicing to master a physical skill. To begin with, you have to discern where, on a continuum running from too little to too much, what amount of practice is

just right. Too little practice doesn't make a difference in your performance; too much practice can simply wear you out without improving your skills. That kind of middle lies on a continuum measured in time. Just as important—and often even more so—you have to discern which issues to focus on while you practice and which ones to ignore. This involves finding a middle that lies off any continuum entirely. For instance, if you're trying to become a faster swimmer, you have to focus on maintaining good form throughout your time in the water and to ignore the question of whether a red or yellow swimsuit will shave seconds off your time. In realizing that neither red nor yellow are relevant to your speed, you cut right through the middle of that issue and are done with it.

The Buddha himself saw the parallels between the path of practice leading to the end of suffering and the practice involved in mastering physical skills. In explaining the path, he often drew similes from the ways in which cooks, carpenters, and archers had to practice to hone their abilities. The main difference, of course, is that while physical skills require a great deal of concentration and discernment, the path requires even more. Once the Buddha's attendant, Ānanda, stopped while on his almsround to watch a group of young princes practicing archery. On returning to the Buddha, he expressed amazement at the accuracy of their aim. The Buddha responded,

> *"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 a 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 actually has come to be, that 'This is stress'; who pierce, as it actually 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.'"* — *SN 46:45*

In other words, the path to the end of suffering is a skill that, like archery, requires accurate aim, but the level of discernment needed to develop that accuracy is of a much higher order.

So when trying to understand the various middles of the middle way—both those that are on a continuum and those that are off—it's useful to keep in mind the middles discerned in mastering a physical skill.

TWO TYPES OF MIDDLE

The middles of the middle way that lie on a continuum are those related to the practice of moderation. Those that lie off any continuum are related to the practice of appropriate attention. Although these two practices focus on different aspects of the path, they have one important feature in common. They both avoid the extremes of commitment to pain and to sensual pleasure, not by avoiding pain and pleasure, but by using pain and pleasure as tools, whenever appropriate, to help the mind abandon its unskillful qualities.

In other words, neither practice treats pleasure or pain as an evil in and of itself. Instead, they both treat pleasure and pain as means to a higher end. They simply differ in the way they use pleasure and pain as tools. Moderation uses pain, when necessary, as a goad to heedfulness, and pleasure as a support for life and for physical and mental health. Appropriate attention encourages you to develop the pleasure of strong concentration to help wean you away from attachment to sensual pleasures. Then it encourages you to use the mental firmness provided by concentration to look carefully at the experience of pain until you develop dispassion for it. This, in turn, allows you to free the mind from all suffering and stress.

So to develop the discernment that can lead to that freedom, you have to exercise it with both sorts of middles: those involving moderation, and those involving appropriate attention.

THE MIDDLES OF MODERATION

The practice of moderation, in which you try to find an ideal point of balance on a continuum between two extremes, relates primarily to the factors of the path related to virtue and concentration, although discernment necessarily plays a role in governing how this is done.

For instance, with virtue: If we compare the precepts recommended by the Buddha—no intentional killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, or taking of intoxicants—with the precepts taught by the other contemplative schools of his time, we find that the Buddha's precepts lie between two extremes. On the

strict side, the Jains taught that all activity, intentional or not, is harmful, and that the only harmless course of action was to undergo austerities and ultimately to lie down still and fast to death. On the other extreme, the Ājīvakas and Lokāyatas taught that actions have no effect on what happens in the world, so there's no way that you can do anyone any help or harm. From this they argued that the whole idea of morality is a sham, a mere social convention, and that there's no need to place any restrictions on your behavior at all. The Buddha's insistence that actions have consequences, that harm is real, and that you have to focus on not *intentionally* causing harm is a midpoint between these two extremes.

However, it's important to note that the moderation of the precepts taught by the Buddha doesn't mean that they should be observed in a middling way, sometimes following them and sometimes not. The Buddha stressed that the practice of the precepts gives its best results when you observe them in your dealings with all living beings in all situations at all times. He also expressed admiration for those monks who kept to their precepts even if it cost them their lives (Ud 5:5). Only when you show that level of commitment to the precepts can they expose any unskillful agendas in the mind that would otherwise lie hidden behind your excuses for not observing them in one situation or another.

So even though the precepts are moderate in their strictness, the commitment they call for is extreme. This is one of the ways in which the middle way is not a middling way. It's both moderate and radical at the same time.

MODERATION & CONCENTRATION

A similar principle applies to the moderation of concentration: You have to be radically committed to developing a balanced state of mind. Here, however, the point of moderation is no longer on a single continuum. Instead, you have to find a point of balance on several different continua at once.

The continuum stretching from commitment to sensual indulgence to commitment to self-affliction relates to the practice of concentration most directly in the need to exercise moderation in the amount food you eat. The path factors related to concentration—right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration—are aimed at developing a stable, full-body awareness at requires a healthy body that's neither weakened from eating too little nor

oppressed from eating too much. Afflicting yourself by eating too little will deprive you of the energy you need to maintain full-body focus; indulging in eating too much will make the body heavy and unsettled. Like an athlete or a soldier, you have to avoid both hating food and loving food for its flavors and the sense of fullness it provides. Instead, you have to regard it primarily as fuel to keep the body both light and strong at the same time.

As for the state of mind in concentration, it lies on the midpoint on a continuum between two other extremes: states of mind that are scattered and hyperactive, and those that are torpid and unalert. To find this midpoint—which will vary over time—you have to develop the factors of awakening in a way that moves you away from either extreme. When the mind is torpid, you rouse it by developing three qualities. The first is your ability to analyze what's skillful and unskillful in your present state of mind: This is called *analysis of qualities*. Then you make the effort to develop what's skillful and to abandon what's not—this is called *persistence*—until the body and mind are nourished with a sense of refreshment called *rapture*. On the other hand, when the mind is overly aroused, you focus not on those factors but on a different set of three: calm, concentration, and equanimity. The only factor for awakening that's always appropriate is mindfulness, for it remembers to watch over the mind and to evaluate which of the other factors are needed at any one time.

