

Buddhist Life / Buddhist Path



foundations of Buddhism based
on earliest sources

Bhikkhu Cintita

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the foundations of Buddhism
based on earliest sources

third edition

Bhikkhu Cintita

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Preface

*He who, having traversed this miry, perilous, and delusive
round of existence, has crossed over, and reached the other
shore; who is meditative, calm, free from doubt, and, clinging to
nothing, has attained to nibbāna—him do I call a holy man.
(Dpd 414)*

This is another introductory textbook on Buddhism, but one almost uniquely based entirely on the earliest stratum of scriptural sources, as close as we can get to what the Buddha *actually* said. It is also more comprehensive than most introductory books in that it encompasses not only the four noble truths, and the noble eightfold path, but also the prerequisite guidance that leads to an upright, virtuous and devoted Buddhist life rooted in basic Buddhist values. This textbook is accordingly divided into two parts: *Buddhist Life* for general guidance, and *Buddhist Path* for systematic training in the higher path leading to awakening, each of which can be studied independently, and in either order. It attempts to touch on the entire range of the Buddha's teachings, and it sees these teachings as nothing more nor less than a guide for Buddhist practice, consistently keeping the question in mind, "How do I make practical use of this in my life."

Early Buddhism. Buddhism began with the Buddha, a towering figure who lived some hundred generations ago, taught for forty-five years, developed a huge following of monastics and householders, kings, merchants, craftspeople, and paupers, and whose teachings were systematically memorized, compiled, and edited over several centuries before being entrusted to written media. As long as Buddhism had not wandered too far from the person of the Buddha and his immediate disciples, its teachings would have remained reasonably uniform. This was the period of *early Buddhism*. As Buddhism spread into increasingly remote regions, and was transmitted through eras increasingly remote from the Buddha's, sects developed and evolved as a result of regional variation, philosophical elaboration, and adaptation to varying demographics

and cultures, eventually stretching from Sri Lanka to Mongolia, from Central Asia (and probably the Mediterranean) to Japan and Indonesia. Often originally local innovations became movements that then swept out over a large part of the entire Buddhist world introducing new commonalities into existing distinct sects. In this way early Buddhism, within a couple of centuries of the Buddha, started to give way to the *sectarian Buddhism*, and to the distinct traditions that further evolved to produce the various schools found today.

Buddhism is now found in a wide array of forms, with little agreement as to what scriptures to take as primary. For instance, Japanese Soto Zen relies for the most part on many texts of Chinese composition, such as the lives of the early masters, the koan collections, the Chinese *Platform Sutra*, and monastery regulations, along with certain Indian Mahayana *sutras* of late composition (such as the *Flower Ornament Sutra*, and the *Lotus Sutra*), and the voluminous writings of the brilliant thirteenth century Japanese master Eihei Dogen. It is rare that any reference at all is made in this school to early Buddhist sources. Analogous observations could also be made about any of the Chinese, or Tibetan schools. Only the Theravada school refers routinely to the earliest texts, having kept alive not only the early Pali corpus, but also the understanding of the ancient Pali language in which that corpus was preserved. Nonetheless, even in the Theravada tradition additional strata have been deposited, particularly in the form of the extensive *Commentaries* from some nine hundred years after the time of the Buddha, and through the development, perhaps over some fifteen hundred years, of the *Abhidhamma* system.

In spite of such variation, the development of later sects has not always meant distortions of the intent of early Buddhism. In fact, it is striking that the brilliance of the Buddha's insight seems to shine through most of the historical sects, even while presented in often unique ways. This I view as a strength of Buddhism, and a testament to the firm roots planted in early Buddhism that have permitted so much variation without losing sight of its original mission, much like a tree that remains firm even as its branches grow this way and that. Nonetheless, our concern here will be limited early Buddhism, the common historical root of all of Buddhism.

Scholarly research has given great insight into the relative dates of Buddhist scriptures, and into which constitute the earliest Buddhist texts (EBT). Sujāto & Brahmali (2016) establish convincingly the scope and authenticity of this corpus. Theravada is the only early sect that has preserved what appears to be the entirety of the earliest corpus continuously since close to the time of the Buddha. Other early sects lost the early corpus with time, but in many cases not before Chinese pilgrims had collected large swaths of early and later texts, which became preserved in the Chinese canon in Chinese translation. The Chinese and Pali Canons are in remarkably close agreement, pointing to a

common very early source. Moreover, the EBT as a whole represents a very consistent, comprehensive, sophisticated and integrated system of thought, reflecting the monumental genius of their originator.

There are a number of advantages gained by focusing on the earliest stratum of the Buddhist scriptural corpus in an introductory text:

- The earliest stratum is the closest we can come to what the Buddha actually taught, and how he taught it. Undoubtedly others have contributed, generally without attribution, to shaping these ancient texts, but for the most part these would have been disciples likely very close in understanding to the Buddha himself.
- Comparing the later sectarian scriptures with the early stratum gives us an idea of how the later schools and sects developed historically, and how well they have preserved, at some level, the original intent of the Buddha.
- The earliest stratum is comprehensive, astonishingly profound, and brilliantly coherent. With some scholarly understanding of the cultural and intellectual milieu in which it arose, it is as intelligible for the modern student as the scriptures of any later school. The genius of the Buddha leaps out in this corpus, not only in the doctrine but in its manner of exposition.
- A complete representative version of this early corpus is now available in English translation from Pali, much of it in multiple English translations, and in other modern languages. Progress is also being made in translating the largely equivalent corpus from Chinese.

For these reasons, I have found, in my own teaching of introductory classes on Buddhism, that it is desirable, and most fruitful for students to focus on these very early texts, rather to attempt a survey of later schools. In this way I hope to make a reasonable attempt at conveying both the scope, and the depth of Buddhist understanding and practice in a single book.

I should caution that there are modern disagreements even among scholars and teachers of early Buddhism. This should not surprise us: The teachings are highly sophisticated, have doubtlessly undergone errors in transmission, and have lost much of the cultural and intellectual context in which the early texts were originally understood. This should, however, not distress the student as much as we might at first suppose: Since Buddhism is a practice tradition, we repeatedly hold our understanding of *Dhamma* and practice experience side by side. Naturally we make corrections, gain new insights, and fill in gaps in our understanding on the basis of experience as we go along.

I have taken sides in certain points of controversy in the course of my

research, and in some cases justified novel interpretations even in the face of established orthodoxy. In some cases this is merely a matter of letting the early texts speak for themselves without cherry picking, and in all cases my choices are based on sound, and rigorous principles of interpretation. I take responsibility for any errors.

Scope of the textbook. In this introductory book I take almost the entirety of the early Buddhist teachings seriously, dismissing nothing out of hand, subject of course to the limitations of my own understanding, and to what we can determine to be later redactions of early texts. At the same time I am concerned to provide modern readers with the means to wrap their minds around teachings that may sometimes appear arcane, given that these teachings arose in a time and place so distant from our own. I often attempt to provide modern ways of looking at the teachings—about *kamma* (Sanskrit and English, *karma*), to take one example, or renunciation, to take another—that I hope will offset the alarming tendency in modern Westernized Buddhism to dismiss large swaths of the teachings out of hand as archaic remnants no longer relevant today. They are, with few exceptions, timelessly relevant.

We do well to note that the Buddha described his teachings as going “against the stream,” by which he meant they upset conventional values, ways of looking at things, behaviors, and habits. Buddhism, when entered deeply, is radical in *any* culture. For this reason alone we should be very reluctant to dismiss any element with the thought of adapting Buddhism to our *own* culture prior to a complete understanding of its implications. Sometimes this entails deconstructing unexamined *modern* presuppositions, much as the Buddha did for his time. Sometimes this entails understanding the *function* each of the individual teachings serves within the entire system of teachings: “Why did the Buddha teach *that*?”

I hold functionality to be a hallmark of the teachings, for the Buddha's approach was consistently practical. One of my primary intentions in this book is to convey a sense of the Buddha's teachings as a functional integrated whole. In general, we can picture the teachings entirely as a support for practice, and practice as entirely a support for realizing certain benefits, pictured in three layers as in the image.



The Buddha's teachings, the *Dhamma*, pertain to the values that underlie a Buddhist life, ethical principles, *kamma*, and the fruits of *kamma*, merit-making, precepts, purity of mind, the role of refuge, and of monastic practice, the four noble truths, the mechanics of human cognition, meditation instructions, and so on. These inform practice, which pertains to the way we

live our lives, the kinds of attitudes we carry with us, and the kinds of actions we routinely perform. Benefits accrue from practice, occasionally awakening, but before that the fruits that come prior to awakening: strong mental faculties, a growing sense of well-being and fulfillment, and finally virtue and wisdom.

A modern perspective in the study and practice of *Dhamma* can be both an advantage, and a handicap. It can be invaluable in correcting traditional calcified misunderstandings of the earliest scriptures because modern “converts” approach these teachings with new eyes. Certainly modern scholarship is valuable in this role, and many of the sophisticated modern understandings of psychology or philosophy can sometimes be used to elaborate, or elucidate principles we find in early Buddhism. However, a modern perspective can be a source of problematic preconceptions—often under the guise of “common sense”—quite foreign to early Buddhist principles. The reader will find particular attention given to three themes in this book that are often neglected or minimized in other introductions to Buddhism in favor of more “hard-core” teachings like the four noble truths, and insight meditation, but that are nonetheless absolutely foundational in the Buddha’s early teachings:

- (1) The ethical foundation of Buddhism, particularly the recognition that *Dhamma* (Sanskrit, *Dharma*) is *almost entirely* a system of ethics,
- (2) Refuge, the Buddhist version of faith, and
- (3) Buddhism as a *culture*, some say a *civilization*, driven by an institutionalized reciprocal relationship between community and individual practice, whereby the former supports but also enjoys the fruits of the latter.

Who should read this book? I hope that this book will most directly meet the needs of three kinds of readers. The first are the beginners to Buddhism who are confused about where to begin. For you, a sweeping survey of the options would fail to convey the profundity of Buddhism, and leave you just as confused as before about where to begin. Virtually all books take a sectarian perspective, even though the early teachings are among the most accessible to modern people. Should a reader, through circumstance, or inclination, later take up the practice of a particular school, or sect—which I generally do not discourage—you will be well prepared through understanding its early Buddhist origins.

The second kind of reader is the experienced Buddhist, already trained, and practicing in some particular vital tradition, such as Zen, or some form of Tibetan Buddhism. I hope that, for you an historical snapshot of where your tradition originated (in early Buddhism) might provide alternative perspectives, and thereby improve the understanding of key teachings as they

are articulated in your school.

The third kind of reader I hope this book will appeal to is the person of another faith (or non-faith), who wants to acquire some comparative knowledge of Buddhism. The early Buddhist perspective will take you to the essence of Buddhism with little embellishment, and with enough depth to begin to allow more than superficial comparisons with your deeper knowledge of your own faith (or non-faith).

Using this book. In a classroom setting, I devote one and one-half hours of lecture time to each of the twelve chapters. I recommend that students read through each chapter twice, once before lecture, and once after. Either the first six chapters, *Buddhist Life*, or the final six chapters, *Buddhist Path*, can be taught as a separate course, though studying *Buddhist Life* before *Buddhist Path* is recommended. In fact each of the chapters within each book is for the most part reasonably self-contained, and, to that extent, might be read in any order. However, Chapter eight “Foundational wisdom” should be read before Chapter eleven “Disentangling the mind,” and Chapter eleven before Chapter twelve “Awakening.” For optimal results read all the chapters in the order of presentation.

Notational conventions. Foreign words are *italicized*. Almost all of these words are in standard romanized Pali, the only surviving early Buddhist language, and the Indic language in which the early scriptures have been preserved, and widely studied in the Theravada school of Buddhism. I will prefer the use of the Pali term over the often similar Sanskrit forms for providing the technical vocabulary of early Buddhism, even when the Sanskrit forms might be better known to English speakers. For instance, *Dhamma* will be used rather than *Dharma*, and *kamma* rather than *karma*. I suspect there are more students of Pali than of Sanskrit among the readership, since Pali is widely studied, and oftentimes mastered in the southern school, and Sanskrit generally only referred to, rarely mastered, in the northern. Moreover, the Sanskrit forms that English has borrowed often have distinctly Hindu meanings which are absent in the Pali. However, I will often point out Sanskrit equivalents.

Also, I have included *diācritics* for the convenience of students of Pali. Others can safely ignore the diacritics to approximate the pronunciation. In general, vowels are pronounced as in Spanish rather than as in English. The diligent reader is invited to google “Pali pronunciation” for further guidance in this matter.

The point of including ancient Indic terms at all is to establish the connection of the English terms to the fixed terminology of early Buddhism. For instance, the key concept *dukkha* appears variously as *suffering*, *anguish*, *dissatisfaction*, *unease*, and *stress* in English translation. Without the aid of

the Indic word, the serious student who pursues further study based on English translations may not recognize that ‘stress’ here means the same as ‘suffering’ there, namely *dukkha*. Nonetheless, the more casual reader should be able to put aside most of the Pali terminology offered, since I have generally used consistent English translations of the Pali terms throughout in this text, and referred to the Pali parenthetically only at first mention to make the technical usage clear. A few Pali words—such as *mettā* (kindness)—or their Pali equivalents have become so widely used in the English Buddhist literature that knowing them has become a part of Buddhist literacy. Special Buddhist terms, whether in Pali or English, are *italicized* at first mention, or at the point of definition. Please make use of the index at the end of the book to keep track of terms and their definitions.

A common issue in citing Pali texts is the rendering of pericopes. A *pericope* is a formulaic passage that is iterated multiple times verbatim, but with substitutions of specific words, or phrases. For instance,

I go to the Buddha as refuge.
 I go to the *Dhamma* as refuge.
 I go to the *Saṅgha* as refuge.

Sometimes a pericope can be a long passage, with multiple substitutions. For the reader’s convenience I mark the points of substitution, cite the first iteration, and list the substitutions for the remaining iterations. For instance,

I go to the ◀Buddha▶ as refuge.
 [... and similarly for ◀Dhamma▶ and ◀Saṅgha▶.]

The passages cited from Pali follow for the most part the Wisdom Publications translations (Walshe 1996; Ñānamoli & Bodhi, 1995; Bodhi 2000, 2012; Ireland, 1997; Fransdal, 2005). However, I have made some adjustments, particularly in Buddhist terminology, to ensure consistency with the whole of the text.

Abbreviations for early Pali sources

DN	<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>
MN	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>
Mv	<i>Mahāvagga (Vinaya)</i>
SN	<i>Saṃyutta Nikāya</i>
AN	<i>Aṅguttara Nikāya</i>
Dhp	<i>Dhammapāda</i>
Ud	<i>Udāna</i>
Iti	<i>Itivuttaka</i>

The sutta number that generally follows one of these abbreviations follows the conventions of the Wisdom Publications translations, and of the Access to

Insight, and Sutta Central web sites.

Acknowledgments. The earliest version of this book was released in 2015 for limited distribution, has been used as a textbook for many classes offered primarily in Austin, and Houston, Texas, and more recently by Zoom, and in Chisago City, Minnesota. It has gone through many substantial revisions along the way. I wish to thank Sameer Vishwanathan, and Cas Seabrook for extensive proofreading of earlier versions, and to Kymrie Dinsmore for the original cover art. I thank many students for feedback. I thank Colleen Kastanek for copy editing the final draft, and Loretta Draths for producing the new cover. The content has benefited from discussions with many people, too numerous to list here.