Another continuum requiring moderation relates to the issue of how much pressure to apply in your focus on the object of your concentration. In the Buddha's simile, it's like holding a quail in your hands. If you hold it too tightly, it'll die. If too loosely, it'll fly away (MN 128).

As concentration develops to the level of jhāna—the absorption that constitutes right concentration—you'll find that the factors of rapture and calm can lead to extremely intense feelings of pleasure. These feelings don't count as sensual pleasures, in that they don't depend on the external senses. Instead, they're classed as pleasures of form: the sense of wellbeing that comes from fully inhabiting your inner sense of the form of the body. For this reason, these feelings are not to be avoided. In fact, the ability to access them at will is an important part of mastering concentration, for it nourishes your ability to stay on the path. However, here too you have to exercise moderation. If you get stuck on the more blatant levels of pleasure in the beginning stages of jhāna, you prevent yourself from reaching the more balanced stability of the higher stages, in which intense pleasure and rapture fade away, leaving the evenness of

pure equanimity.

The concentration that results from following these instructions is balanced and moderate, both stable and fully aware. But the commitment it requires is extreme. The Buddha recommended developing it at all times and in all situations. Here again the moderation of the path has its radical side.

DISCERNMENT & MODERATION

Although issues of moderation focus primarily on the parts of the path dealing with virtue and concentration, they require that you use discernment. After all, discernment plays a necessary role in seeing the value of moderation in the first place. Appreciating moderation—to say nothing of mastering it—requires a higher level of intelligence than the intelligence used in chasing after extremes. Discernment is also needed to provide you with effective reasons to withstand the emotions that would push you off-course. Without this sort of discernment, it's all too easy to push too hard when you feel enthusiasm or to slack off when your enthusiasm wanes, leading you to waste time swinging back and forth between two fruitless extremes.

Discernment also plays a role in gaining a sense of how the energies of the mind and the demands of the practice keep changing—especially in the practice of concentration—so that you can figure out, at any given moment, where on the continuum the middle point of most effective moderation actually lies. For instance, you can notice how today's needs differ from yesterday's and—like a swimmer who can read the state of his body as he swims his laps—figure out whether your concentration today needs more energy or less.

Discernment also helps you to notice when you can practice in line with your pleasure, and when you have to practice with pain. If you see that living in accord with pleasure fosters unskillful qualities in the mind, you have to push the middle point of moderation in the direction of pain: sitting longer hours, going with less food and sleep, practicing walking meditation for longer stretches of time. When working with pain has done its work, the middle point of moderation can slide back in the direction of harmless pleasure (MN 101).

An example of harmless pleasure is the pleasure that comes from the beauties of wilderness, where you can find the seclusion that fosters concentration. At present we tend to take for granted the idea that wilderness is beautiful, and forget that only recently has human culture come to view

wilderness in a positive light. For millennia, ever since the beginnings of agriculture, wilderness was something endured under duress and that had to be tamed. Only with the industrial revolution have people in general come to regard wilderness as a place to be enjoyed. But the Pali Canon was far ahead of its time in this regard. It contains the earliest extant poetry extolling the beauties of wild nature, treating those beauties both as inherently pleasant and as the ideal setting for finding the even higher pleasures of a well-concentrated mind. The ability to appreciate these pleasures, and to realize that this appreciation was a healthy aid on the path, required sharp discernment.

What makes these pleasures healthy is the purpose which they are used—a point that applies equally to the more everyday pleasures of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. Monks are enjoined everyday to reflect on why they need these supports on the path, and to remind themselves to use them strictly for that purpose, to keep from getting carried away by the pleasures these things can provide. The reflection on food, for instance, gives guidance on how to find the point of moderation in eating by keeping the purpose of eating always in mind:

> *"And how does a monk know moderation in eating? There is the case where a monk, considering it appropriately, takes his 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, 'I will destroy old feelings [of hunger] & not create new feelings [from overeating]. Thus I will maintain myself, be blameless, & live in comfort.'"* — *AN 4:37*

So the role of discernment in directing the moderation of virtue and concentration shows that the path, in avoiding the extremes of commitment to sensual pleasure and commitment to self-inflicted pain, doesn't require you to avoid pleasure and pain. It teaches you to avoid *commitment* to either of the two. In other words, it doesn't view either pleasure or pain as an evil—or a good—in and of itself. Instead, it uses both of them as tools, whenever appropriate, for a higher good: cleansing the mind of its unskillful qualities. This requires that you use your discernment to see when these tools are best used and best put aside, by determining—at each stage of the path—where on the point of effective moderation lies.

THE MIDDLES OF APPROPRIATE ATTENTION

When discernment turns to the larger questions of understanding the framework of the practice—in other words, when it focuses on the processes of discernment itself—its middleness is no longer a shifting point on a continuum. It becomes a range of points off the continuum entirely. In cases like this, the middleness of the path is less a matter of moderation and more one of *appropriate attention:* knowing which questions to focus attention on at any particular time, and which to cut through the middle and put aside.

The questions to focus attention on are those dealing with the duties appropriate for the four noble truths: how to comprehend suffering, how to abandon its cause, how to realize the cessation of suffering, and how to develop the path to that cessation. The focus on suffering shows again that avoiding commitment to pain and sensual pleasure doesn't mean avoiding pain and pleasure entirely. You learn to sit with the pain of suffering so that you can really comprehend it; you develop the factors of the path—which include the non-sensual pleasures of strong concentration—that allow you to sit with pain without feeling the need to run away from it in the direction of sensual pleasure. This is what allows you to fulfill the duties appropriate to all the noble truths, and so to reach the end of suffering.

To stay focused on the questions related to the noble truths, however, you have to learn to how put aside any questions that cling to issues that would get in the way of performing the duties appropriate to those truths. This is where the middleness of appropriate attention shows its radical side, for it cuts through the middle many of the questions that people normally ask themselves about themselves and the world around them.

These inappropriate questions increase in subtlety as you progress along the path, but they all come down to two sorts of clinging that can develop directly around the practice of the path: clinging to the practices of the path as if they were the goal of the path, and clinging to a sense of identity fashioned around those practices. The need to avoid these two types of clinging—and the need, at the same time, to develop a path of practice that risks giving rise to them—is related to a concept central to the Buddha's analysis of the stress and suffering that the path is designed to end. That concept is *becoming*.

QUESTIONS OF BECOMING

Becoming is a sense of identity in a particular world of experience. Becomings of this sort can last for whole lifetimes or, within the mind, for fleeting moments of time. In every case of becoming, both the identity and the sense of the world coalesce around a particular desire. The identity relates to the desire in two ways: both as the self that wants to experience the object of the desire, and as the self that wants to develop (or already has) the powers that will bring that object about. Other aspects of yourself are irrelevant to that particular becoming.

The sense of the world related to the desire is also composed of two things: those aspects of the world that will help fulfill the desire and those that threaten to stand in the way of its fulfillment. Anything irrelevant to the desire won't count in that particular sense of the world.

For instance, suppose you want a drink of water. The self in the becoming that coalesces around that desire is composed of the mental acts that hope to quench a thirst and the parts of your body and mind that will be involved in finding the water you want. Other aspects of yourself—such as your looks or you musical abilities—will be irrelevant to that particular becoming. The world of this becoming will be composed of the parts of the world that will either provide you with water or stand in the way of your obtaining it. If you're in a desert far from water, the desert will play a huge role in that particular becoming. If you're near a stream in the mountains, the desert—even though it still exists in this human world—won't count in the world of that becoming at all.

Processes of becoming can operate simultaneously on many levels, both short-term and long. The fact of your being a human being in this human world is a becoming that resulted from a desire that appeared in the mind as you were leaving your last lifetime. Within this larger becoming there are many shorter-term becomings that coalesce around particular desires related to possibilities in the physical world. There are also many more fleeting becomings that are purely mental, as when you conceive a desire to think and take on the role of the thinker thinking the thought, or of an actor in the world of your thought. These levels of becoming are interrelated in that physical levels of becoming can inspire mental ones, and purely mental becomings can form the seed for becomings on the level of the physical world for short periods of time or for entire lifetimes.

The process of becoming is related to the issue of suffering and stress

because any desire leading to becoming is also a cause of stress. To gain freedom from stress requires putting an end to all desires leading to becoming. The Buddha identified these desires as falling into three categories. The first two are intuitive: sensual desire and desire for becoming itself. The third—the desire to put an end to any existing becoming—is counterintuitive but it can be explained in that any action to destroy a becoming requires taking on an identity built around the desire to see it destroyed. This in turn forms the seed for a new becoming.

But even though this third type of desire can be explained as a cause of becoming, it presents a strategic problem for any path of practice aimed at the ending of stress and suffering: how to allow becoming to end without getting involved in the desire to destroy becoming. In Iti 49, the Buddha presents his solution to this problem as a middle way between the desire for becoming and the desire to end any existing becoming. That middle way is to see what has come to be simply as what has come to be.

Iti 49 gives no further explanation of what this means, but other passages in the Canon concerning the path show that this approach requires a two-stage strategy. The first stage is to use virtue, concentration, and discernment to provide a stable state of concentration, a poised state of becoming that allows you to observe the processes in the mind as they are happening—or, in the words of Iti 49, as they have come to be. The second stage is to use discernment based on this stable becoming to watch those processes without reference to a "self" or a "world"(or "no self" or "no world") as a context for those processes. In other words, you watch the processes simply as processes without reference to the question of whether there is or isn't a self watching the processes, or to the question of whether there is or isn't a self or a world standing behind them.

At first, this sort of discernment is applied to all processes outside of those involved in maintaining virtue, concentration, and discernment. Ultimately, it's applied to those processes as well. This leads eventually to a dispassion for all processes, at which point the desires related to becoming simply end on their own. That's the end of all suffering and stress.

TWO STAGES OF DISCERNMENT

In the context of this two-stage strategy, the role of appropriate attention —the middleness of discernment that lies outside any continuum—is to turn

attention away from any unnecessary or unskillful sense of self or the world that would interfere with this strategy. For instance, **in the first stage,** the practice of virtue and concentration requires high levels of self-esteem and heedfulness, both of which require a healthy sense of self. So appropriate attention at this stage doesn't call that sense of self into question. However, any desire to compare your level of virtue or concentration with that of others is detrimental to the practice, and so appropriate attention focuses on turning attention away from questions that would involve comparing yourself with others. You're here to cure your own unskillful mental qualities, so the question of whether you're better than others is really none of your business.

For this reason, the middleness of discernment at this stage warns you, for instance, not to exalt yourself or to disparage others over how content you are with meager material gains or how much delight you take in the practice (AN 4:28). And it warns you not to exalt yourself over other people whose level of concentration is lower than yours (MN 111)

So at this stage the middleness of discernment deals only with becomings that thwart your path, while it encourages those that are necessary to keep the path going.

On the second stage of the Buddha's strategy, discernment undercuts every type of becoming, but here again it treads a middle path. The middle here lies in turning attention away from any questions concerning the nature or existence of a self or world surrounding the processes of the mind.

The middle path that cuts through these questions is an understanding of the processes leading to suffering and stress, viewed simply as processes. The formal name for the pattern of these processes is dependent co-arising *(paṭicca samuppāda)*.

Although dependent co-arising is a teaching that even the Buddha described as complex, its middleness as a form of discernment is easy to explain: It makes no reference to the existence or non-existence of a self or world as a context for the processes leading to suffering and stress. In fact, it shows how any sense of "self" or "world" is a byproduct of those processes. In this way, instead of placing these processes within the context of a self or a world, dependent co-arising provides the context for understanding how ideas of self and world come about as a result of the processes leading to stress and suffering.

In doing so, it shows how to view the processes of the mind in such a way that leads ultimately to a sense of dispassion for any sense of self or world, and in so doing leads to total release from becoming, total release from all suffering and stress.