Bhikkhu Cintita
Chisago City, Minnesota USA
December, 2025

PART ONE: BUDDHIST LIFE

1. Buddha

The Tathāgata, bhikkhus, the arahant, the perfectly awakened One, is the originator of the path unarisen before, the producer of the path unproduced before, the declarer of the path undeclared before. He is the knower of the path, the discoverer of the path, the one skilled in the path, and his disciples now dwell following that path, and become possessed of it afterwards. (SN 22.58)

Some hundred generations have passed since eighty-year-old Gotama, the sage of the Sakyans, the *Tathāgata* (*thus-gone one*), announced that he would soon depart from the world. The Buddha's foremost disciples, Sāriputta and Moggallāna, had already passed away. The *Bhagavā* (illustrious one) asked his younger assistant, Ānanda, to summon all of the monastics (*bhikkhus*) living near Vesāli to meet so that he could make his prophesy public. When they had convened he spoke these words,

Bhikkhus [monks], I have now taught you things that I have directly known: these you should thoroughly learn and maintain in being, develop and constantly put into effect so that this holy life may endure long; you should do so for the welfare and happiness of many, out of compassion for the world, for the good and welfare and happiness of gods and persons. ...

Now, *bhikkhus*, I declare to you: all conditioned things are of a nature to decay—strive on diligently. (DN 16 ii 119-20)

Nibbāna (Sanskrit, *nirvāna*) is awakening, and *final nibbāna* is complete release from existence at physical death of the body. In the forty-five years since his awakening, the Buddha had realized the goals he had set for himself when he had vowed that he would not leave the world ...

... until the monks, nuns, laymen followers, laywoman followers, my disciples, are wise, disciplined, perfectly confident and learned, until they remember the *Dhamma* properly, practice

the way of the *Dhamma*, practice the true way, and walk in the *Dhamma*, until after learning from their own teachers they announce, and teach, and declare, and establish, and reveal, and expound, and explain, until they can reasonably confute the theories of others that arise, and can teach the *Dhamma* with all its marvels. ... [until] this holy life has become successful, prosperous, widespread, and disseminated among many, until it is well exemplified by humankind. (DN 16 ii 106)

Dhamma (Sanskrit, *Dharma*) refers to the body of Buddhist doctrinal teachings. Indeed, his disciples on the Gangetic Plain of northern India circa 500 BC already numbered in the many thousands by the end of the Buddha's life, included those from all walks of life, and from every caste, and had in his lifetime even included several kings. Those who, through understanding the Buddha's teachings, and through putting them into practice, had awakened themselves, to share the Buddha's awakening, now numbered in the thousands.

He had additionally instituted a well-regulated community of monks (*bhikkhus*), and within a few years an order of nuns (*bhikkhunīs*), providing them with a detailed code of conduct, the *Vinaya* (*Discipline*), setting standards for governance, for maintaining harmony, for relations with householders, as well as for renunciation of worldly ways, so that future generations might live the holy life.

In the years to come, the vast corpus of the Buddha's teachings would be remembered, preserved, and sometimes reformulated in new cultural contexts. Its civilizing influence would sweep over almost half of the world. Today, hundreds of millions of people still count as adherents of the Buddha, and both monastic communities persist, following essentially the same discipline the Buddha formulated one hundred generations ago. More importantly, he had set a civilization, a culture of awakening in motion, that alongside many cases of individual awakening would infuse peace, wisdom and virtue into the broader society.

Buddhism is not a revealed religion, that is, not of otherworldly origin communicated through a human prophet to benefit mankind. Nor is it the product of patching together various ancient and obscure sources of wisdom. Rather it is, particularly in its early form, the product of this single mind, the Buddha's, whose life and being also illustrate and motivate the teachings he espoused. The British scholar of early Buddhism Richard Gombrich calls the Buddha "the first person." By this he means that we know almost nothing about any prior historical figure anywhere in the world. The Buddha is certainly the most influential personality in all of South Asian history. The tale

of the Buddha's life has been told many times, sometimes in highly mythical and embellished forms with which the reader may already be familiar. Let's hear what the early texts say.¹

1.1. The noble search

The *Bodhisatta* (Buddha-to-be) grew up in the ancient city of Kapilavasthu (Sanskrit, Kapilavastu), in the Sakya Republic in present day Nepal. He was born of the warrior/administrative caste, and his father seems to have had a prominent role in the government of the republic. Moreover, the Buddha tells us of a privileged upbringing, as a kind of Nepalese playboy:

Bhikkhus, I was delicately nurtured, most delicately nurtured, extremely delicately nurtured. At my father's residence lotus ponds were made just for my enjoyment: in one of them blue lotuses bloomed, in another red lotuses, and in a third white lotuses. I used no sandalwood unless it came from Kāsi, and my headdress, jacket, lower garment, and upper garment were made of cloth from Kāsi. By day and by night a white canopy was held over me so that cold and heat, dust, grass, and dew would not settle on me.

I had three mansions: one for the winter, one for the summer, and one for the rainy season. I spent the four months of the rains in the rainy-season mansion, being entertained by musicians, none of whom were male, and I did not leave the mansion.

While in other people's homes slaves, workers, and servants are given broken rice together with sour gruel for their meals, in my father's residence they were given choice hill rice, meat, and boiled rice. (AN 3.39)

Pretty cushy. His privilege must certainly have also entailed an optimal education, perhaps particularly in statecraft. Yet, he was not satisfied with a life of ease and sensual pleasure. As the passage continues, he began reflecting on the inevitability of old age, sickness and death.

Amid such splendor, and a with a delicate life, it occurred to me: "An uninstructed worldling, though himself subject to ◀old age▶, not exempt from ◀old age▶, feels repelled, humiliated, and disgusted when he sees another who is ◀old▶, surveying his own situation. Now I too am subject to ◀old age▶, and am not exempt from ◀old age▶. Such being the case, if I were to feel

repelled, humiliated, and disgusted when seeing another who is ◀old▶, that would not be proper for me.” When I reflected thus, my intoxication with ◀youth▶ was completely abandoned.
(AN 3.39)

What he spoke with regard to ◀old (age)▶ and ◀youth▶, he then repeated with regard to disgust with ◀illness▶ and ◀health▶, and then with regard to {◀death▶ and ◀life▶}.²

Like many of us at a young age, the Buddha experienced an existential crisis, and like the hippies of olde, he set off for India on a spiritual quest. Young Gotama became a wandering ascetic.

Here, Aggivessana, before my awakening, while I was still only an unawakened *bodhisatta*, I thought: “Household life is crowded, and dusty; life gone forth is wide open. It is not easy, while living in a home, to lead the holy life utterly perfect, and pure as a polished shell. Suppose I shave off my hair and beard, put on the yellow robe, and go forth from the home life into homelessness.”

Later, while still young, a black-haired young man endowed with the blessing of youth, in the prime of life, though my mother and father wished otherwise, and wept with tearful faces, I shaved off my hair and beard, put on the yellow robe, and went forth from the home life into homelessness. (MN 36 i 240)

To *go forth* is to enter ascetic/monastic life. A *bodhisatta* (Sanskrit, *bodhisattva*, literally “awakening-being”) is a future Buddha, that is, one intent on the path to Buddhahood. Gotama’s youthful noble spiritual quest was to go through three identifiable phases: (1) discipleship, (2) extreme austerities, and (3) the middle way.

The first phase entailed training under an accomplished meditation teacher,

Having gone forth, bhikkhus, in search of what is wholesome, seeking the supreme state of sublime peace, I went to Ālāra Kālāma, and said to him: “Friend Kālāma, I want to lead the holy life in this *Dhamma* and Discipline.” (MN 26 i 163-4)

The Bodhisatta soon understood the *Dhamma* of Ālāra Kālāma, as did others, and progressed in his practice. The highest extent to which Kālāma himself had entered and dwelt in this *Dhamma* was the meditative attainment of “nothingness.” Before long the Bodhisatta also entered and dwelt in that dimension, but nonetheless realized,

This *Dhamma* does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to awakened, to *nibbāna*, but only to reappearance in the base of nothingness. (MN 26 i 165)

Dissatisfied with that *Dhamma*, he left. But, undaunted, the Bodhisatta sought out a second teacher, this time one Uddaka Rāmaputta, through whom he learned to dwell in the dimension of “neither perception nor non-perception,” but whose *Dhamma* also did not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to stilling, to direct knowledge, to awakening, nor to *nibbāna*.

At this point the *Bodhisatta's* period of discipleship came to an end. The second phase of his training was to practice extreme austerities, a way of life common to many homeless mendicants of the time, which he seems to have entered in a way both extreme, and austere, and which he describes with some morbid humor,

I thought: “Suppose I were to take only a little food at a time, only a handful at a time of bean soup, lentil soup, vetch soup, or pea soup.” So I took only a little food at a time, ... My body became extremely emaciated. Simply from my eating so little, my limbs became like the jointed segments of vine stems, or bamboo stems... My backside became like a camel's hoof... My spine stood out like a string of beads... My ribs jutted out like the jutting rafters of an old, run-down barn... The gleam of my eyes appeared to be sunk deep in my eye sockets like the gleam of water deep in a well... My scalp shriveled, and withered like a green bitter gourd, shriveled, and withered in the heat, and the wind... The skin of my belly became so stuck to my spine that when I thought of touching my belly, I grabbed hold of my spine as well; and when I thought of touching my spine, I grabbed hold of the skin of my belly as well... If I urinated or defecated, I fell over on my face right there... Simply from my eating so little, if I tried to ease my body by rubbing my limbs with my hands, the hair—rotted at its roots—fell from my body as I rubbed, simply from eating so little. (MN 36 i 245-6)

He practiced in this way for years, much of this period with five companions in the austerities, but once again became frustrated with the progress he had made.

The third phase of his training was the *middle way*, and he discovered it

himself. It is the middle way that would carry him to final awakening. In discovering the middle way the Buddha seems to have recalled a childhood incident, in which he had entered spontaneously into a meditative state (*jhāna*), and to have considered it to be of pivotal significance. As he recounts,

I recall once, when my father the Sakyan was working, and I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree, then—quite withdrawn from sensuality, withdrawn from unskillful mental qualities—I entered and remained in the first *jhāna*: rapture, and pleasure born from withdrawal, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation. “Could that be the path to awakening?”

Then, following on that memory, came the realization: “That is the path to awakening.” I thought: “So why am I afraid of that pleasure that has nothing to do with sensuality, nothing to do with unskillful mental qualities?” I thought: “I am no longer afraid of that pleasure that has nothing to do with sensuality, nothing to do with unskillful mental qualities, but it is not easy to achieve that pleasure with a body so extremely emaciated. Suppose I were to take some solid food: some rice and porridge.” So I took some solid food: some rice and porridge. (MN 36 i 246-7)

He would have been familiar with *jhānic* (meditative) states of some kind from his training with his two meditation teachers, so we can assume that a critical difference in his childhood experience was that it was fun. He had already abandoned the pursuit of sensual, or worldly, pleasures in his spiritual quest, and it seems that others had been telling him that all pleasure must be squeezed out of practice, and discarded (“no pain, no gain”). Nonetheless, he had discovered a crack in this understanding that he would pry open to gain access to the middle way. The crack was the difference, previously unnoticed, between *worldly* (*lokiya*) pleasure, and *supramundane* (*lokuttara*) pleasure. Likewise, fear of pleasure would no longer be the primary consideration in his dietary habits, but rather keeping the body healthy in order to sustain his practice. Apparently, his five colleagues saw things differently, thinking Gotama had fallen into “luxury,” and so they left him in a huff.

1.2 Gotama's awakening

It is reported that the Bodhisatta sat down at the root of a bodhi tree, entered the first level of meditative composure (*jhāna*), then progressed to the second, to the third, and to the fourth and final. He describes the unfolding of his awakening as follows,

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

This was the first knowledge I attained in the first watch of the night. Ignorance was destroyed; knowledge arose; darkness was destroyed; light arose—as happens in one who is heedful, ardent, and resolute. (MN 36 i 247-8)

This is clearly a direct recognition that the present life is one link in a long, and monotonous continuum of death and rebirth, which is known as *samsāra* (faring on). In more concrete terms, we can also think of *samsāra* as stuckness in normal existence, the inability to free ourselves from the recurring patterns of thinking, and responding, from the soap opera of life. Rebirth was not a universally accepted notion at the time of the Buddha, but was presented by him to frame conceptually the context of Buddhist practice. We will see later that awakening entails a break from the cycle.

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

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

This was the second knowledge I attained in the second watch of the night. Ignorance was destroyed; knowledge arose; darkness was destroyed; light arose—as happens in one who is heedful, ardent, and resolute. (MN 36 i 248-9)

This recognizes that *saṃsāra* generalizes to all beings, and that our past actions (*kamma*, Sanskrit *karma*) determine the circumstances of our rebirths. We build in this life, through our ethical choices, the house that we will live in in the next. However, our choices can instead serve to end this process.

If the first two knowledges are cosmological in nature, the last is psychological, in that it provides an introspective view of what happens in the process of awakening.

When the mind was thus collected, purified, bright, unblemished, rid of defilement, pliant, malleable, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to the knowledge of the ending of the mental corruptions. I discerned, as it had come to be, that “This is suffering... This is the origination of suffering... This is the cessation of suffering... This is the path leading to the cessation of suffering... These are corruptions... This is the origination of corruptions... This is the cessation of corruptions... This is the way leading to the cessation of corruptions.” My heart, thus knowing, thus seeing, was released from the corruption of sensuality, released from the corruption of becoming, released from the corruption of ignorance. With release, there was the knowledge, “Released.” I discerned that “Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.”

This was the third knowledge I attained in the third watch of the night. Ignorance was destroyed; knowledge arose; darkness was destroyed; light arose—as happens in one who is heedful, ardent, and resolute. (MN 36 i 249)

The third knowledge makes implicit reference to the *four noble truths*, which we will revisit in later chapters, as well as to dependent coarising, which explains the corruptions of sensuality, becoming, and ignorance. We will learn later that the Buddha viewed mind in terms of networks of mutually conditioning mental factors. Upon awakening, Gotama—no longer “the Bodhisattva,” but henceforth “the Buddha”—is said to have uttered the following verse, oft recited to this day:

Through the round of many births I roamed without reward,
without rest, seeking the house-builder. Painful is birth again
and again. House-builder, you are seen! You will not build a
house again. All your rafters broken, the ridge pole destroyed,
gone to the unconditioned, the mind has come to the end of
craving. (*Dpd* 153-154)

The house-builder is to be found in our own minds. Once we find him, he will not provide us with a new home in *saṃsāra*. Gotama had discovered the *deathless*, the end of suffering, the extinguishing of the flame (which is what the word *nibbāna* means). Henceforth he would be known as *Bhagavā* (the Illustrious one), *Buddha* (the Awakened one), *Sammāsambuddha* (the Perfectly Awakened one), and *Tathāgata* (the Such-gone one).

What is this awakening thing? By the end of this book we will be in a much better position to appreciate that it entails a radical reworking of human cognitive faculties. For now we can roughly understand it as the perfection of human character in two aspects: virtue and wisdom. The awakened person is virtuous: selfless, kind, compassionate, actively concerned with the well-being of all beings. The awakened person is wise: able to see things as they really are, unbiased, unprejudiced, without fixed views. The awakening person has mastered the skill of life.

Anyone who shares the Buddha's awakening is also called an *arahant* (worthy one). Although the *arahant* realizes what the Buddha realized, the Buddha is much more: he is the discoverer, and teacher of the path to awakening, upon which the awakening of others has been grounded ever since.