Several discourses list questions that are cut through the middle when you adopt the perspective of dependent co-arising. Some of these questions cover issues about the nature of the self. For instance:

> *"Is the body the same as the soul, or is the body one thing and the soul something else?"* — *SN 12:35*
>
> *"Is stress self-made, or is the one who creates it different from the one who experiences it?"* — *SN 12:17*
>
> *"Are pleasure and pain self-made, or is feeling one thing and the one who experiences it something else?"* — *SN 12:18*

Other questions cut through the middle by dependent co-arising cover issues concerning the nature and existence of the world:

> *"Does everything exist? Does it not exist?"* — *SN 12:15*
>
> *"Is everything a oneness? Is it a plurality?"* — *SN 12:44*

When discernment is able to put aside these questions—and other similar ones, such as whether the self does or doesn't exist (SN 44:10; MN 2)—it can reach a point of equipoise, called non-fashioning *(atammayatā)*, where all the issues of becoming fall away. It's in this way that the Buddha' middle way cuts through the middle of the challenge posed by the desire for becoming and the desire for non-becoming, allowing the experience of all becomings—including the becoming of the path—to fall away, leaving total release.

RELEASED FROM LOCATION

One of the features of this release is that it's totally devoid of location, both physical and mental. After all, location is an issue of selves in worlds, which in turn are issues of becoming. When the mind is free of becoming, location is no longer an issue, for there's no sense of a world in which to be located, and no sense of a self that has to be located somewhere. This is how the various middles of the middle way—the middles of moderation and the middles of appropriate attention—prepare the mind to cut through one of the final

middles faced on the path: the issue of moving or staying in place. As long as location is an issue, there's no way through the middle of this question. The mind is always faced with choosing one side or the other: to stay where it is, or to go somewhere else. This means that it's always having to choose a course of action. It's still not totally free. But when location is no longer an issue, the question of where to go or stay is cut through the middle, and total release is found.

This is why the consciousness of those who are totally awakened is said to be nowhere established (SN 22:87) but everywhere released (Dhp 348). Because this release is so total, they're no longer concerned with who's experiencing the release, or where. The fact of release, on its own, is completely enough.

PIERCING A MOVING TARGET

It's worth noting that the number of discourses dealing explicitly with the middleness of dependent co-arising—eight—is more than twice as large as the three dealing explicitly with the middleness of the path as a whole. This fact is apparently related to the fact that the issues of appropriate and inappropriate attention are more complex and present a larger number of pitfalls than the issues of moderation.

However, what's even more noteworthy is that the total number of both sorts of discourses is so small when compared with the vast number of discourses the Pali Canon contains. The Canon rarely discusses the issue of the middleness of the middle way at all. This may be because many of those other discourses, even though they don't explicitly mention the middleness of the Buddha's path, treat it implicitly. The issue of moderation, for instance, lies in the background of every discussion of the path, whether dealing with issues of virtue or with issues of concentration and discernment. Appropriate attention lies in the background of every discussion covering any of the four noble truths.

But, more importantly, the small number of discourses devoted explicitly to the middle way may also be related to the fact that only so much can be said about middleness in words. Most of the issues surrounding the middleness of the path can be settled not by thinking about it in the abstract, but by dealing with the detailed ups and downs you encounter in your own mind, both as it creates suffering and stress, and as it develops the path to bring suffering and stress to an end. The challenge of finding the many middles of the middle way —which often involves trying to pierce the center of an erratically moving

target—exercises and sharpens your discernment so that it can find the end of suffering where it matters most: not in the abstract, but in the middle of your own heart and mind.

The Arrows of Thinking

papañca & the path to end conflict

In a striking piece of poetry (Sn 4:15), the Buddha once described the sense of *saṁvega*—terror or dismay—that inspired him to look for an end to suffering.

> *I will tell*
> *of how*
> *I experienced*
> *saṁvega.*
> *Seeing people floundering*
> *like fish in small puddles,*
> *competing with one another—*
> *as I saw this,*
> *fear came into me.*
> *The world was entirely*
> *without substance.*
> *All the directions*
> *were knocked out of line.*
> *Wanting a haven for myself,*
> *I saw nothing*
> *that wasn't laid claim to.*
> *Seeing nothing in the end*
> *but competition,*
> *I felt discontent.*

Rather than trying to solve the problem by looking for a larger puddle for himself or his fellow fish, he looked inside to see why people would want to be fish in the first place. What he found was an arrow embedded in his own heart.

> *And then I saw*

an arrow here,
so very hard to see,
embedded in the heart.
Overcome by this arrow
you run in all directions.
But simply
on pulling it out
you don't run,
you don't sink.

This arrow has many names in the Pali Canon—the oldest extant record of the Buddha's teachings—and one of them is *papañca. Papañca* is a type of thinking that causes conflict within those who think it, and leads them into conflict with people outside.

As a word, *papañca* is notoriously hard to translate. As one scholar has noted, the word changed meanings frequently over the centuries among Indian Buddhists, the only constant being that it was always regarded as something negative. Scholars trying to decipher what it means specifically in the Pali Canon have proposed deriving a translation from the verbal root from which the word is derived, only to run into the problem that there is no obvious root that everyone can agree on.

Some have proposed that *papañca* derives from the root √*pad,* or foot, and so should mean something like "impediment." Some have proposed that *papañca* is related to the root √*pac,* meaning to cook, and so means something "cooked up": imaginary and sarcastic. Others have suggested that it comes from the root √*pañc*, or five, and so is a reference to the "fiving" tendency in some of the Upanishads, which see the world as evolving through a process of multiplying through categories of five. Still others, noting that the root √*pañc* can also mean "spreading" or "expansion," have suggested that *papañca* should mean "conceptual proliferation." It's through this last interpretation that the word *papañca* has entered the vocabulary of modern meditation circles, to refer to the times when meditators suddenly find themselves overrun by thoughts running riot, coming thick and fast, out of control.

Although some of these interpretations fit in with the way *papañca* was used in other texts in later centuries, none of them correspond to the way in which the Buddha actually uses the word in the Pali Canon. He doesn't

describe papañca as an impediment to progress; he discusses it instead as a source of conflict and pain (MN 18; DN 21). Nor does he describe papañca as sarcastic. As for "fiving," the Upanishads employ many other numbers in addition to five to describe their various theories for the evolution of the world, and the Buddha himself makes frequent use of lists of fives, so there's nothing inherently non-Buddhist or wrong with "fiving." And the problem with papañca is not so much the *amount* or abundance of the thinking, as the *type* of mental labels—categories and perceptions—it employs. This is a point that the Buddha makes over and over again. The *categories and perceptions* of papañca are what cause conflict (MN 18; DN 22).