1.3. Setting the wheel of *Dhamma* in motion

The Buddha seems not immediately to have committed to the role of teacher. Assessing the profundity of what he had experienced, he doubted that others would grasp what he might teach, for,

This *Dhamma* that I have attained is deep, hard to see, hard to

realize, peaceful, refined, beyond the scope of conjecture, subtle, to be experienced by the wise. But this generation delights in appropriation,³ is excited by appropriation, enjoys appropriation. For a generation delighting in appropriation, excited by appropriation, enjoying appropriation, conditionality, and dependent coarising are hard to see. This state, too, is hard to see: the stilling of all fabrications, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving, dispassion, cessation, *nibbāna*, and if I were to teach the *Dhamma*, and if others would not understand me, that would be tiresome for me, troublesome for me. (MN 26 i 167-8)

This passage introduces an array of new terms with which we will become familiar with in the course of this book. Perhaps the Buddha thought a life of meditative ease would be the best option. Where we might expect an inner dialog to ensue, Brahmā Sahampati, an eves-dropping deity, took up the cause in favor of teaching. Showing appropriate veneration—for deities are never introduced in the early texts as objects of worship, but rather to venerate the Buddha, and often other Buddhist monastics—the deity knelt down, bowed to the new Buddha, and said,

Lord, let the *Bhagavā* teach the *Dhamma*! Let the *Tathāgata* teach the *Dhamma*! There are beings with little dust in their eyes who are falling away because they do not hear the *Dhamma*. There will be those who will understand the *Dhamma*.
(MN 26 i 168)

On reflection the Buddha discovered some wisdom in the deity's words. The Buddha at first thought to teach the *Dhamma* to his former teachers, but they had both died. So he decided to seek out the five ascetics who had abandoned him in a huff when he had begun to eat “luxuriously,” according to newly discovered middle way principles. On the way thither, the Buddha encountered another ascetic, Upaka of the Ājīvika school, who recognized something special in this monk's demeanor,

“Clear, my friend, are your faculties. Pure your complexion, and bright. On whose account have you gone forth? Who is your teacher? In whose *Dhamma* do you delight?” (MN 26 i 170-1)

To this, the Buddha explained that he had no teacher, but was fully awakened through his own efforts. He was, indeed, just now, on his way to turn the wheel of the *Dhamma*, and beat the drum of the deathless. Upaka's response was a bit disappointing,

“May it be so, my friend.” Shaking his head, and taking a side road, Upaka departed. (MN 26 i 171)

Having botched his first awakened encounter with another ascetic, then having walked for many days, the Buddha found his five former friends at Vārānasī at the Deer Park in Isipatana. They too noticed something special about their former colleague, something that wasn’t there before, aside from weight gain. The Buddha declared,

The *Tathāgata*, friends, is an *arahant*, rightly self-awakened. Lend ear, friends: the deathless has been attained. I will instruct you. I will teach you the *Dhamma*. Practicing as instructed, you will in no long time reach, and remain in the supreme goal of the holy life for which clansmen rightly go forth from home into homelessness, knowing, and realizing it for yourselves in the here and now. (MN 26 i 172)

And at this point the Buddha began his very first *Dhamma* talk, the first *turning of the wheel of Dhamma*. First, he explained the middle way, to justify his “luxury,”

There are these two extremes that are not to be indulged in by one who has gone forth. Which two? That which is devoted to sensual pleasure with reference to sensual objects: base, vulgar, common, ignoble, unprofitable; and that which is devoted to self-affliction: painful, ignoble, unprofitable. Avoiding both of these extremes, the middle way realized by the *Tathāgata*—producing vision, producing knowledge—leads to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to *nibbāna*. (SN 56.11)

Then, he enumerated the noble eightfold path,

... and what is the middle way realized by the *Tathāgata* that—producing vision, producing knowledge—leads to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to *nibbāna*? Precisely this noble eightfold path: right view, right attitude, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right recollection, and right composure. This is the middle way realized by the *Tathāgata* that, producing vision, and producing knowledge, leads to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to *nibbāna*. (SN 56.11)

Notice that he also calls the path “the middle way,” suggesting a balance

between extremes, an attunement, in each of the eight factors. We will devote the second part of this book to the noble eightfold path, the master checklist for advanced practice that, when taken up with diligence, ensures progress toward awakening.

The Buddha then discussed the four noble truths,

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

And this, monks, is the noble truth of the origination of suffering: the craving that makes for further becoming—accompanied by passion, and delight, relishing now here and now there—that is, craving for sensual pleasure, craving for becoming, craving for becoming other.

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

And this, monks, is the noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of suffering: precisely this noble eightfold path—right view, right attitude, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right recollection, right composure. (SN 56.11)

Once again, many important terms are introduced here that will become all-too familiar in the course of this book. The second half of this book is dedicated to the noble eightfold path. At the core of the four noble truths is the principle of conditionality: Since that arises, this arises. Since that ceases, this ceases. *Conditionality* is the foundation of most of the Buddha's understanding of the human condition. Here, as elsewhere, what the Buddha presents initially as a concise statement unfolds into something much more complex in practice. Suffering, and craving are prominent, conditionally related mental factors that provide initial points of investigation for the Buddhist practitioner.

With the offering of this one discourse, one of the five ascetics, whose name was Kondañña, attained the *vision of Dhamma*, a brief view of the deathless, an insight that marks one as a *stream-enterer*, ideally fit to embark firmly on the path with no going astray. We will have more to say about the vision of *Dhamma*, and *stream-entry* in later chapters. It was at that moment of insight

also that the *Saṅgha*, the Buddhist monastic community, arose, with the first monastic disciple to benefit from his teachings.

It is said that the Buddha awakened at the age of thirty-five, and died at the age of eighty. He taught for the intervening forty-five years. The remaining chapters of this book describe the core of what he taught. We have abundant reports of the discourses he delivered to diverse audiences in diverse locations on the Gangetic plain, venues that he reached by foot, wandering from place to place, generally in the company of monastic disciples, living on alms, often living in monasteries, which were lands donated by kings, or wealthy donors, and developed for habitation by monastics.

The Buddha is particularly renowned for his unique skill as a teacher, as is abundantly evident in the earliest discourses. Particularly noteworthy are his many apt metaphors and similes, often tuned specifically to his target audience to convey quite vividly some very subtle, or sophisticated realization. His common technique for teaching those trained in non-Buddhist systems was to initially adopt their perspective, but then reinterpret their terminology, thereby subverting them in the direction of more useful views, or practices. We will see examples of these in the course of this textbook. The Buddha is reported to have been remarkably skilled in shining the light of *Dhamma* in the most unlikely corners. A great example was the conversion of the mass-murderer Aṅgulimāla, whom the Buddha apparently sought out for just that purpose. Aṅgulimāla later became an *arahant*.

The Buddha's preferred target audience would be those profoundly dedicated to spiritual development, of great aptitude and dedication, willing and able to give up all other significant assets and responsibilities in order to practice twenty-four/seven. Nuns and monks remained the Buddha's focus throughout his teaching career. Nonetheless, progress toward awakening comes incrementally, and each step forward entails some share of the benefits of awakening. Long before full awakening, our life becomes less and less of a problem, we become kinder, more compassionate, calmer, sustained increasingly by an inner strength independent of external contingencies, and we become more balanced in our judgments, and more penetrating in our insights. In short, we become more content, happier, wiser, and much nicer to be around.

With time, the Buddha broadened the goal—without sacrificing depth—to provide guidance for those who do not fit the ideal profile, in order to ease the harshness of the human condition rather than to transcend it. For these he also provided wise advice on how to live a conventional life with dignity, and ethics. He was comfortable moving through every level of society, speaking with paupers, lepers, with those suffering calamities, with brahmins, mer-

chants, and with kings and ministers. On an early visit to his home town of Kapilavattu, his wealthy father was aghast at seeing him walking through the streets of the city collecting alms. Another account has him spending the night in a barn with the permission of a farmer, joining another itinerant Buddhist monk who had never met him. The other monk had no idea who he was chatting with, until a long *Dhamma* discussion revealed that it must be the Buddha himself.

The Buddha also moved about in high social circles. King Bimbāsāra, in whose kingdom Gotama had awakened, became, it is said, a stream-enterer upon hearing a discourse by the Buddha, and then became a major benefactor of the *Saṅgha*. King Pasenadi of Kosala became a disciple of the Buddha, and visited the Buddha daily when the Buddha was nearby, often asking advice on matters of state. A banker from Sāvatti, the capital of Kosala, Anāthapiṇḍika, became a disciple, and a stream-enterer, and donated land to the *Saṅgha*, which then became the Buddha's primary residence for the yearly three-month rains retreats in the years to come, and the most frequent site of the Buddha's discourses.

1.4. Establishing the *Saṅgha*

The Buddha was a three-fold genius. First, he became awakened without dependence on a teacher who could explain the path to awakening. Second, he succeeded in describing, explaining, illustrating, and elaborating the path he had discovered, so that many (hundreds) of his disciples were able to realize his awakening in his lifetime. Third, he succeeded in perpetuating his teachings, and their practice so that future generations might realize awakening, and that still others would share the civilizing effects of their awakening. Thereby, the Buddha created not only a path to awakening, but a culture of awakening. He founded an institutional structure that has perpetuated awakening up to the present day.

The community of the Buddha's most dedicated disciples seems to have grown by leaps and bounds beyond the original five. A wealthy young man named Yassa, who was disenchanted with dancing girls, and other worldly pleasures, showed up at his encampment, his father in hot pursuit. As a result, Yassa became a monk, and later an *arahant*. His father became the very first householder to follow the Buddha, and later a stream-enterer. Soon, the Buddha was off to visit the three Kassapa brothers, matted-hair ascetics who among them had one thousand followers. The Buddha convinced the eldest of the brothers, who had fancied himself already fully awakened, that he was not. As a result, he, his brothers, and their whole complement of followers became

disciples of the Buddha.

Uṇṇiṣṣa and Koliṭṭha were ascetics, and best of friends since childhood. Searching for the deathless, they agreed that whichever found the path thereto would immediately inform the other. One day Uṇṇiṣṣa noticed a lone ascetic gathering alms, whose comportment so impressed him that he suspected that some degree of attainment must lay behind it. In fact, this ascetic was Assaji, one of the Buddha's first five awakened disciples. Uṇṇiṣṣa approached Assaji to inquire about who his teacher might be, and what he taught. Assaji named the recluse Gotama of the Sakya clan, and summarized his teachings in a single verse,

Of those things that arise from a cause,
The *Tathāgata* has told the cause,
and also what their cessation is.

This is the doctrine of the Great Recluse. (Mv i 23.1-10)

This is a brief statement of this very principle of *conditionality*, and its effectiveness. Immediately, Uṇṇiṣṣa attained to the vision of *Dhamma*, thereby achieving stream-entry. Later that day, Uṇṇiṣṣa repeated this verse to Koliṭṭha, with exactly the same effect. Uṇṇiṣṣa and Koliṭṭha would soon achieve the deathless, and indeed become the two leading disciples of the Buddha, to be known respectively as Sāriputta and Moggallāna.⁴

The Buddha had been planting seeds in fertile fields. With time, however, the quality of his many new monastic disciples began to slack off. They were like seeds in less productive, more arid patches of land, fell more readily in blameworthy actions and speech, and often disrupted the harmony of the *Saṅgha*. They were less consistent in living a life of renunciation and simplicity, and reflected poorly on the entire *Saṅgha* in the public eye. They had more to learn. In response the Buddha began tightening up, in very explicit ways, the parameters of the monastic life, sometimes in response to complaints from householders, for he understood as practical matters that the *Saṅgha* was critically dependent on the goodwill of the householder, while householders took inspiration from the *Saṅgha*. The official set of monastic rules is the *Pātimokkha*. The *Pātimokkha* is the heart of the monastic code of discipline, the *Vinaya*, where it is supplemented by procedures for governance, further details about each rule, and many narratives that illustrate the applications of rules, as well as the history of the *Saṅgha*.

Although there were ascetics in India before the Buddha, "... among all of the bodies of renunciators it was only the Buddhists who invented monastic life,"⁵ that is, who provided an organized institution capable of sustaining its teach-

ings. The Buddha himself consistently referred to the body of his teachings as *Dhamma-Vinaya*. It is not often appreciated that institutionalizing the *Saṅgha* in this way was a truly monumental achievement. It has been observed⁶ that the Buddhist *Saṅgha* is likely the oldest human organization in continual existence on the planet! If the Buddha were to return to modern times he would recognize his *Saṅgha*, so enduring is it. This amazing institution, democratic, and decentralized, is the product of one genius, who cobbled it together from diverse elements already present in ascetic life in his time, who clearly articulated for it a mission, and a charter, and who released it into the world, never yet to perish.

About five years after the founding of the monks' *Saṅgha*, the Buddha also established a nuns' (*bhikkhunī*) *Saṅgha*, roughly equivalent to the monks' *Saṅgha*. The Buddha seems to have had the highest regard for women's potential for awakening, and the many recorded awakened *bhikkhunīs* bear this trust out. Indeed, a number of nuns became prominent teachers whose discourses are found alongside the Buddha's, and Sāriputta's, and others' in the earliest sources.

1.5. Aftermath

The *sāsana* (“teaching,” but often translated as “dispensation”) is the living Buddhist tradition viewed from a social, or historical perspective. Many of the Buddha's closest disciples met shortly after his death in order to recite together the discourses of the Buddha, and the *Vinaya* from memory, in order to ensure uniformity of what would be preserved in memory for future generations. We know a lot about the teachings as they existed during this early period, either as spoken by the Buddha himself, or as reworked, or augmented by his closest disciples before the development of separate sects, which developed largely as a result of geographical dispersion.

The primary sources we have of early Buddhism are largely parallel collections of early *discourses* (*suttas*, *Dhamma* talks) of the Buddha and his contemporary disciples transmitted through different later sects: The Pali *Nikāyas* (*sutta* collections) are preserved even today in an early Indic language. The Chinese *Āgamas* are translations into Chinese of texts originally transmitted to China through various South Asian, and Middle Asian sects in a variety of languages, commonly through classical Sanskrit. In addition, the early Buddhist monastic code, the *Vinaya*, exists in several parallel versions preserved, and studied in diverse sects. The close agreement among equivalent texts transmitted through distinct sects makes it clear that, to a surprising extent, the teachings of early Buddhism have been accurately, and uniformly

preserved.

About two centuries after the Buddha, the Mauryan Empire had extended its boundaries to encompass an area larger than present-day India. Its emperor, Asoka, became a great promoter of Buddhism, without neglecting, or suppressing other religious and philosophical traditions. Asoka endeavored to run his empire according to *Dhammic* principles, caring for the poor, for travelers, for the sick, in what was probably the first known welfare state. He also sent monks as missionaries to far-flung places, even as far as the Mediterranean. Buddhism took root in many of these destinations. In the following centuries the Buddhist movement spread westward as far as Persia, eastward into Indochina, and Indonesia, northward into Central Asia, and from there eastward into China, and the rest of East Asia.

We will look at the teachings of early Buddhism in the remaining chapters.

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1. Nyanamoli (1992) offers a more complete account of the life of the Buddha based on the early texts.
 2. This passage is a *pericope*. The notation used here is described in the Preface.
 3. Appropriation: identifying with things as “me,” or “mine.”
 4. Nyanaponika & Hecker (1997, p. 76).
 5. Gombrich (2006, p. 19).
 6. Gombrich (2009, p. 2).

2. Generosity

Go your way, monks, for the benefit of the many: for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the welfare, the benefit, the happiness of gods and men. (Mv i 32)

There are many ways in which the transfer of goods from one person to another might occur. Perhaps the most significant are through theft, through exchange, and through generosity. While modern society aggressively promotes the other two at the expense of generosity, the development and cultivation of generosity is at the epicenter of Buddhist practice. It induces a fundamental shift in how we view our role in the world, and in who we think we are. The systematic practice of generosity sets the direction that our life will take in the most fundamental way, pointing it toward selflessness rather than toward self-advantage, which—perhaps surprisingly—will turn out to be the direction that brings the greatest personal satisfaction.

The Pali word for generosity is *dāna*, literally “giving,” which is commonly left untranslated in English-language Buddhist literature. (As a cognate of the English word *donate*, it is easy to remember.) It can refer to giving of material or immaterial things, from rice to teachings, from labor to advice, from cooking a meal that will delight and nourish one’s family to rescuing a flood victim from perilous waters, to helping overturn an unjust economic order. Generosity is eschewed by the stingy.