So rather than trying to understand the word *papañca* through etymology, it seems more useful to understand it through the types of mental labels that distinguish it from thinking in general. And on this point, the Pali Canon is very clear. The Buddha points out in Sn 4:14—the poem that the compilers of the Canon placed immediately before his explanation of his saṁvega, quoted above—that the root of the classifications of papañca is the perception, "I am the thinker." In other words, papañca begins when your thinking takes you, the thinker, as its object. And as we will see, this object requires other objects in order to survive. This is why "objectification" seems to be the best translation for the word. It's from treating yourself and the world around you as objects—rather than as events or processes—that the perceptions causing inner and outer conflict derive.

The Canon contains several lists of these perceptions, and in every case states that they ensnare the mind in conflict and difficulty. For instance, AN 4:199 lists 18 "craving-verbalizations" that derive from this perception, verbalizations by which craving ensnares the mind:

> *"'There being 'I am,' there comes to be 'I am here,' there comes to be 'I am like this' … 'I am otherwise' … 'I am bad' … 'I am good' … 'I might be' … 'I might be here' … 'I might be like this' … 'I might be otherwise' … 'May I be' … 'May I be here' … 'May I be like this' … 'May I be otherwise' … 'I will be' … 'I will be here' … 'I will be like this' … 'I will be otherwise.'"*

MN 2 lists 16 questions that grow out of the thought, "I am":

> *"'Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past?*

How was I in the past? Having been what, what was I in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I be in the future?' … 'Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where is it bound?'"

MN 2 goes on to list six views that derived from these questions and fetter the mind:

"'The view 'I have a self' arises in him as true & established, or the view 'I have no self'… or the view 'It is precisely by means of self that I perceive self'… or the view 'It is precisely by means of self that I perceive not-self'… or the view 'It is precisely by means of not-self that I perceive self 'arises in him as true & established, or else he has a view like this: 'This very self of mine—the knower that is sensitive here & there to the ripening of good & bad actions—is the self of mine that is constant, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and will endure as long as eternity.'"

These ways of thinking all qualify as objectification because they derive their categories—self/not-self, existence/non-existence, here/there—from the mental label, "I am." The fact that the issues surrounding this mental label can multiply so quickly and spread so far gives some credence to the idea that papañca is proliferation. However, liberating insights can proliferate as well, as when an insight into one of the causes of suffering leads quickly to insights into other causes of suffering. So the question is, what is it about the thought "I am" or "I am the thinker" that leads to ways of thinking that cause inner and outer conflict?

The answer lies in the Buddha's explanation of what it means to be a being. The act of taking on the identity of a being is primarily a mental act. In other words, it's because you have passion, desire, delight, or craving for something that you identify with it (SN 23:2). In identifying with it, you become tied there. That's what makes you a being. Your choice of what to desire defines the type of being you are. This process happens both on the macro level—in the events leading from death to rebirth—and also on the micro level, as one sense of identity is shed for another on a moment-to-moment basis in the mind.

For instance, before you left your last body, you identified yourself as the thinker that craved continued existence. With the demise of that body, the

craving born of the root of objectification-labels led to your present birth (SN 44:9). Your continued craving to stay here is what maintains your present identity. On the micro level, you identify, in your search for pleasure, with the desires for specific pleasures, as well as with the areas of your awareness that you can control—"I am this"—in the search for those pleasures.

The act of assuming an identity on either level requires looking for food—both physical and mental (SN 12:64)—for if you don't find food for that identity, you can't maintain it. In fact, the need to subsist on food is the one thing that characterizes all beings (AN 10:27). This fact is so central to the Buddha's teachings that it's the first item in the catechism memorized by novice monks and nuns. It's also the fact that shows why the mental labels of objectification lead to conflict. As a being looking for food, you need a world to provide you with that food. Without a world to provide you with food, your identity as a being couldn't last.

From this observation about what it means to be a being, the Buddhist notion of "becoming"—a sense of identity in a particular world of experience—derives. Your sense of who you are has to inhabit a world that can provide for the desires around which you're defined. This applies both on the external, physical level and on the internal, psychological level. This is why the views and questions of objectification cover not only who you are, but also where you are, where you've come from, and where you're going.

Externally, as a human being with human desires, you inhabit the same physical world—the same puddle—as other human beings. When you think in terms of objectification and look for food in the human puddle, you inevitably run into conflict with other beings inhabiting the same puddle looking for the same sort of food. Thinking in terms of the categories of objectification spawns the desires that see your sources of food within that puddle as dear, and anyone who blocks those sources as not-dear. From this distinction come envy and stinginess, hostility, violence, rivalry, and ill will (DN 22). These attitudes, in turn, lead to the violence of "taking up rods & bladed weapons, of arguments, quarrels, disputes, accusations, divisive tale-bearing, & false speech" (MN 18).

As for the internal conflict caused by objectification, when you focus on a particular desire, only certain parts of the external world are relevant. Your psychological world is configured around whatever will fulfill your desire, along with whatever gets in the way of that fulfillment. When you want some ice cream, you're interested only in where you can find ice cream and whatever

might get in the way of your eating it. Everything else is either passively ignored or actively blocked out. Your corresponding sense of self is defined by its ability or inability to overcome obstacles and fulfill your desire in the world as you define it. For instance, if you want some ice cream, your body and your financial status are relevant. You looks—unless you plan to use them in getting a cheaper price for the ice cream—are not. This is why we can live in the same world physically with other people, but entirely different worlds psychologically. It's also why we can change our inner sense of *who* we are and *where* we are from moment to moment.

If there were a world that could provide all beings with all the food they want, objectification might not be much of a problem. But our desires are so insatiable that, as the Buddha said, even if it rained gold coins, it wouldn't be enough to fulfill our desires (Dhp 186). This is why the conflict between the fish in the Buddha's analogy can never be resolved by finding larger puddles, for no puddle could provide all the water we want. As a result, objectification inevitably leads to external conflict.

Internal conflict also inevitably follows from the thought that "I am the thinker" because when you define yourself, you limit yourself (SN 22:36). This may seem counterintuitive, for part of your sense of who you are revolves around the abilities you develop to get past the limitations standing in the way of getting what you want. But in doing so, you ignore the limitations that come from feeling the need to have desires. To begin with, you limit yourself to the condition of having to keep finding food. That enslaves you to the conditions surrounding the type of food you want. If you want physical food, you have to submit to all the conditions required for finding physical food and fighting off anyone who might want the same food. You have to identify with a physical body that has physical limitations. Even if you aim for more rarified forms of food, such as the pleasure and rapture that can come from refined states of concentration, you run into the fact that concentration is conditioned and inevitably ends.

If these were the only forms of happiness available, and if we couldn't help but take on the identity of "being" in order to find happiness, we'd simply have to put up with these conflicts and to keep on fighting as best we can. But the Buddha discovered another form of happiness—nibbāna—that can be experienced when the experience of the six sense stops. This happiness doesn't require taking on an identity, is not subject to conditions, is totally free from

hunger, and so is free from conflict. It's so unobjectified that you shouldn't even ask whether anything is left over or not—or both or neither—once it has been attained (AN 4:173), for the very concepts of "left over" or "not left over" derive from the thought, "I am the thinker" who would or would not be or have anything left over with the attainment. The person who attains nibbāna no longer has passion, desire, delight, or craving for anything, and so cannot be defined even as a "person" or a "being" (SN 22:36). This is why the Buddha said that arahants, after death, can't be described as existing, not existing, both, or neither, for whatever can't be defined can't properly be classified in those terms (SN 22:86). However, the unobjectified dimension *can* be described as the ultimate happiness (Dhp 203). In other words, not only is it totally free of suffering and stress, but after the experience of it, you can also come back to the world of the six senses and talk about it. That's the dimension in which all conflict ends.

Obviously, touching that dimension requires that you abandon objectification, and in particular the forms of objectification that would stand in the way of following the path to the end of objectification. For instance, if you define yourself as bad, there's no way you can help yourself out of the predicament of your suffering. You would need outside help to overcome your inherent badness. If, to avoid that problem, you choose to define yourself as inherently good, you also run into a problem: If you're inherently good, how did that goodness allow you to succumb to pressures to behave in unskillful ways leading to suffering? And if inherent goodness is something that can be lost, what's to prevent you from losing it again after you've reclaimed it?

So a necessary skill in the path to true happiness is learning step-by-step how to think in a way that avoids the categories of objectification. That requires a radical shift from the way people and religions ordinarily think. To begin with, it would mean thinking about experience without an "I am" imposed on it, without any reference to what objects might lie behind experience, either in the world "out there" or the experiencer "in here." Instead, you would have to look directly at the processes of experience simply as processes, explaining them only in terms of other processes that can be directly experienced.

Modern philosophy has a term for thinking in this way: radical phenomenology. The term "phenomenology" is a little daunting, but you probably had your first taste of what it refers to when you were small. At some

time during childhood you probably stopped to wonder whether your experience of blue is the same as another person's experience of blue. You and other people can point to an object and agree that it's blue, but you can't get into their experience to see if blue looks the same to them as it does to you. Similarly, they can't check your experience of blue to compare it with theirs. And neither of you can get outside your experience to see what the blue object "really" looks like. You simply have to accept your sense of blue as the phenomenon it is and leave it at that. That's phenomenology. In formal terms, it's the analysis of how experience is directly experienced as phenomena, without getting involved with the questions of whether there is a world "out there" or a self "in here" lying behind those phenomena. It looks at experience "from the inside," while making the fewest possible assumptions about what lies outside or behind it.

This sort of analysis would be something of an idle issue—how you experience blue is rarely a problem—if it were not for the fact that pain and suffering are also phenomena, and definitely *are* a problem. And it's right here that the Buddha focused his attention. He discovered that if you adopt the phenomenological approach to the problem of suffering, you can bring suffering to an end. This is where his teaching differs from modern phenomenology. He doesn't adopt this perspective simply for the sake of analyzing or describing the experience of phenomena. He puts this perspective to use, manipulating factors directly present to experience to provide a total cure for the primary problem of direct experience: suffering and stress.

The Buddha had two names for the type of thinking that adopts this non-objectified perspective. One is *dependent co-arising (paṭicca samuppāda):* a sequence of factors, all of which can be directly experienced, leading to the experience of suffering. The nature of this sequence is that the factors themselves can be used to turn the sequence into the path to the end of suffering, at which point they all disband. The causal principle that underlies both sides of the process—the causation of suffering and the cessation of suffering—the Buddha called, *this/that conditionality (idappaccayatā).* This name focuses on the fact that all the conditions in the process are events that are directly apparent to awareness as "this" or "that." You don't have to explain the causal sequence by assuming anything lying behind what can be directly experienced: either a world "out there" or a self "in here." Everything in the sequence can be explained—and manipulated—by what's right there in the

sequence.

To adopt this sort of perspective, though, the mind needs to be prepared. That's why the Buddha didn't teach dependent co-arising to rank beginners on the path. Instead, he first taught them how to use the categories of objectification in a skillful way that would prepare them for stage when they no longer needed to think in those terms.

In other words, objectification is not always a negative thing. Although it inevitably leads to some level of conflict, that conflict is sometimes strategically necessary as you practice for the end of suffering. On the outside level, there are bound to be people who will try to prevent you from following the path. You need a strong sense of yourself to maintain a sense of purpose in the face of whatever obstacles they may place in your way.

Similarly, on the inside level, some forms of objectification are helpful as skillful urges do battle with unskillful urges in the mind. To begin with, healthy objectification can help fight off any emotions that threaten to pull you off the path. If you feel discouraged in your practice, you can use the thought of what you are and what you're capable of doing to give yourself encouragement: "Other people can gain awakening. Then why not me?" (AN 4:159) If you feel tempted to abandon the path, you can use the thought of what you are—and what you will become if you go back to your old ways, or worse—to remind yourself of the sufferings you'll face if you give up. You can also use the thought of what you are to remind you of the love and concern for yourself that inspired you to practice in the first place (AN 3:40).