2.1. The gradual instruction

Buddhist practice begins with generosity. This is evident in the *gradual instruction* (*anupubbi-kathā*), which the Buddha presents in various discourses¹ as a step-by-step guide for those first embarking on a spiritual quest. The gradual instruction² begins with generosity, and unfolds as follows:

(Buddhist Life)

- Generosity (*dāna*).
- Precepts (*sīla*).
- Heavens.

- The drawbacks, degradation, and corruption of sensual passions.
- The rewards of renunciation.
- On the basis of the understanding, and pursuit of the foregoing, “a mind ready, softened, unbiased, elated, and trusting,” a precondition for the last step.
(*Buddhist Path*)
- The four noble truths.

This textbook follows the sequence of the gradual instructions. I've divided the steps here according to how they are covered in *Buddhist Life*, and *Buddhist Path*. Buddhist life is a requisite for reaching the practice attainment of *stream-entry*. We will see in the course of this book that this is a point in our practice career at which we gain a glimpse of awakening, at which our understanding and practice turn from mundane to supramundane, and at which we become equipped to take full possession of the noble eightfold path.

The purpose of Buddhist life is to establish us in the set of values, attitudes, understandings, practices, and other factors, based in virtue, harmony, and contentment, that bring benefit to the world, and are conducive to personal well-being, and fulfillment. Most devout Buddhists historically have begun to live—with varying degrees of commitment—according to these principles as very young children, and have lived this way into old age. I hope in *Buddhist Life* to convey an appreciation for the practical depth, and wisdom of the Buddha's early teachings on living an everyday life in the *Dhamma*.

The noble eightfold path introduced in the first chapter was presented by the Buddha as the cure-all for the suffering described in the four noble truths. When fully embraced by the stream-enterer, it provides a course of intense study and practice that ensures progress toward awakening, which can be understood as the perfection of human character in its aspects of virtue, and wisdom, along with supporting faculties. This is the higher training, profound, and highly sophisticated, which traditionally some fraction of the Buddhist population has wholeheartedly undertaken. The Buddhist life is fulfilling in itself, but also enables us to establish ourselves on the higher Buddhist path.

The reasons we begin with generosity in the gradual instruction certainly includes the ease with which the practice is understood, and taken up, even by children. It includes the traditional community support around conventional generosity that the Buddha fashioned, and it includes the immediate gratification that arises in conjunction with the practice of generosity, both on the giving, and on the receiving end. Generosity also sets the theme of selflessness at a fundamental behavioral level, which will bear fruit on the Buddhist path in the profound realization that the notion of the self—at least in

the way we normally understand it—is a kind of conceptual mistake.

The next factor in the gradual instruction, *precepts (sīla)*, will supplement generosity with the practice of *harmlessness*, the subject of Chapter three. Generosity, and precepts are guidelines that promote ethical behavior. *Heavens* here are the prospect of personal fulfillment that comes with the ethical life. This has to do with *kamma* (Sanskrit, *karma*), and the fruits of *kamma*, an understanding of which guides and incentivizes these practices.

The next two factors (drawbacks, degradation, and corruption of sensual passions; and the rewards of renunciation) are realizations that we all too easily overlook in our own experience, but that arise through contemplation with appropriate attention on the practices of generosity, and harmlessness. Together they underlie the development of *purity of mind*, the topic of Chapter four. Development along the Buddhist Path will be primarily an extension of the practice of purity. The challenge of practicing harmlessness and generosity is the swing toward the *renunciation* of sensual pleasures.

Sensual passions provide our primary motivations when we have no moral standards. However, if we attend closely, we notice that passions are painful, and sensual pleasures are rarely satisfying. Rather, they lead easily to addiction on the one hand, and growing indifference on the other. At some point these considerations will throw us for a loop, and make us wonder why we pursue sensual pleasures in the first place, even as we continue doing so. The more we investigate this, the more we discover the shallowness of expecting satisfaction in selfish pursuits.

Generosity and harmlessness give frequent rise to supramundane feelings of delight and joy (you know, warm fuzzy feelings), which, like meditative states, are not rooted in sensuality. These are personal rewards of ethical behavior. These considerations put a new light on the failure of the pursuit of sensual pleasures to provide personal well-being. In fact, this begins the process of renunciation, the gateway to the remainder of Buddhist practice.

The topics of generosity, harmlessness, and purity (Chapters 2-4) describe three aspects of Buddhist ethics referred to in the gradual instruction. The topic of Chapter five “Harmony,” is not explicitly mentioned in the gradual instruction, yet is an aspect of ethics that weaves together generosity, harmlessness, and purity, is moreover a constant theme and value in the Buddha’s teaching, and has become more relevant than ever in our own discordant age. Therefore, I’ve devoted a chapter to it.

The phrase, “the mind is ready, softened, unbiased, elated, and trusting” has to do with *faith*, (trust and wholeheartedness), and with opening up the heart and

mind to receive the *Dhamma*. These are qualities of *refuge*, the topic of Chapter six The gradual instruction up to, and including this passage is thus the topic of the first part of *Buddhist Life*.

The four noble truths encapsulate *Dhamma* and the practice of *Dhamma*. The noble eightfold path is the fourth noble truth, and represents the course of practice upon which we will embark in *Buddhist Path*. In summary, *Buddhist Life* constitutes the more general aspects of Buddhist practice and understanding, the kinds of things familiar to most Buddhists, and integral to how Buddhists live their everyday lives. *Buddhist Path* provides a much more focused, and specialized course of training that presupposes a life rooted in Buddhist principles, and that terminates in awakening.

2.2. Understanding consequences

Back to generosity. Generosity is about bringing benefit through one's actions, particularly for others. Its ideal motivating principle is *kindness* (*mettā*), though one might outwardly begin this practice when kindness is weak, but from which kindness will grow. The Buddha introduced the practice of benefiting others to his newly ordained son as follows:

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

“For reflection, sir.”

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

“... if on reflection you know that it would ◀not cause▶ affliction... it would be a ◀skillful▶ ◀bodily▶ action with ◀pleasant▶ consequences, ◀pleasant▶ results, then any ◀bodily▶ action of that sort is ◀fit▶ for you to do.” (MN 61)

The last paragraph is the first iteration of pericope. In the next iteration { ◀not cause▶, ◀skillful▶, ◀pleasant▶, ◀fit▶ } are replaced as a group by { ◀cause▶, ◀unskillful▶, ◀unpleasant▶, ◀not fit▶ }. Then ◀bodily▶ in these is replaced alternatively by ◀verbal▶, and ◀mental▶. (Sorry, this is the quickest way to capture the minor substitutions made in original sequence of six paragraphs.)

I should note that *bodily action*, *verbal action*, and *mental action* are regarded throughout the discourses as the three basic kinds of action. The word for *action* here is *kamma* (Sanskrit, *karma*). *Kamma* means “intentional action.” Since all of our generous deeds are intentional, they are *kamma*. In fact all deeds that have an ethical quality (beneficial or harmful, wholesome or

unwholesome) are *kamma*. Moreover, all elements of Buddhist *practice*, ethics-based, or not, are *kamma*. Notice that mental actions are referred to in this last passage as well. This means that purity of thought and meditation practice are both *kamma*. Given that Buddhism is fundamentally about practice, *kamma* is a very important concept indeed.

Our practice of generosity aims at good consequences—the world carries a burden of great suffering, and needs people to accomplish good, now more than ever. The great challenge of accomplishing good is to trace, as best as possible, with discerning wisdom, just what the heck all the consequences of our actions might be. We live in a very complex and highly interdependent world in which the consequences of the simplest action run very deep, playing themselves out forever. Consider the butterfly (as in “butterfly effect”) who, by choosing to fly from one flower to the next, will, as meteorologists tell us, trigger storms and hurricanes on the other side of the world in the decades and centuries to come that otherwise would not have occurred, or prevent those that would have. Similarly our actions may (or, more likely, will) enable wars to happen, or not to happen, and we are unlikely ever to know.

Added to that, we tend to have a lot of hubris with regard to our ability to foresee consequences. Perhaps this is why we say, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” We can only see a few moves ahead with relative certainty. Beyond a certain *horizon*, we are nearly blind. This is why the Buddha recommended that Rahula consider his actions with great care.

2.3. The art of making merit

A groundbreaking operating principle in Buddhist ethics is that an ethical, virtuous, generous, non-harming, pure life is not only likely to benefit others, but at the same time constitutes progress toward our own well-being and our own awakening. We can begin to appreciate the intimate connection between the two when we observe that generous open-hearted people tend to be—or with great reliability are—contented people, and stingy self-centered people tend to be dissatisfied. Ebenezer Scrooge is a case in point, before and after that fateful night. As we do generous deeds—rescue kittens from a flood, or offer the plumber a cup of coffee—we exhibit personal merit. *Merit* (*puñña*) is the quality or purity of wholesome practice or particular actions, insofar as these conduce toward awakening, regardless of how much benefit they bring others. Merit is closely related to *kamma*, and particularly to what are called the *fruits of kamma*, which we will explore more deeply in the next two chapters. *Demerit* (*pāpa*) is the opposing exhibition of impurity of

unwholesome practice.

Merit-making conceptually quantifies generous deeds, in terms of merit. Since the practice of generosity benefits both others and ourselves, this way of looking at the practice makes sense. Something like merit-making is commonplace in many of our activities for which there is progress made in practice. Recognizing merit ensures persistence in our practice, for instance, among joggers, and dieters. A meditator similarly tracks hours on the cushion for similar reasons. Merit gives us a vague metric of these cumulative effects of our deeds for self and others.

Degrees of merit are associated with certain categories of recipients, to certain categories of gifts, to certain manners of giving, and to certain intentions behind giving. These conduce to full engagement in giving, thereby raising the amount of merit made. These standards are roughly as follows:

- To whom is it given?

Worthy recipients of generosity are ascetics and priests (who live on alms), destitutes, wayfarers, wanderers, the sick, and beggars, as well as family members, and guests. These are generally those in need, or for whom we bear a special responsibility. Additionally, the purity of the recipient correlates with the amount of merit made. For instance, offerings to those of great spiritual attainment gain oodles of merit. Notice that these, in turn, are people with a great capacity for making merit themselves (effectively to pay generous deeds forward), and so supporting them is likely to multiply the beneficial consequences of our deeds. In analogy to planting seeds, such recipients serve as *fields of merit* (*puñña-khetta*). Buddhist monks and nuns tend to be designated in this way.

- What is given?

The gift of *Dhamma* (*dhamma-dāna*) exceeds all other gifts, which tends to give monastics and those of great spiritual attainment an edge in their merit-making.³ Although most other gifts are material, the gift of service is also very meritorious (SN 1.32, DhP 224). It is important to note that the merit earned tends to correlate inversely with one's resources, for instance, a meager offering from a pauper might easily gain far more merit than a sumptuous gift from a tycoon. This is because it is ultimately the intentions, and level of sacrifice that count, which we will come to in a moment.

- How is it given?

The Buddha recommends that offerings never be given in a callous manner, but rather respectfully, not in a way that humiliates the recipient, and ideally

with one's own hands, rather than through an intermediary. It is also best to give at a proper time, and to give what is not harmful (AN 5.148).

Notice that these recommendations encourage direct engagement in, and full experience of, the act of giving. These measures encourage feelings of friendship, appreciation, and interpersonal harmony. In fact, they enhance the personal benefit of giving to such a degree that one begins to lose track of who is the giver, and who is the receiver in a particular transaction. Giving feels so good that one begins to think of oneself as a recipient. This manner of giving would also suggest that it is better to be actively present at the orphanage to which we are donating, rather than simply arranging an automatic fund transfer. Notice that that would also allow us more closely to track the worldly benefit of our generosity.

○ Why is it given?

One might physically give with different intentions: out of annoyance, out of fear, in exchange, thinking “generosity is considered good,” to gain a good reputation, out of kindness, with awareness of the personal effect, or to “beautify, and adorn the mind.” The first three of these are fairly neutral with regard to merit, since in each case one's intention is generally to gain something as much as to give something. The last one earns a truckload of merit (AN 8.31). Again, we find intention to be critical, for merit is ultimately about purity of mind. In general, it is best to give with no expectation of personal benefit. (AN 7.52)

Nonetheless, if we feel happy before, during and after giving we are in the swing of this practice (AN 6.37), for ...

When this gift of mine is given, it makes the mind serene.
Gratification, and joy arise. (AN 7.49)

Accordingly, we should take care that there is later no resentment for having given (SN 3.20). The purest form of giving is with the attitude:

It is an ornament for the mind, an accessory of the mind.
(AN 7.49)

Notice how the Buddha's emphasis in discussing generosity moves freely from benefit for others to our own pleasant personal experience, and back again. Pure acts of giving are expected to gladden the heart, and contribute to the development of wholesome personal dispositions. This often creates some confusion concerning intention for the modern student of Buddhism: Are we practicing generosity for *them*, or for *us*? Out of *benevolence*, or out of

selfishness? Many conclude merit-making is a self-centered enterprise, but, paradoxically, generosity gains the most merit for us when our intentions are based in pure kindness and compassion for the other, rather than in seeking personal advantage, and the least merit when our intentions more self-centered. It feels great when our intention is to benefit others, when the self simply gets out of the way. We attain the most personal gratification when personal gratification is not our primary aim. In fact, one of the ways we practice generosity is to be gracious in our acceptance of gifts from others, and to be a fertile field of merit by paying that generosity forward to others.

2.4. Lifeblood of the Buddhist community

We should appreciate the extent that the practice of generosity is adapted to, and presupposes the structure of the traditional Buddhist community. The symbiotic relationship of householders and monastics has played a central role since the time of the Buddha, and still does in Buddhist lands to this day. The Buddha gave great attention in the *Vinaya*, the monastic code, to organizing and regulating the monastic community, to a level that seems to have been unknown in other ascetic communities of the time, with the understanding that the householder behavior would adapt itself around the behavior of the monastics. Alms-giving (the support of ascetics in various traditions) was already prevalent in India at the time of the Buddha, and has been a natural part of merit-making for Buddhists ever since.

Moreover, the Buddha did something surprising: He imposed on the monastic community, through the selfsame monastic code, an *enhanced* level of dependence on the householder, removing them entirely from the exchange economy, and making their dependence a matter of daily contact. He made the monks and nuns as helpless as house pets, or as young children with regard to their own needs, but then did not substantially restrict what monastics can do for others. The result is that monastics live entirely in what has been called an *economy of gifts*⁴ in which goods and services flow solely through acts of generosity. Householders generally participate in this economy in their interactions with monastics, while also participating in the exchange economy as customers and as wage earners.

Generosity is the lifeblood of the Buddhist community, and the conventional interaction between householder and monastic its beating heart. In Burma, for instance, I observed how readily this classical practice of generosity carries beyond the monastery walls, how people naturally take care of each other with a sense of obligation that requires no compensation. The Buddha fashioned an economy particularly conducive to the practice of generosity. Although the

same *material* benefit might be realized in an exchange economy, the economy of gifts affords more opportunity for merit-making, manifesting in higher *spiritual* dividends for the persons involved.⁵

There is a skill in being a recipient of generosity. In our balance-sheet-obsessed culture one might imagine that we make *demerits* by acting as the recipient, but that is not so. In fact, as a recipient we have a good opportunity to practice generosity ourselves, simply by being a worthy, and appreciative recipient in the practice of merit-making. One discovers this quickly as a monastic, for instance, when one says, “I can do it myself,” and sees the disappointment in the eyes of the devout and generous householder, or when one is invited for lunch at a householder's house but has to travel two hours to get there. To make of oneself a field of merit for others' generosity is itself an act of generosity.