The Buddha also recommends using objectification to become what he calls a person with a sense of yourself *(attaññū):* the ability to gauge how far you've come in developing qualities needed on the path—such as conviction, virtue, learning, generosity, discernment, and quick-wittedness—so that you can build on your strengths and focus your energies on the areas where you're still lacking (AN 7:64).

However, the type of objectification that the Buddha most frequently advises as a part of the path is derived from the teaching on rebirth. If you adopt rebirth and the power of actions to influence rebirth as a working hypotheses, it gives you a useful perspective on the choices you are always making. As you think about the possibilities of where you may have been as you've gone through life after life of stress and suffering, and of how much

suffering you'll face if you don't take on the path of skillful action leading to release, you're much more likely to embark on the skillful path and to stick with it (MN 60). Also, reflecting on the universality of long-term suffering helps to induce the level of saṁvega needed to give intensity to your practice (AN 5:57).

There is even a discourse where the Buddha uses this sort of reflection to bring thirty monks to full awakening, reminding them that—in their many previous births as common animals and human beings caught breaking the law—they have lost more blood from having their heads cut off than there is water in all the oceans (SN 15:13). This was an effective use of objectification to get the monks to see the drawbacks of objectification so that they would abandon the objectification that would lead to further rebirth.

In most cases, though, the Buddha recommended using objectification primarily in the early stages of the path, and to develop types of thinking that avoid the categories of objectification on a higher stage of the practice.

This pattern follows the Buddha's own practice on the night of his awakening. The first knowledge he gained that night was an answer to questions of objectification: Was he in the past? What was he in the past? Where had he come from? Pursuing these questions in the clarity of his concentrated mind, he gained knowledge of his previous births. The second knowledge he gained that night, dealing in terms of beings dying from and being reborn to various worlds throughout the cosmos, was also a form of objectification. However, the third knowledge he gained that night—the knowledge that led to full awakening—abandoned the terms of objectification. This knowledge came to him after he reflected on the enormous sufferings of continual rebirth and redeath that he had seen in his second knowledge, and saw a need to gain escape from them. In the course of looking for that escape, he began to drop the categories of objectification and looked at birth and death simply as processes, without regard to who they were happening to or where. This enabled him to trace the cause of birth and death to events appearing directly to his awareness in the present (SN 12:10). That's when he was able to abandon the ignorance underlying those events, and so gain release.

Dependent co-arising is a description of the line of thought and investigation the Buddha followed in going from the second to the third knowledge that night. Although even a rudimentary explanation of dependent co-arising would require at least a book, for our purposes here we can simply

look at the list of factors in the sequence. In forward order they are: ignorance, fabrication, consciousness, name-and-form, the six sense media, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, becoming, birth, and then all the sufferings that follow on birth, such as aging, death, and grief. What's striking about this sequence is that none of the factors, even in their detailed explanations (SN 12:2), deal in terms of "I am," such as "my birth" or "my craving." And the term "being" doesn't appear until the end of the sequence, in the explanation of the factor of birth.

This means that the sequence of dependent co-arising is expressed in terms that sidestep the categories of objectification. However, the sequence can be used to explain how those categories arise. As Sn 4:11 points out, the categories of objectification come from the activity of perception. Extended explanations of dependent co-arising in the Canon show that perceptions play a role at two points in the sequence: prior to sensory contact, in the factor of fabrication (SN 12:2); and after sensory contact, following on feeling (MN 18). If these perceptions are conditioned by ignorance, they can be primed to read a sense of "I am the thinker" into sensory contact even before that contact happens; and they can feed on whatever feeling that contact gives rise to, to engender the views and verbalizations that cause the categories of objectification to ensnare them even further. It's because of these feedback loops—where one factor conditions a factor that in turn conditions it—that dependent co-arising needs no outside help to keep on going indefinitely. The factors are mutually sustaining.

However, this fact can also be used to end dependent co-arising from within. If the ignorance underlying dependent co-arising is replaced with knowledge of dependent co-arising itself, its factors turn into factors of the path. The acts of attention and intention, which come under name-and-form, can be used to direct perceptions away from objectification, and in this way the sequence that ordinarily leads to becoming and suffering breaks down. The sense of being a being is abandoned, and a sense of the world is no longer needed to provide food.

Ultimately, even the processes of dependent co-arising and this/this conditionality have to be abandoned. After all, they aren't the goal itself. They simply form a path to a goal. Total freedom from objectification comes only when *all* processes come to an end (MN 18). But learning how to think in terms of processes is the most effective way to reach that unobjectified

freedom.

Because the habits of objectification are deeply ingrained in everyday thinking, the act of learning how to think in terms of processes goes against the grain. We're so used to taking on the role of beings and looking for food that it's hard to break out of the pattern. This is why people ever since the time of the Buddha have tried to fit dependent co-arising into the classifications of objectification. To allow this, though, would have made the teaching of dependent co-arising ineffective, so the Buddha consistently fought off any attempts to place dependent co-arising into the context of those classifications while he was alive.

One discourse (SN 12:12) tells of a monk who wanted to read an agent into the sequence, asking for each factor of the sequence, "Who is doing this?" For example, when the Buddha said that feeling leads to craving, the monk asked, "Who craves?" The Buddha responded that he hadn't said, "craves," and so the question, "Who craves?" is invalid. The appropriate question is: "From what as a requisite condition comes craving?" The answer is, "feeling." And so on down the line.

Another discourse (SN 12:35) tells of a monk who wanted to pursue the question of whether there was someone to whom the factors of sequence were happening. He asked, for example, "Which is the craving, lord, and whose is the craving?" Again, the Buddha said that the question was invalid, but then he went further, saying that this question was another way of asking a question that he consistently put aside: "Is the soul the same as the body, or is the soul one thing and the body another?" In other words, is there something that possesses the body (or the craving, or any other of the factors), or is there not? These sorts of questions, the Buddha said, would make it impossible to practice the holy life. He didn't explain why, but the reason is fairly clear: By trying to look behind the sequence and to engage in questions using the categories of objectification, you are not looking right at the factors of the sequence. You're trying to peek around them. Only by looking directly at those factors, and by engaging in them directly, can you put an end to them and bring about the end of suffering.