Likewise you, the reader, are already a recipient of generosity simply by reading these words, in fact a recipient of the the greatest gift, that of the *Dhamma*, the gift that keeps on giving. I give the gift freely, without compulsion, and without compensation. To see the point, imagine how many hours, and how much effort have been put into composing, editing, checking references, reflecting, reviewing literature, and reflecting on feedback, and criticism to produce this text for you (which I do with great joy throughout the process), not to mention the uncompensated efforts of many others in copy editing, cover design, etc. Whatever our skill or ineptitude is in its production, we make the offering sincerely because we think you might benefit from it, just as I have benefited in my life from receiving the gift of *Dhamma* from others. The greatest gift you can possibly give to *me* is to accept this gift, to learn from it, to reflect on it with an open heart, and to put it to use in your life. Be a fertile field of merit! Your resultant spiritual progress will bring me immeasurable joy. That's how generosity works.

2.5. Open-ended generosity

We have been discussing the garden-variety practices of generosity in a Buddhist community. However, this is only a part of our hugely open-ended capacity for producing benefit. Generosity also encompasses addressing a range of local social needs, such as providing care for the sick or orphans, or organizing, funding and offering education. It includes charitable projects, or addressing more global issues like ending wars, oppression, crime, or ecological degradation, sometimes through advocacy for changing social, economic, political, or cultural structures, and institutions. Presumably

because of its diverse range (and perhaps the danger of unforeseen consequences in large projects), the Buddha had few specifics to offer about wider range of ways generosity can manifest, except insofar as he provided examples of his own personal engagement for us as he responded to circumstances that arose in his life.

In an incident described in the *Vinaya* (Mv viii 26) the Buddha, and Ānanda came upon a monk sick with dysentery, uncared for, lying in his own urine and feces. After he and Ānanda had personally cleaned the monk up, the Buddha admonished the other monks living nearby for not caring for the sick monk, famously proclaiming,

Whoever would tend to me, should tend to the sick.

We can imagine the shame of the monks who had neglected this sick monk. The quote with which this chapter began, “Go your way, monks, for the benefit of the many . . .,” is wonderfully evocative of the disposition toward generosity he encouraged in his followers. This was spoken to a large group of monks, all of them *arahants*, already possessed of pure minds. They would practice “for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the welfare, the benefit, the happiness of gods and men.” Although the primary opportunity for people of spiritual attainment to benefit others is through teaching the *Dhamma*, and also by setting a behavioral example for others through embodying *Dhammic* values in their lives, such people will also tend to serve others in other ways wherever possible.

In one discourse the Buddha describes a chaplain offering wise advice to a king concerning the relationship of crime, poverty, and general prosperity:

Your majesty’s country is beset by thieves, it is ravaged, villages and towns are being destroyed, the countryside is infested with brigands... Suppose your majesty were to think: “I will get rid of this plague of robbers by executions, and imprisonment, or by confiscation, threats, and banishment,” the plague would not be properly ended. Those who survived would later harm your majesty’s realm. However, with this plan you can completely eliminate the plague: To those in the kingdom who are engaged in cultivating crops, and raising cattle, let your majesty distribute grain, and fodder; to those in trade, give capital; to those in government service, assign proper living wages. Then those people, being intent on their own occupations, will not harm the kingdom. Your majesty’s revenues will be great, the land will be tranquil, and not beset by thieves, and the people, with joy in

their hearts, will play with their children, and will dwell in unlocked houses. (DN 5)

We do well to note here and elsewhere a characteristic feature of the Buddha's method of ethical scrutiny: its otherwise uncommon tolerance, and forgiveness. He thereby maintains unwavering kindness for *all* participants in human society, even thieves, and brigands, whose worldly actions he sees as almost unavoidably conditioned by circumstances. The advice to the king here is also an instance of the practice of *appropriate attention* (*yoniso manasikāra*, literally, "thinking from the source"), a hugely important principle in early Buddhism, which we will encounter a number of times in this textbook. The plague addressed in this passage arises directly from observable social conditions that a king can control, not from some unseen unconditioned evil that has infected thieves and brigands that a king cannot. In fact, blaming the situation on the latter would lead to a counterproductive, violent response that produces demerit on their part. Appropriate attention follows conditions back to the source of the problem, where well-intentioned intervention is possible and effective.

We have seen that as we, with Rahula, contemplate possible actions it often becomes difficult to assess if they are for benefit or for harm beyond a certain horizon. To take a mundane example, what are the consequences of driving slow in the fast lane of a highway? It is easy to convince ourselves that it is a beneficial thing to do: "It will be good for the long line of drivers stuck behind me to slow down; their lives are probably too fast-paced anyway." It is easy to convince another that it is a harmful thing to do: "If someone wants to drive fast, and you are in the way, they will become angry, will start zig-zagging from one lane to another to get around you, and will have a good chance of causing an accident." In fact, we can proliferate the exploration of consequences of our choices endlessly, and at the same time find justification for almost any course of action that we want. This is certainly not the kind of ethical thinking the Buddha expected of Rahula.

Nonetheless, there are ways in Buddhism for making ethical choices that do not depend on accurately tracking consequences of our potential actions beyond that close horizon. The next three chapters consider harmlessness, purity, and harmony as alternative determinants of our ethical choices. For instance, purity involves constant assessment of our intentions. In the case of driving in the fast lane, one asks, "Why am I driving in the fast lane? Am I just too lazy to move to another lane? Am I really concerned about the spiritual development of the vexingly impatient driver behind me?" Recall that the merit of our actions depends on our intentions, particularly on benevolence or

ill-will. If the intentions are impure, most likely the consequences of our actions will be harmful, since we are very likely to have introduced a personal bias into our actions. This is why the main determinant of merit, and most reliable predictor of ultimate benefit is its intentional quality. We will learn more about intention in the next chapters. Our actions *should* be an ornament for the mind.

It is instructive to look at one of the great ethical questions in Western philosophy, whether the ends justify the means, from a Buddhist perspective. One might think that generosity aimed at the greatest good entails this principle, for instance, sacrificing one life is justified if it saves three. The weakness of this principle is that we can rarely foretell all of its consequences, yet human hubris repeatedly tells us otherwise. Our attempts to do so beyond a certain horizon are often ideologically driven, or otherwise focus too narrowly on a single end, ignoring collateral consequences.

Military attacks on civilian populations, divide and conquer as a means of enforcing colonial rule, economic austerity that creates massive poverty, the Cultural Revolution in China, the attempt of the Khmer Rouge to impose a rural peasant society on Cambodia, and the remaking of European society through ethnic cleansing by the Nazis are examples of this way of thinking, in which a desirable, presumed to be beneficial, but elusive, or ill-considered end is used to justify current human suffering. It is generally the suffering that in the end prevails and endures after the intended end is long forgotten. Yet at the time the perpetrators of these policies often imagine—or convince themselves—that they are performing acts of generosity, of producing, “on balance,” an ultimate benefit for others.

What does Buddhism have to say about this? First, although our ethical choices are based partially on anticipating consequences, they are also constrained through *precepts* based on the qualities of the actions themselves. Second, they are also, as noted, constrained through careful considerations of the purity of intentions behind our actions. The practices of harmlessness, and of purity, discussed in the next two chapters, nullify any notion of the end justifying the means beyond a limited horizon. If some grand plan involves killing or stealing, then we need to find another means. If we recognize personal greed or self-interest, or anger or hatred, as we are about to execute some grand plan, then we are advised to abandon the plan.

Moreover, Buddhist wisdom casts great doubt on our capacity for reasoning beyond a certain horizon. The Buddha repeatedly disparaged ideologies, fixed views, and conceptualizations as inherently illusory. The idea of some utopia or final solution that has justified many of the greatest ethical lapses of human history is quite unwelcome in the Buddhist way of thinking.

2.6. The practice of generosity

This is a book on *Dhamma*. *Dhamma* undergirds practice, which is to say, it provides the values, standards, and understandings that determine how we behave in our lives. *Dhamma* is not a speculative philosophy pursued for itself, but a practical manual that at every point should make a difference in our lives. With this in mind, we will conclude this, and each subsequent chapter with a section entitled “**The practice of ...**” to ensure we don’t go off on an intellectual tangent. In this section I offer practical advice for integrating the topic of the chapter into one’s practice life, taking into particular account the opportunities and pitfalls encountered in applying these ancient teachings in modern culture.

Benefit to others is fundamental to the prospect of a consequential life. Before coming to Buddhism, you have certainly already practiced generosity at some level, particularly with regard to family and friends. If you just put aside any inherent stinginess, generosity can flow quite naturally to others. Nonetheless, we are a particularly self-centered culture, conditioned as we are by incessant advertising for personal consumption (for which we suffer, as we will see). In a Buddhist life, on the other hand, your job is to seek out opportunities to benefit others. Generosity is something anyone can practice; children have an inborn, if simple, understanding of generosity, and experience quite readily the joy that can come with giving, nonetheless interspersed with urges grounded in greed or ill-will.

In the modern context you might also consider more open-ended forms of generosity. You might volunteer as a candy-striper at a local hospital, engage in hospice work, rescue abandoned puppies, pick up trash along the highway, mentor troubled youth, teach meditation in prison, offer sandwiches to the homeless. You might also donate financially to charitable, or educational organizations. Regular volunteering, and support are highly recommended as a means of fulfilling the practice of generosity. Such volunteer efforts can even scale up to enterprise-level efforts, like founding hospitals in third-world countries, or advocacy for peace, social justice, or environmental protection,⁶ or just be on constant look-out for opportunities as they arise to help others. I am

just throwing out ideas for encouragement.

Depending individually on your current level of engagement, and on your current life circumstances, you might begin to broaden the various ways in which you practice generosity. However, you should take care not to push any practice too hard, lest you suffer resentment and burnout, just as you might begin a jogging practice by running down to the corner and back, and only gradually work your way up to six miles every morning. Take it easy; this applies to all aspects of Buddhist practice. This is the middle way. In this regard, the Buddha offered the simile of the lute which makes the most beautiful sounds if the strings are tuned neither too loose nor too tight (AN 6.55). In the end you may become hungry for new opportunities for generosity, and finally discover the most meaningful part of your life in doing things on behalf of others. You may become selflessly hooked, with no resentment whatever to hinder your practice.

As you practice generosity, keep in mind the criteria for merit-making. For instance, when giving to a homeless person, you should give not begrudgingly, but in a way that preserves the dignity of the recipient. In giving to an orphanage it is better to drive to the orphanage with the check rather than to set up an automatic fund withdrawal ... unless the inconvenience of doing so will likely subvert the donation altogether. You should also keep in mind that if your funds are limited, each gift gains that much *more* merit. Giving of labor is of great merit because the depth of engagement is great. You should also take care not to expect reciprocation.

As you practice generosity, you should also be aware of the effects on your own mind. You will experience many sensual pleasures in your life: food, music, sex, and zombie movies. You should become aware as well of the great joy, a pleasure beyond the sensual, that comes with generosity. Become aware that this joy is greatest when your intentions are purest, when the recipients of your generosity are worthy, and when the manner of giving is proper. This joy doesn't make you greedy, but is what merit feels like when greed is absent. Consider how much joy there must be in a lifetime dedicated to bringing benefit to others. You have a choice: You might work long hours every day in order to not quite afford a degree of comfort for yourself and your family. But the small effort of ensuring one stranger gets proper medical care in a crisis can save a life, and the relatively small effort of turning the life of a single troubled youth around is equally beneficial. Generosity is relatively easy in comparison to the weight of its potential benefits for others.

We have seen that the practice of generosity in Buddhism tends to be centered around the Buddhist community itself. This has some advantages. There is a

certain energy sustained in the communal context as we inspire, and provide role models for each other. Young children learn generosity particularly effectively in communal contexts as they see Buddhist values exemplified. The community is a source of wise *admirable friends (kalyāṇamitta)*, who—we will see in 6.5—are an essential condition for Buddhist practice, and who not only exemplify the practice, but explain it. For many Buddhists conventional communal generosity remains the primary practice for one's entire life.

In community practice, a family or an individual will commonly pick a particular practice on a daily or weekly basis. This might be to prepare, and offer rice, or other foods for monks or nuns on alms round every morning, or to bring a meal offering to the monastery once a week, or to provide work on behalf of the entire community one day a week. All of this works pretty smoothly in Asia especially at the village level. However, in the West it may be more difficult to find such tight-knit communities, though traditional ethnic Asian Buddhist communities are more common in America, and in much of the West than most people realize.

Buddhist communities developed by Western converts, in my experience, are generally far less successful in implementing, or even understanding, the economy of gifts, though there are exceptions. For instance, contrary to Asian norms, it is rare for Western-based Buddhist centers to operate without fees or dues. Yet any financial exchange is in principle an opportunity lost for the practice of generosity. In fact, one exchange is *two* lost opportunities for merit-making. As culturally Western Buddhism matures, this is one of the primary ways in which our culture might shift, under the example, and guidance of our ethnic Asian counterparts.

Let me conclude with a word about children as Buddhists, often eager practitioners of generosity. I have sometimes encountered the view among modern Buddhists, so-called convert Buddhists (those who, like myself, were not born into Buddhist families) that Buddhist parents should not teach Buddhism to their children, but that they should let their children grow up to decide whether or not they want to be Buddhists. I understand the motivation for this view: Many modern people have been brought up in a religion that they came to reject for one reason or another as teens or adults. Buddhism is often a magnet for such people. Furthermore, most modern Buddhists are frustrated to the extent they have tried to present Buddhism as they understand it to their children, because their understanding and practice are centered in meditation, not in things children more easily comprehend, like generosity (a view the present book tries to correct).

Nevertheless, we generally acquire the greater part of our values and under-

standings as children, much as we acquire language most readily as children. If the parents have not instilled values and understanding, the popular culture will, and will do an exceptionally poor job of it. If you have come to a book like this, you may be already intent on developing personal wisdom in your values, and understanding beyond what your parents, or culture have provided. I regard it as the duty of any parent to encourage, as best as you possibly can, wise values, and understandings in your children during their indiscriminately impressionable early years. Withholding these is like withholding your own language so that your child can decide what language they want to speak—not as well—as an adult. Besides, your children will still be free to choose to become a Sufi, or a Wiccan after they are grown, just as they will be free to choose to move to Costa Rica and speak Spanish, or the Philippines, and speak Tagalog.

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1. *Udana* 5.3, for instance.
 2. See the *Dhamma* sections of Thanissaro (2001a), and Thanissaro (2013) for further discussion of the gradual instruction.
 3. Religious gifts made to the general public would, particularly in later Buddhist traditions, include contributions to building pagodas, Buddha statues and things along those lines, and also to book-publication and other educational projects and other expensive projects. Otherwise gifts satisfy mundane material needs.
 4. Thanissaro (1997).
 5. This theme is further explored in Cintita (2010).
 6. Buddhism has not traditionally been as known for its enterprise-level efforts as has Christianity, for instance. But there is no reason that the ethic of accomplishing good should not scale up in this way. Probably social conditions in Asia have been, until recently, less conducive to enterprise-level efforts of this kind. On the other hand, Ven. Rahula (not the Buddha's son, but the author of the widely read *What the Buddha Taught*) devoted a book to making the case, specifically for Sri Lanka, that the widespread reputation of monks as indifferent to social concerns arose during European colonization, in which the *Saṅgha* was systematically disenfranchised from responsibilities in which it had previously routinely engaged, such as running schools. In fact, in recent decades Buddhist communities have become quite socially engaged, often inspired by the Christian example.

3. Harmlessness

*Refraining from every evil,
Accomplishing good,
Purifying mind,
This is teaching teaching of Buddhas. (Dhp 183)*

Seeing his complete awakening in meditation as the Buddha's greatest accomplishment, we often fail to recognize how thoroughly Buddhism is about ethics (virtue, or morality). The Buddhist path creates saints before it creates awakened ones. Buddhist children learn generosity, and harmlessness from toddlerhood. Ethics provides the foundation without which achievement of wisdom is unattainable. Without the perfection of virtue, awakening is impossible. Starting with ethics, we most easily come to understand the logic of the entire Buddhist path, including its wisdom contemplations, and its final goal of awakening.