The attempts to read the categories of objectification into dependent co-arising didn't stop after the Buddha passed away. In the ensuing centuries, many Buddhist philosophers got into a long-standing debate over the time

frame in which the factors happen: Do they all happen in an instant? Are they spread over time in a single lifetime? Or are they spread over more than one lifetime? To ask these questions, though, is to try to place the sequence of dependent co-arising into the framework of the worlds into which beings are born. The sequence itself, however, makes no reference to time frame, and so could be applied to any time frame. In fact, it explains how time frames are created as categories of thought, and how to gain freedom from the constraints of time and other dimensions of the world (Iti 63).

Similarly, when the idea took hold that the Buddha's teaching on not-self was actually a teaching on no self—that there is no self—dependent co-arising was pressed into service as a way of explaining how experience can happen in the absence of a self. This too, however, was an imposition of the categories of objectification on dependent co-arising. As MN 2 points out, the belief "I have no self" is just as much a fetter as the belief "I have a self." Both beliefs qualify as forms of objectification because they answer questions that derive from the categories of objectification: "Am I? Am I not?" Only if you abandon these issues entirely, and focus instead directly on the factors of dependent co-arising as they are immediately apparent, can you avoid the inner and outer conflicts that come with objectification.

The tendency to read the categories of objectification into dependent co-arising continues to the present day. Modern-day materialists—who reject the idea that there is a self or soul in the body, and prefer to explain mental events as mere side-effects of biochemical processes—interpret dependent co-arising, with its lack of reference to a self, as compatible with their ideas. This, however, ignores the huge gulf that separates the factors of dependent co-arising from those of a materialist view of the world.

To begin with, the materialist view deals in the categories of objectification. It identifies a person as a being existing in a particular world. It takes the physical world "out there" as real, and regards the processes of the body that can be measured by people or instruments "out there" as the real causes for what is directly experienced to awareness. As for events as they are directly experienced to awareness, the materialist view relegates them to a purely subjective realm, in which the idea of causation from within awareness is regarded as purely illusory. You may think that you're choosing one course of action over another, for instance, but the choice was actually determined by the chemistry in your body. What you actually *are* is limited to what people

outside, along with their instruments, can measure. In terms of an old debate from the Buddha's time, materialism maintains that the soul is the same thing as the body. When the body dies, that's it.

What this means is that—unlike phenomenology, which looks at experience from the inside—materialism looks at it from the outside and holds as real only the aspects of consciousness that can be explained from the outside. This puts materialists in a peculiar position. On the one hand, because they hold that consciousness is simply the by-product of chemical processes, they call into question the idea that consciousness can have an accurate view of the world outside, for—after all—how can the occurrence of a chemical process guarantee that it conveys true knowledge of anything? Yet, on the other hand, they claim that their knowledge of those chemical processes is a proven fact. Where does this knowledge come from, if not from the world outside their consciousness? And when they convey this knowledge to us in their writings, what has it come through if not through their consciousness, whose reality and ability to know they have called into question?

Dependent co-arising, however, takes a very different approach. Instead of taking a stand on whether the soul is the same as the body or different from the body, it explains experience in terms of processes "right here." For instance, it sees the experience of the world "out there"—which the Buddha equates with the processes of the six sense spheres (SN 35:82)—as the result of mental processes such as ignorance and fabrication as they are immediately experienced. And as for the experience of the material body, dependent co-arising shows how that, too, depends on mental processes. Even the birth of this body, it describes in non-objectified form, not as requiring a soul independent of the body, but as the result of acts of craving and clinging, which feed acts of consciousness at the same time they feed off acts of consciousness, as they pass from the experience of one life "right here" in consciousness to the experience of the next life (SN 44:9), also "right here."

In other words, from the point of view of dependent co-arising, consciousness is not merely the result of physical processes. It's what allows the experience of physical processes to occur. At the same time, the craving and clinging dependent on acts of consciousness are what allow for acts of consciousness to experience those processes in a new body after an old body dies.

What's more, dependent co-arising focuses primary attention on a problem

that cannot be detected by people or instruments "out there": namely, the problem of suffering. No one outside can detect your mental pain. They may know that certain physical processes are accompanied by pain, but only if you report the pain to them. The actual pain is a phenomenological issue.

At the same time, dependent co-arising treats suffering as a problem that can be cured in a phenomenological way: not through the manipulation of biochemical processes, which can't be directly experienced—you can't detect from the inside which chemicals are combining in your brain—but through mental factors such as intention, attention, and perception, which *can* be directly detected, or as the Buddha says in MN 18, "delineated" as steps in a process. This is a fact of great consequence. The main problem of experience—the suffering that comes from craving, clinging, becoming, and birth into one confining puddle after another—is caused by factors directly present to experience, and can also be solved by factors directly present to experience, without having to look outside of direct experience to material or non-material causes hidden behind it.

This is why the best-known anthology of the Buddha's poetry—the *Dhammapada*—begins with these lines:

> *Phenomena are*
> *preceded by the heart,*
> *ruled by the heart,*
> *made of the heart.*

It's right at the heart—right at awareness—where the causes and solutions to the arrow of suffering can be found. An important part of the solution is to recognize that the categories and perceptions of objectification are a major cause of suffering in causing internal and external conflict. Although these categories and perceptions may have their uses, they ultimately have to be dropped. And the best way to drop them is to view them from a perspective that can watch them in action, as processes, without adopting them. To view them in this way gives rise to dispassion for them, and through dispassion they end. That's the role played by dependent co-arising. Its perspective forces a radical reorientation of how to look at experience—a lesson that was hard to learn in the Buddha's day, and is still hard to learn today. But the benefits that can come from learning it—in a way that brings total freedom from suffering—more than repay any difficulties involved.

Glossary

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

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

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.

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.*

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

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

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

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

Pāṭimokkha: The basic code of rules for monks and nuns. The monks' code contains 227 rules; the nuns', 311.

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

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

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

References are to texts from
the Pali Canon:

AN	*Anguttara Nikaya*
Dhp	*Dhammapada*
DN	*Digha Nikaya*
Iti	*Itivuttaka*
MN	*Majjhima Nikaya*
SN	*Saṁyutta Nikāya*
Sn	*Sutta Nipata*
Ud	*Udana*