The opening verse above gets to the heart of Buddhist ethics. It enumerates the three distinct but interrelated systems: "Refraining from every evil" involves behaving harmlessly according to Buddhist ethical codes, or *precepts*, which define norms of appropriate behavior. This is the topic of the present chapter. "Accomplishing good" is acting in ways that produce beneficial consequences for others. This is generosity, and it was the topic of the last chapter. "Purifying mind," the most characteristically Buddhist and ultimately the most important of the three, is the development and cultivation of *virtue* as an aspect of character, in which how we think and respond becomes second nature. This will be the topic of the next chapter. The three, in the Buddha's teachings, are mutually constraining, and mutually supporting, like the legs of a tripod.

The primary motivating principle of refraining from every evil is *harmlessness* (*ahimsā*). 'Ahimsa' has become well known in the English language as Mahatma Gandhi's "nonviolence." Although generosity, to wit being of benefit, would seem to reach beyond not being of harm, living harmlessly is actually a great challenge. Without ethical standards most people cause great

harm almost daily through physical injury, deception, betrayal, discord, and exploitation. Moreover, the practice of refraining from evil can be much more effectively reduced to a set of practice rules, in contrast to the open-endedness of generosity. Refraining from evil is also sometimes described as a specific practice of generosity in itself, for when we are harmless we thereby give to others freedom from fear, freedom from fear of us.

3.1. Precepts

Harm is also easier to track than benefit. Whereas benefit, in principle, involves weighing and predicting future consequences, harmfulness is generally an immediate quality of particular types of action. For instance, killing harms the object of the killing almost regardless of what other circumstances obtain. For this reason, limiting harm, or “avoiding evil,” can quite effectively be reduced to prohibitive rules of thumb, which we call *precepts* (*sikkhā-pada*) in Buddhism. The Pali word *sīla* is also used, especially in its plural form, to refer to precepts, though *sīla* also refers to ethical behavior in general, or even behavior (ethical, or not) in general.

Buddhist precepts are similar to the ten commandments of the Bible, or to traffic laws, or to the bothersome things your parents told you to do when you were a kid, like not to watch more than four hours of TV a day, nor to eat the dog's food. They are also comparable to professional rules of ethics, such as those observed by psychotherapists (not sleeping with clients), or members of the scientific community (not falsifying data). They are almost invariably in early Buddhism stated as abstentions, things *not* to do, for instance, “do not kill,” rather than “protect life.”

Traditionally householders throughout the Buddhist world have observed and routinely recited, as a reminder, at least the following five precepts since the time of the Buddha:

- (1) I undertake the precept to refrain from assaulting living things.

This translates literally “... from attacking breath [breathing things]” (*pāṇātipātā*). Killing, or bodily harm is therefore not limited to humans, but includes squirrels, and even snakes, and insects. It thereby covers (in itself) a huge swath of our options for causing harm, and regulates our most violent tendencies.

- (2) I undertake the precept to refrain from taking what is not given.

This prohibits stealing. We practice this so that others will have a car to drive to work the next day, something to eat when they get home that evening, and

something to write with if they need to jot something down. Also so that they will not need a home security system, or a guard dog.

- (3) I undertake the precept to refrain from committing sensual misconduct.

Sensual misconduct has primarily to do with sexual relations. The primary example is adultery, which is to say, having extra sexual partners, or becoming an extra sexual partner (in the context of a formal marriage, or not). Sex with a minor is also excluded. When we practice this, our partner gains trust in us, does not need to feel jealous, and need not fear the financial hardship, and emotional distress that would come with the breakup of the family. This precept has, by the way, nothing to do with the perceived “kinkiness” of sexual acts that might be prohibited by societal norms, as long as no one is harmed.

- (4) I undertake the precept to refrain from false speech.

This prohibits lying, which otherwise undermines trust and social harmony, and is implicated in many forms of exploitation. We practice this so that others have accurate information on which to base their decisions, even when our impulse might be to misdirect their information in our own favor.

- (5) I undertake the precept to refrain from the heedlessness of spirits, liquor, and intoxicants.

This precept is unlike the others in that the harm otherwise committed is less certain, and less immediate. In fact, no definable harm might result in a particular case of violating this precept. Nonetheless, imbibing alcohol is implicated statistically in car accidents (or presumably ox-cart, and chariot misadventures in the Buddha's day), barroom brawls, spousal abuse, family neglect, and mental illness. The sharp, and heedful mind is not only highly prized in Buddhism, but also fundamental to developing purity of mind, the topic of the next chapter, with all of its ethical implications.

This standard set of precepts covers five basic pitfalls whereby harm routinely results. Some people choose a higher level of practice commitment by adding some more finely tuned precepts. Common are the following two, both, like the fourth precept, having to do with appropriate speech.

- I undertake the precept to refrain from harsh speech.

Harsh language injures the one we are speaking to, leads to disharmony in human relations, and encourages the unskillful factor of anger.

- I undertake the precept to refrain from malicious speech.

The word “malicious” already tells us that harm is intended. This is speech that, even when it is truthful, is intended to create divisions, and animosity. These additional precepts having to do with speech will be discussed further in Chapter five “Harmony.” Buddhists have commonly, from the earliest days, observed an extended set of precepts, beyond the basic five, including these last two, specifically on *uposatha days*, that is, every quarter moon, to push the envelope of practice a bit.

Since most readers will be somewhat familiar with Abrahamic commandments, let me point out a few contrasts to draw out some peculiar qualities of Buddhist precepts. Precepts pertain, at least in early Buddhism, to actions of body and of speech, but not of thought. Commandments, on the other hand, seem sometimes to apply to thoughts such as coveting one’s neighbor’s house, cow, or wife. Thoughts as a matter of ethics fall in Buddhism under purifying mind, where they are treated in fine detail. Although thoughts, along with bodily, and verbal actions, are a kind of *kamma* (they are mental actions), thoughts are much more difficult to bring under control, and therefore require more refined methods than practice rules.

Precepts are regarded in Buddhism as *trainings*; the word *sikkhā-pada* literally means “training step.” They are undertaken voluntarily as part of a personal practice commitment, rather than as an imposition by a god, pope, government, or other authority. Specifically, we use precepts to train in purity of mind. In this sense, there is no *sin* in Buddhism: whereas violating a commandment in Christianity, or in other Abrahamic faiths insults the will of God, following precepts simply reflects a commitment to our own spiritual practice for the benefit of oneself and of the world.

One might break a commandment without doing, or intending harm, or adhere to a commandment while doing, and intending harm, for God’s will can work in mysterious ways that we know not of. Murder, theft, bearing false witness, and adultery, are actions both harmful to others, and displeasing to God. Homosexual acts, on the other hand, making for ourselves an idol, or handling leather made from pig skin would seem rather harmless (we say they are “victimless crimes”), but nonetheless—so we are told in the *Old Testament*—are displeasing to God. Stoning someone to death is clearly harmful to others, and clearly violates the first Buddhist precept, yet might be sanctioned by God as an appropriate response to others’ misdeeds (never in Buddhism). As a practical consequence of the absence of sin, we rarely find “victimless crimes” in early Buddhist ethics. In fact, the Buddha’s precepts are to a surprising degree free of ancient cultural norms, and are quite relevant to this day.

3.2. Strengths, and limitations of precepts

Precepts provide the most primitive, and concise form within the three kinds of ethics—generosity, harmlessness, and purity. Their primary advantage is that they provide reasonably clear guides to conduct, even when we are drawing a blank, and cannot work out all the consequences of a proposed action. This reduces much of our conduct to rules of thumb that are easy to learn, and remember, even for the young, or young at heart, or for the beginning Buddhist, or one with beginner's mind. A precept tends to highlight a basic problem area in human conduct that the sages of past ages must have repeatedly experienced, and recognized.

The weaknesses of precepts as guides to ethical conduct are that they generally allow loopholes, and that they don't permit appropriate exceptions: precepts are porous and rigid. There is the case in which the Gestapo shows up at our front door, and asks us, gleefully aware that a Buddhist will not lie, whether we are hiding Jews in the attic, or the case in which one of us just happens to be returning from a softball game with a bat in their hand, and walk in right behind a man who has just "gone postal" with an assault rifle that he is about to unload on his fellow employees. There are, moreover, many harmful—generally mildly harmful—behaviors that simply are not covered in precepts, like taking up two parking spaces, or telling long dull stories.

Nonetheless, it is significant that the Buddha rarely sanctioned exceptions to precepts to correct their rigidity. I suspect this is because he wanted us to be fully aware of, and live with, the contradictory nature of the human condition, rather than regulate it away. The one example I am aware of in which the Buddha discusses the kinds of contradictions that may arise in following precepts is in the *Mahāsaṃhāsaṅkhaṇḍa Sutta* (MN 38), in which the Buddha was challenged for his own use of harsh speech, of all things against Devadatta, his misguided cousin who had (1) created a schism in the *Saṅgha*, (2) injured the Buddha in an assassination attempt, (3) induced a prince to murder his father in order to become king, and (4) committed various other odious misdeeds. The Buddha's response was that sometimes it is necessary to dig a pebble out of a child's mouth even though it causes great discomfort. Providing a metaphor for choices we must sometimes make, rather than admitting loopholes, was wise: the smallest loophole can inspire the height of human creativity in justifying exceptions. It would soon become acceptable to disregard non-harming in the case of people one does not like, or for whomever is otherwise imagined to be "undeserving."

3.3. *Kamma* and its fruits

We learned in 2.2 that *kamma* means “intentional action,” and that it is closely related to merit-making, and that more generally all Buddhist practice is *kamma*. A generous act is *kamma*, a harmful act is *kamma*, following a precept is *kamma*, breaking a precept is *kamma*. Furthermore, sitting down to meditate and fixing the mind on the breath are *kamma*, for *kamma* can be of body, speech, or mind. I would like to go into some more depth with respect to the critical, and subtle concept of *kamma* here, and then even more depth in the next, and in subsequent chapters.

The violation of a precept is always *kammic*,¹ that is, although it must involve a physical act of speech, or body, it also requires a mental intention. For instance, accidentally running over the neighbor’s cat, or inadvertently taking someone else’s suitcase at the airport does not violate a precept against assaulting living beings or against stealing, because it lacks intention. Also, violating a precept almost always entails *demerit* (*pāpa*), whereas performing a generous action almost always entails *merit* (*puñña*).

Now, the root meaning of the term *kamma* is simply *action*. However, it is worth noting that the brahminic religious tradition had by the time of the Buddha long used this word in a specialized sense of *ritual* action, where rituals were supposed to determine the future well-being of the person on whose behalf the ritual was conducted by a brahmin priest. A properly performed ritual, often an animal sacrifice with some incantations of memorized texts, was *good kamma*, an improperly performed ritual was *bad kamma*.

For the brahmin, *kamma* = action + ritual.

For the Buddha, on the other hand, *every* intentional action that we perform has this solemn role as a determinant of the *actor’s* future well-being, for no one can intercede on our behalf through ritual in this way. Moreover, the benefit for us is found not in the *ritual* quality, but in the *ethical* quality of our actions. That ethical quality is inherent in our intentions, roughly, whether we intend harm, or benefit to others, or whether we are instead motivated by desire for personal advantage.

For the Buddhist, *kamma* = action + intention.

Kamma, in Buddhism, is explicitly defined as “intentional action,” and intention is as sacred for the Buddhist as ritual is for the brahmin, and therefore calls for careful deliberation, just as ritual action must for the brahmin priest.

We (in modern culture) generally differentiate between benefit, or harm for

others, and benefit, or harm for ourselves, and think of ethical conduct as a balancing act between the two. The Buddha, in contrast, equated the two, saying,

I will be the heir of whatever deeds I do, admirable, or demeritorious. (AN 5.57)

In short, our *kammic* acts not only shape the world for others, but also shape our personal fortune. Good deeds work to our own benefit as well as to the benefit of others. Bad deeds work against our own benefit as well as against the benefit of others. The effect of one's own action accrued for oneself is called its *kammic result* (*vipāka*), or alternatively its *kammic fruit* (*phala*). Likewise, we can talk about the results, or fruits, of practice. Without producing results, it would be fruitless to practice the way we do. So if I intentionally harm someone, it will be to my own detriment, and if I give generously to the benefit of another, it will be to my own well-being. This seems a bold generalization, and may initially seem unfounded. But it can be verified in our own experience, and found to hold up quite well.

For instance, we enjoy some of the fruit of a generous deed right away when it brings us joy. Moreover, others become a bit more well-disposed toward us, and we may benefit in the near future from their cooperation or support. After a lifetime of generosity we die peacefully, and without regret. In contrast, with the tension of anger, or of greed, we taste the bitter fruit of a malicious deed right away. Others become a bit more ill-disposed toward us, and we suffer when they refuse to cooperate with us, or to support us in the future. After a lifetime of harming others we die in anguish, and with remorse.

As we explore a little more deeply in our own experience the bold generalization that the ethical quality of our *kamma* determines our own well-being, we are likely to notice various factors conspiring to produce that result. Our harmful actions tend to incite retribution, to our detriment, from those affected, because people tend by nature to be vengeful. Moreover, the more we act in this way, the more we develop our *dispositions* to act this way, and eventually we become trapped in a disposition that repeatedly produces unfortunate results. Such dispositions come to define our character. Our angry, or greedy dispositions tend to give rise to loneliness, because people tend also not to like those of angry, or greedy disposition, and therefore distance themselves from us. Soon we view the world as determined to torment us. Habitual anger and other unwholesome mental factors are demonstrably associated with physical health problems. Even physical beauty adheres to ethical character: kind people often exhibit a kind of angelic glow, whereas hateful people often seem

perpetually under a cloud with furrowed brow. Through our *kamma* we are quite capable of creating a personal hell right here on earth ... , or a heaven.

Very specific examples of the fruition of *kamma* may raise the skeptical modern reader's eyebrows, such as offering a certain worthy monk alms on one occasion in one life, and then receiving great riches for oneself in the next life. Such examples of *kammic* cause and specific effect are actually relatively rare in the earliest texts, and could well be entirely allegorical. Exactly how and why *kammic* acts produce their results according to ethical quality in this way is not explicitly clarified by the Buddha, nor is it necessary to know. We need only to verify this generalization in our own experience, and let it inspire our practice.

In any case, it does not require some kind of mysterious cosmic accounting mechanism, something like Santa keeping track of who is naughty and nice, which I emphasize lest we dismiss the notion of *kammic* fruit, or merit altogether (as many modern people do). In fact, practical psychological, physiological, and sociological processes in themselves seem adequately to explain virtually all of the claims about *kammic* fruits. (It is fine, and certainly simpler, to think in terms of cosmic accounting for practical purposes, if that works better for you.) We will investigate *kamma* further, primarily in psychological terms, in 4.2-3.

Moreover, I should note a common misunderstanding about the fruits of *kamma* that may also mystify the critically-thinking modern reader: that everything that happens to us for our benefit or harm necessarily has a previous *kammic* basis, that is, arises as fruits of our own previous actions. For instance, the claim is that if you win the lottery, or are blown away by a tornado, it must be the fruit of some (generally indeterminate) past deed. This misunderstanding, very widely accepted in many current schools of Buddhism, is, in fact, unambiguously denied by the Buddha in the *Sīvaka Sutta* (SN 36.21). Quite simply, there are many causal forces at work in the world in addition to *kamma*, and we are subject to most of them. If a tree's roots have rotted, a gust of wind can fell the tree. If the tree falls where we stand, entirely through no *kammic* fault of our own, we are likely to be injured. Previous *kamma* is beside the point in explaining such eventualities.

More important than understanding the mechanisms that produce *kammic* fruits is understanding *why* the Buddha taught *kamma*, and the fruits of *kamma*. The Buddha was characteristically not interested in speculative philosophy, nor in science in the sense of unearthing the universe's hidden mechanisms. Rather his teaching is intended as a determinant of our practice, which, in turn, is a determinant of our personal development, hopefully in the direc-

tion of perfecting virtue, and wisdom. Our practice is *kamma*, and each of the hundreds of intentional actions we perform throughout the day is a factor in determining our developmental progress. Therefore it is imperative to take great care in what we choose to do, including gaining merit where we can, and by all means remaining harmless. This is what the teachings around *kamma* bring to our practice.

3.4. Heavens

In the early discourses, discussions of the results of *kamma* most often projected them onto the circumstances of one's future *rebirth* (*punabhava*). Recall that the third step in the gradual instruction, immediately after generosity, and ethics, is *heavens*:

(Buddhist Life)

- Generosity.
- Precepts.
- Heavens.
- ...

Heavens are reached as the *kammic* result of practicing generosity, harmlessness, and purity. The idea is that by leading a virtuous life, much as we can create a heaven for ourselves here on earth, we can be born into a heavenly realm in the next life. By leading a depraved life, much as we can create a hell for ourselves here on earth, we can be born into a hellish realm in the next life. More specifically, the Buddha tells us that the fruits of *kammic* acts can ripen in this life, in the next life, or in subsequent lives, but the realm of heavenly rebirth is highlighted as a worthy goal of one's practice in this life. This goal belongs to *mundane right view*, which we will define in Chapter eight. The final goal of awakening belongs to *supramundane right view*.

This model of rebirth is uncharacteristic of the Buddha, who was generally not interested in speculation, nor in unearthing the universe's hidden mechanisms, and whose *Dhamma* adhered closely to what can be directly verified in experience (as we will see in chapter six). However, he was interested not only in providing the conditions for successful practice as a determinant of our personal development, but also in providing a basis upon which others, extending into future generations, might succeed in Buddhist practice. It is perhaps from this perspective that we can best appreciate why the Buddha, ever practical, taught rebirth.

The doctrine of rebirth greatly extends the scope of *kamma* and its fruits

beyond a few decades of a single life, and therewith profoundly deepens the significance of our individual practice in this life. Rebirth endows our practice with a “transcendent meaning,” in the words of Bhikkhu Bodhi, with “that panoramic perspective from which we can survey our lives in their broader context, and total network of relationships”² that comes from realizing that our lives, and therefore our practices are woven inextricably into something far larger in scale, a rich, and immense tapestry of human affairs in which our individual practice assumes huge significance. We realize that we are each engaged in an epic struggle with *kammic* forces from the ancient past, and that this struggle will determine *kammic* outcomes endlessly into the future. Our practice therefore has vastly more at stake than personal satisfaction with this present life, and therefore has different incentives. From framing our practice in terms of rebirth comes the urgency that impels us to deep practice as more than a personal project limited to a few decades of worldly existence.

Let’s put aside the specifics of the simple linear model of rebirth, whereby one life follows another temporally, and focus on what our situation in this one life looks like. It becomes quite apparent that each of us is born already the heir of many past deeds. We are the products of ancient behavioral patterns, compelling *kammic* forces which we are disposed to reenact in this life. We certainly did not invent all the scripts we began acting out in even the earliest months, and years after birth: particular fears, attractions, incentives to anger then revenge, forgiveness, affection. Many of these dispositions doubtlessly have deep roots even in our early mammalian ancestors, but all have been transmitted to us by some means or other (genetically? culturally? through mimicry? through a one-to-one death-to-birth connection?). But just as these scripts are transmitted to us from the past, they must be transmitted to the future, through us.

Our practice is situated in the midst of *kammic* forces, both for benefit, or harm, flowing through us from past to present. These forces are the stuff of our practice, whereby we revise our dispositions, learning new ones, unlearning old ones, or revising old ones to produce new. The transcendent meaning of our practice is to reshape these forces “for the benefit of the many: for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the welfare, the benefit, the happiness of gods and men.”³

We do not have space to do full justice to the topic of rebirth here,⁴ but will explore some of its implications briefly at different points in this book. At this point it is only important to recognize that our lives, and our practices *are* woven inextricably—no matter what particular model we adopt to explain it—into something far greater in scale, a rich, and immense tapestry of human affairs. This suffices to give gravity, and urgency to our practice. This is what

impels us to make practice the overarching purpose our lives rather than simply making it yet one more thing we add to our busy lives. I always like to say,

It is more important to ask, “Why did the Buddha teach this?”
than it is to ask, “Is this true?”⁵

3.5. Regulatory precepts

Some precepts are not directly about harmlessness, for they prohibit actions that are not intrinsically harmful. A non-Buddhist example is the rule mandating that cars drive on the right side of the street in the U.S., and in many other countries. There is nothing intrinsically harmful in driving on the left side of the street; in fact, the Japanese do it all the time. Either rule improves the efficiency of traffic flow as long as everybody follows the rule. Likewise, we have seen that monks observe the precept of not saving food offered today until tomorrow's meal. This rule ensures daily contact between householders and monastics in order to forge a stronger bond of dependence. It is itself a kind of traffic law.

Other precepts are also not immediately about harmlessness, but rather serve in the task of developing purity of mind. An example of this is the following:

- I undertake the precept to refrain from dancing, singing, music, or watching shows.

This precept is undertaken by ordained monks and nuns, and often supplements the five standard precepts for householders on special occasions dedicated to Buddhist devotional, or contemplative practice, for instance during modern meditation retreats. It serves to restrain the senses, the practice of which is a key contributing factor to purification of mind, as we will see. Likewise, we have seen that the precept about alcohol is justified in terms of purification, and less directly in terms of harmlessness. We will see in 4.7 that most precepts that have to do directly with harmlessness also serve to purify the mind.

3.6. The monastic life

We have referred to monastics and householders a number of times. The reader might suspect that a Buddhist life is the domain of the householder, and the Buddhist path that of the monastic. This is not the case. Rather, monastic and householder are a matter of two different tracks in the Buddhist life, where

the Buddhist path is but one, open to all. The two tracks of the Buddhist life are distinguished in terms of the large number of additional precepts the monastic undertakes. It is therefore appropriate to discuss what constitutes the monastic life at this point.

The monastic's life is a kind of enhanced (or pared down, depending on how we choose to look at it) form of Buddhist life. This enhanced form does tend to prepare the monastic for the Buddhist path much more thoroughly than the householder life does. As a result, monastics tend to navigate the Buddhist path with more facility than the householder, but otherwise the path practices themselves are the same. Gifted householders may be innately prepared for path practice, and there are no special practices, or parts of the path reserved exclusively for monastics. The basis of the monastic life is renunciation, and renunciation is enforced through precepts found in the *Vinaya*. In fact, this monastic code has hundreds of them.

The early scriptures report that there was among the Buddha's earliest disciples an unwritten understanding of what the conduct and deportment of a monastic should be, but only the most exceptional practitioners were initially likely to join his band. As monastics of less exceptional talent began to ordain, they behaved increasingly in ways that went beyond the limits of this unwritten understanding. In response to such behaviors, the Buddha began mandating prohibitory precepts, and continued doing so—alongside amending existing precepts—for many years in a rather piecemeal way.

For instance, a certain monk was persuaded by his family to have sex with his former wife in order to perpetuate the family name, so a disapproving Buddha explicitly prohibited sexual intercourse. Another monk responded to justified constructive criticism by other monks in a vengeful way, so the Buddha introduced a precept that prohibited being difficult to admonish. Other monks accumulated so many robes that the Buddha joked that they must be planning to open a shop. As a result the Buddha put a limit on the number of robes a monk could possess. Other monks wore their permitted robes in such disarray that the Buddha became concerned about the implications of this for the reputation of the entire *Saṅgha*, which he was determined to protect, not only to sustain the *Saṅgha*'s material needs, but also to enable monastics to teach effectively. So the Buddha required that bottom edge of robes be even all around. Some of these are regarded as serious offenses, others as violations of mere etiquette.

As a whole, only a relatively small percentage of monastic rules are directly about harmlessness. Some of these correspond roughly to the five standard precepts, though they are more numerous and more detailed in their

application. Other rules regulate interactions with householders, and with other monastics with consequent social benefits. A particularly large proportion enforce renunciation. Renunciation includes restraint of the senses, and an almost blanket prohibition of self-serving actions. The former category puts emphasis on disallowing sexual activity, which tends not only toward distraction from the holy life in itself, but also toward responsibilities to spouse, and newly spawned children.

The ban on self-serving actions is quite systematic in the Buddha's formulation, and has strong implications for Buddhist practice. People are by nature needy and often hostile creatures, and generally this neediness and aversion is encouraged by the need for self-protection and self-enhancement. We chase after sensual pleasures, after fame, after power, after wealth, we compete with others for these, and we have aversion for anything or anyone that threatens us physically, or undermines what we chase after. Even the most pure Buddhist practice is compromised in a competitive environment, in the dog-eat-dog world, as soon as we are forced to the point of protecting our own interests. Students of Buddhism sometimes express a concern—with all this emphasis in Buddhism on selflessness, on non-harming, on kindness—that we open ourselves to others taking advantage of us. We do. At some point we need to draw a line and push back at the world, or at least stand firm.

This is, however, barely the case for monastics. Their conventional interface with the world is limited. They might be internally greedy, but they have extremely limited ways of seeking sensual pleasures, fame, power, or wealth, and no way to push back at the world: they do not negotiate with the world, they do not even participate in material exchanges. Although they might still hold on to a self, it effectively serves little function, and therefore tends to wither.

How is this possible? Because the monastic is limited in acting on their own behalf, their well-being can only be secured by householders. The monastic is the ward of the householders. The monastic can even mentally disappear into emptiness, and know that the householders have a lifeline to draw them back at mealtime. The monastic lives in a very rarefied context offered by the Buddhist community which was carefully crafted by the Buddha to unleash the full potential of the Buddhist path.⁶

3.7. The practice of harmlessness

Without the practice of refraining from evil, you quite likely might take more from the world than you give, and harm others perhaps unspeakably, as you

accrue personal advantages. You might become ever more entrenched in reprobate behaviors as you act out your greed, aversion, and delusion. Even as you practice with precepts, you are likely to struggle with needy and aversive impulses rooted in the central importance of a misperceived self that must navigate a harsh, competitive, and often abusive world.

Bad deeds, and deeds hurtful to ourselves, are easy to do; what is beneficial, and good, that is very difficult to do. (Dpd 163)

All the while, you might view yourself to be a good, fair person, in sharp contrast to the welfare cheats, terrorists, financial speculators, and ignoble ruffians beyond your doors, yet doing what it takes to hold your own so that your family might survive.

Taking on the precepts sincerely, and with dedication can be a shock. It is often the first of the important decisions made within a Buddhist life. It is on the level of choosing a spouse, career path, or family dog. Keep in mind that precepts are not imposed upon you; they are your choice. However, they are meaningless unless you yourself honor this decision with a sense of vow, commitment, and dedication, with full awareness that, “This will be the shape of my life.” Vow is how you enter into all of Buddhist practice, step by step. Accordingly, like marriage vows, a public ceremony is appropriate to add gravity, and the feeling of linking arms with like-minded people. Talk to your local teacher, monk/nun, or priest about what support might exist for this.

In general, it is advisable to commit to the five standard precepts listed above. I generally ask anyone who wants officially to become my student, after discussing the nature of their commitment, to formally accept the refuges (to be discussed in Chapter six), and to commit themselves to the eight lifetime precepts—which include the five standard precepts, but also proscribe harsh, malicious, and useless speech—as a counterweight to some of the excesses our culture tends to encourage. If you begin attending meditation retreats you may be expected to observe almost absolute silence, forgo all sexual activity for days on end, and to give up entertainments and self-beautification for the duration of the retreat. Consider this an opportunity to push the precept envelope a bit.

Once committed, you might nonetheless find yourself wandering over the bounds of certain precepts. Different people are challenged by different precepts under different conditions. Your job is not to feel guilty, but to fully acknowledge each transgression, and determine to do better in the future. Perfection is a high standard that often eludes mere humans, and may even cause some a degree of resentment and anxiety that is inimical to practice. Some-

times it is appropriate to adhere to precepts by degrees. For instance, suppose you currently enjoy sharing a drink on weekends with friends, and are either not yet convinced of the harm to yourself, to others, or to practice, or else are simply stuck in this routine. Initially, you might limit your intake to one beer, or two, but if you consistently acknowledge that you are overstepping a precept, you will probably find yourself progressively tightening your limit. At some point, you might spontaneously give up alcohol altogether. In fact, this was my experience in my early days of Buddhist practice. Just let your acknowledgment be an opportunity for reflection on the purpose of the precept, and that alone will tend to wear away your resistance to following it.

In observing precepts, you cannot help but confront the mind, nor can you help but confront social demands. Many of us start Buddhist practice with little awareness of our own minds, so you do well to take this opportunity to investigate its tendencies as a preparation for the practice of purifying mind. In precept practice there will be repeated conflicts between what your mind demands, and what precepts ask of you. You will find that the mind is impulsive, but in predictable ways, following familiar habit patterns. Whether you manage to follow a precept, or give up, and break a precept, try to become aware of the mind's countervailing impulses. Simple awareness provides a firm basis for developing purity of mind, as discussed in the next chapter.

In following precepts, you probably also confront social circumstances. Your livelihood is likely to be particularly prominent in this regard. For instance, if you interact with customers, you may be required, as a condition for employment, to stretch the truth a bit, "That dress looks, uh, great on you," to cook the books, to set mouse traps, or commit other demeritorious acts. I recommend that you evaluate the ethics of your job very carefully, and change profession if appropriate, and feasible, realizing this may be all but impossible in the current job market. Today we have whole industries founded on the shards of broken precepts. It may be difficult to find an honorable occupation, and still be able to support a family. Aside from this, you should closely evaluate any personal agendas you might have, and what future actions they might entail that violate precepts. For instance, a plan to secure a promotion at work, might entail controlling who in authority knows what, and accordingly result in telling lies to cover up, or to alter inconvenient truths. Precept practice has a way of breaking up personal agendas.

1. I use *kammic* as the adjectival form of *kamma*. When spoken, care should be taken not to pronounce it like the English word "comic," which occurs in many of the same contexts, since many of us commit "comic actions" that produce "comic

results.” Note that the double “m” in Pali is actually held longer than “m” in English. Accordingly, I advise holding the “m” to avoid comic results, or otherwise revert to the word *karmic* (from the Sanskrit root).

2. Bodhi (1987).
3. *Vinaya*, Mahāvagga.
4. Readers who would like to explore the topic of rebirth further are encouraged to start with Story (1975), Nagapriya (2004), and Stevenson (2000). Stevenson documented and meticulously researched thousands of case studies of early childhood memories in his more academic writings, some of which are quite remarkable.
5. The meaning of “truth” for the Buddha is taken up in 6.4.4.
6. For more discussion of monastic precepts, I recommend Ariyesako (1999). This provides an excellent overview of the range of precepts that define the monastic life, organized by topic. Cintita (2014) discusses how the relationship between monastics and householders has produced a *culture of awakening*.

4. Purity

*Well-makers direct water;
Fletchers bend the arrow.
Carpenters bend a piece of wood.
Good people fashion themselves. (Dhp 145)*

Our actions, for harm, or benefit, arise first in the mind as thoughts with certain intentionality behind them. For most of us, as we attempt to refrain from evil and accomplish good, the mind is often contrary, unsupportive, agitated, and rebellious, intent on other, generally selfish agendas. As a result, following the precepts and practicing generosity are often a struggle. Occasionally, however, we may experience the enormous joy when mind and body come into full alignment, and our most virtuous intentions flow effortlessly into actions harmless and beneficial. This is a moment of *purity* (*visuddhi*) of mind. There are those noble ones among us who experience life like this all of the time. The mind for them has become an instrument of virtue, of kindness and compassion, of wisdom, and of strength. They have become adepts in virtue through the practice of purifying mind, and so walk the earth with unbounded goodwill, equanimity, and wisdom, selfless, beyond delusional views, with clarity about what is of harm, and what is of of benefit. They are also the happiest, and most fulfilled among us, I venture to say.

In previous chapters, we've seen that the practices of avoiding evil, and doing good have certain limits. Precepts are rigid, and porous, and therefore not adequate in themselves. Seeking beneficial consequences is unreliable beyond a certain horizon. Additionally, delusion and hubris easily subvert the potential advantages of these practices: Humans are quite adept at convincing themselves and others of the rightness of their behaviors, and overestimate their ability to comprehend consequences. They justify ethically questionable means in terms of praiseworthy ends they are (most likely mistakenly) convinced will ensue. Some of history's greatest atrocities have arisen as a result. Throughout, ethical intentions contend with our baser impulses.

Purifying mind is directed at the transformation of human character. We train to develop adept, spontaneous, and intuitive dispositions of virtue and wisdom, free of conflicting impulses, misperceptions and motivations. We become a different kind of person as we make progress toward awakening through Buddhist practice. The Buddha may have been the first to discover that this prospect is already intrinsic in the nature of the human mind, albeit obscure, and in need of guidance. This explains the strongly psychological character of *Dhamma*.

4.1. Wholesome and unwholesome thoughts

The basic principle of purifying mind is expressed in the first two verses of the *Dhammapāda* as follows:

Mind precedes all phenomena.
 Mind is their chief; they are all mind-made.
 If with impure mind a person speaks, or acts,
 Suffering follows him like a wheel that follows the foot of an ox.

Mind precedes all phenomena.
 Mind is their chief; they are all mind-made.
 If with pure mind a person speaks, or acts,
 Happiness follows him like his never-departing shadow.
 (Dhp 1-2)

The motivating principle of purifying mind is *renunciation*, putting aside the desire for personal advantage. Purifying mind roots our conduct in the intentionality that selflessly seeks benefit, and shuns harm. Training mind toward virtue might, at first, seem like a hopeless task. Most of us have a lot of activity endlessly rattling and buzzing around between our ears, and it is not clear how it might be brought into any reasonable order, much less under control:

“Hubba hubba.” “That jerk!” “Out of my way!” “It’s his own fault.” “Oh boy!” “Aha!” “There, there now; let me take care of it.” “If I slide my sunglasses up my forehead I’ll look really cool!” “Good Morning, God!” “Arrrrgh.” “Yaaaawn.” “What th..., huh?” “I’m gonna get even!” “Good God: Morning!” “Yikes!” “Yakity yakity yak.” “Relaaaaaax.” “Tomorrow ... is another day!” “Let’s be logical about this.” “Mine, all mine! Haha.” “No more ... Mr. Nice Guy!”

How do we sort through *this*, much less point it in the general direction of

virtue? Exactly what is a *pure* thought as opposed to a *impure* thought anyway? Can we actually get rid of one, and keep the other so that *happiness* will follow like a shadow, instead of *pain* like a wheel? The Bodhisatta began with such questions early on,

Bhikkhus, before my awakening, while I was still only an unawakened *bodhisatta*, it occurred to me, “Suppose that I divide my thoughts into two classes.” Then I set on one side thoughts of sensual desire, thoughts of ill will, and thoughts of cruelty, and I set on the other side thoughts of renunciation, thoughts of kindness, and thoughts of harmlessness.
(MN 19 i 114)

Notice that the thoughts on the second side—renunciation, kindness, and nonharming—are the motivating principles for purity, generosity, and precepts, respectively. In 8.6 we will also learn that these are the guiding principles mentioned in the path factor of *right attitude*.

The Buddha called the first class of thoughts *unwholesome*, or *unskillful* (*akusala*), and the second class *wholesome*, or *skillful* (*kusala*). Wholesome thoughts have the intentional quality of meritorious deeds. Unwholesome thoughts have the intentional quality of demeritorious deeds. It is significant that the Buddha chose terminology suggestive of skill. Buddhist practice is—like playing tennis or solving crossword puzzles—primarily a process of *skill acquisition*, and awakening something like perfect mastery of a variety of skills, to the point of virtuosity.

Among the thoughts identified as unskillful are restlessness, agitation, conceit, jealousy, guilt, pride, cynicism, greed, miserliness, thoughts of revenge, spite, envy, grumpiness, ill-will, anger, hate, rage, sorrow, fear, bias, delusion, stubbornness, narrow-mindedness, torpor, complacency, and lust. Among those identified as skillful are generosity, renunciation, kindness, compassion, patience, intelligence, discernment, shame, rectitude, conscientiousness, composure, equanimity, pliancy, buoyancy, conviction, open-mindedness, proficiency, and empathy.

4.2. Greed, aversion and delusion

What underlies the distinction between skillful and unskillful? Unless we understand this, our path will be without direction, awakening will remain elusive, we will continue to be driven by forces we do not understand, we will cause harm, and we will never find satisfaction in our life. The Buddha

developed a psychology of *Dhammic* skill, discovering that several criteria coincide remarkably in each of the skillful, and unskillful sets.

There are these three roots of what is unskillful. Which three?
Greed as a root of what is unskillful, *aversion* as a root of what is unskillful, *delusion* as a root of what is unskillful. These are the three roots of what is unskillful. (Iti 3.1)

These are the *unskillful roots* (*akusala-mūla*). The *skillful roots* (*kusala-mūla*) are the opposites of the unskillful: *non-greed*, *non-aversion*, and *non-delusion*, also known as *renunciation*, *kindness*, and *wisdom*.

Greed (*lobha*) is the desire for, longing for, appropriation of, or lust for sensual pleasures, for reputation, for fame, for wealth, for power, for comfort, for security, and so on.

I would prefer to translate *lobha* as the more general ‘neediness,’ but ‘greed’ has become standard. Greed causes anxiety, and restlessness, initially from not having what we desire, then later, if we have acquired what we desire, from knowing we will lose it, or from simply wanting more.

Aversion (*dosa*) is the dislike, dread, or fear of pain, of discomfort, or the hatred of enemies, and so on.

It includes thoughts of anger, revenge, envy, or jealousy (these last two also have an element of greed), resentment, guilt, self-hate, disdain, judgmental attitudes, and so on. *Dosa* is most often translated as ‘hate,’ or ‘hatred.’ Aversion easily manifests as anxiety and restlessness, in short, as suffering, because it entails dissatisfaction with the world as it is. Typically it arises when our desires are thwarted, or threatened, and in this way is intimately bound to greed. Both are forms of *craving*, greed for the presence of something, aversion for its absence. We will see in 8.4 that craving is bound up with *suffering* (*dukkha*).

Delusion (*moha*) is found in erroneous views, or justifications, misperceptions, ignorance, and denial.

Many of our delusions may be widely held beliefs in a given culture, or even across cultures, for instance, that material abundance produces happiness, that unconditionally evil people walk among us, or that one race, or class is the master of others. These lead to endemically misguided decisions, and actions. Others are often pervasive across cultures, manifesting particularly in the sense that certain things are unchanging, fixed, or reliable, and that there is fun, happiness, and beauty where in fact there is decay and suffering. The greatest delusion for the early Buddhist is that there is an abiding self, a “me,”

that in some way remains fixed in spite of all the changes that happen all around it, that is also the owner, and controller of this body and mind. We will learn a lot more about this last delusion in *Buddhist Path*. For the Buddha, delusion is the most dangerous of the three unwholesome roots,

But there is a corruption worse than all corruptions: delusion is the greatest corruption. *Bhikkhus*, throw off that corruption, and become corruptionless! (Dhp 243)

The root of delusion is also the basis of the other two unskillful roots. In fact, the delusional sense of self is the greatest source of all that ails us, and is the basis of our resistance to beneficial conduct. Greed and aversion have their basis in the sense of self, which leads to taking things personally, in a self-centered way.

This relation of delusion to greed and aversion is also reciprocal. The Buddha observed,

Greed, aversion, and delusion, friend, make one blind, unseeing, and ignorant; they destroy wisdom, are bound up with distress, and do not lead to *nibbāna*. (AN 3.71)

Those under the influence of greed, aversion or delusion misperceive the world, suffer, and are misdirected in their practice. *Suffering (dukkha)* is a key concept in Buddhism. The Pali word has also been translated into English as ‘stress,’ or ‘dissatisfaction,’ and in any case ranges from the slightest feeling that something is out of kilter to the worst mental or physical anguish.

Let’s take anger, one of the great fountainheads of *kammic* intentions, as an example of the dangers of greed, aversion, and delusion. Perceived through angry eyes, the object of our anger—who might even be a close friend or family member—easily appears to be a jerk or a schmuck, if not a demon, that, when the anger subsides, will re-morph back into a normal more amiable form. The level of *dukkha* associated with the arising of even slight anger is astonishing when carefully observed, and great anger plunges us into a hell-like state right here and now. We are all aware that habitual, or sustained anger can even affect our physical health (high blood pressure, heart disease, etc.). Moreover, should anger become more ingrained through habituation, it will become increasingly difficult to bring the mind into states of calm and insight.

The Buddha also discovered that an unwholesome, or unskillful thought,

... leads to my own affliction, to others’ affliction, and to the affliction of both; it obstructs wisdom, causes difficulties, and

leads away from *nibbāna*. (MN 19 i 115)

This paraphrases the earlier passages about suffering, misperception of reality, and the crippling of progress on the Buddhist path associated with unwholesome intentions. It also adds to those the inflicting of harm on others. Harm naturally results when greed, aversion, or delusion forms the intentional basis of a *kammic* act. Consider how often violence, or dangerous behavior such as reckless driving, arises from anger, or how our anger gives rise to fear in others. On the other hand, skillful thoughts bring proportionate success to the practices of refraining from all evil and accomplishing good.

There are two reasons why greed, aversion, and delusion lead to harm for others. First, we misperceive reality under the influence of greed or aversion. Our actions are like driving with a frosty windshield. We may vaguely make out, or even only imagine our ignoble goals through the icy film, and not see the deer in the road as we head toward those goals. As we have seen, it is difficult enough to track consequences of actions beyond a certain horizon, even when we see present conditions reasonably clearly. Second, the self-centered basis of greed, aversion, and delusion potentially makes us willing to sacrifice the well-being of others in favor of the perceived well-being of ourselves. These unskillful thoughts tend to stand in constant opposition to our practice of generosity, and harmlessness. Misperception and self-centeredness are reflected in the two responses we may have if Little Johnny commits a misdeed: “What were you thinking?” and “What got into you?”.

We can summarize the Buddha’s observations just discussed in the following terms,

Unwholesome, or unskillful intentions:

- (1) They are grounded either in greed, in aversion, or in delusion.
- (2) When they give rise to actions, those actions generally cause harm to self or others.
- (3) They give rise to misperception.
- (4) They cause personal suffering.
- (5) They retard development on the path to awakening.

Wholesome, or skillful intentions work in the opposite direction.

4.3. Fruits of *kamma*

Notice that these characteristics of the unwholesome lend support to the familiar saying:

Virtue is its own reward.

Our intentions are driven by underlying *dispositions* or habit patterns, which are in turn strengthened or weakened as we act out our intentions. As long as we act with unskillful intentions, we suffer, and moreover strengthen our dispositions toward acting with unskillful intentions. As long as we act with skillful intentions, we strengthen our dispositions toward acting with skillful intentions. Through strengthening skillful dispositions, we make progress in our practice. Through strengthening unskillful dispositions, we regress, we sacrifice the future well-being enjoyed by those of advanced spiritual attainment, and we ensure greater future suffering for ourselves as well. The Buddha describes this process of strengthening habit patterns,

Whatever a monk keeps pursuing with his thinking, and pondering, that becomes the inclination of his awareness. If a monk keeps pursuing thinking imbued with sensuality, abandoning thinking imbued with renunciation, his mind is bent by that thinking imbued with sensuality. If a monk keeps pursuing thinking imbued with ill-will, abandoning thinking imbued with non-ill-will, his mind is bent by that thinking imbued with ill will. If a monk keeps pursuing thinking imbued with harmfulness, abandoning thinking imbued with harmlessness, his mind is bent by that thinking imbued with harmfulness. (MN 19 i 116)

By the way, the reader should never feel excluded from the Buddha's instructions specifically addressed to monks for lack of robes, nor presence of head of hair. This usage simply reflects the circumstance that most of the time his audience was monastic (certainly nuns would also have been included on many of these occasions). He said himself that he did not "teach with a closed fist," that is, he had no esoteric teachings reserved for the few.

In short, when we act with unskillful intentions, we suffer on two occasions: immediately, and through the replaying of the habit patterns that thereby accrue. The Buddha's psychological observations are in accord with what was said in 3.3,

I will be the heir of whatever deeds I do, admirable, or demeritorious. (AN 5.57)

Recall that while we make the world through our actions, we also make ourselves. While we perform virtuous actions, we become more like angels. While we perform vicious actions we become more like devils. We therefore

expect merit-making, or good *kamma* to adhere to the *intentions* (wholesome, or unwholesome mental actions) behind our actions more directly than to the particular physical actions themselves.

Purity of mind in this way deepens the more we practice generosity and harmlessness with pure intentions. As a result we suffer less and we make progress in our practice on the way toward *nibbāna*. An act of generosity or harmlessness is an act of body, or of speech. The Buddha tells us there are three kinds of intentional actions, or *kamma*: those of body, those of speech, and those of mind. In the first two our intentions are acted out externally in the world. An act of mind, on the other hand, lacks in itself bodily, or verbal expression, yet still has intentionality behind it. For instance, we can harbor ill-will ... , or kindness through thought alone.

Acts of mind are important in our practice because they can be used to cultivate purity directly and efficiently independently of bodily or verbal action. *Contemplative practices*—generally performed on a meditation cushion—are primary examples. We will look at contemplative practices in detail in *Buddhist Path*. Indeed, these mental exercises have ethical value, even while producing no direct harm, or benefit to others, because they result in greater purity of mind as growing dispositions toward wholesome intentions. That greater purity eventually produces benefit, and reduces harm. Cultivating mind in this way is something like tuning a running engine without actually shifting it into gear. The car does not move during the tune-up, but it will drive much more smoothly after the tune-up. Cushion practices are like tune-ups.

Let's step back a moment to appreciate what the Buddha is doing here. He is not proposing an ethical system based in conventional values, so much as discovering the roots of ethics in human psychology. Effectively he has discovered two *motivational directions* within each of us, each of which is vying to regulate our behavior in opposition to the other. One seeks personal advantage, and is rooted in greed, hate, and delusion. The other seeks communal benefit, the greater good, and is rooted in renunciation, kindness, and wisdom. Which should we prefer? If the second is also ultimately conducive to better personal well-being, the answer should be clear. Our task as Buddhist practitioners is to grow the second, and weed out the first.¹

4.4. Lust

Let's take *lust* (*rāga*), or sensual passion as another example of an unwholesome mental factor. Alongside anger, lust is another major wellspring of human intentionality. Although we tend to think of lust in western culture as

positive, the qualities of the unskillful listed in 4.2 tell us otherwise.

(1) Lust is grounded in greed, that is, in neediness, and

(2) Lust also tends toward harm.

For instance, stealing is often a result of lust, including stealing someone's squeeze. Often lust is even consciously self-destructive: people sacrifice physical health out of lust for food, drink, cigarettes, hang gliding, and so on, and sacrifice mental health out of lust for electronic entertainment, drugs, alcohol, and so on. People are often propelled by lust from one unhealthy and unhappy sexual relationship to another.

(3) We lose wisdom under the spell of lust.

I'll say! Sometimes we sacrifice careers, and marriages as well as peace of mind in the conviction that "love will find a way." It doesn't.

(4) Lust is always at least a bit painful.

Sometimes it is so painful we can hardly stand it. It often flares up into a fever of longing. Some relief is possible if the object of lust is attained, but even then fear of eventual loss sets in. Bitter disappointment ensues if the object of lust is lost or never attained.

(5) Finally, lust diverts us from the path to awakening.

It agitates the mind, obstructing stillness and other skillful factors. It easily spins out other unskillful thoughts such as anger, jealousy, and greed for the various means needed for satisfying lust, such as that dashing fashion statement, or that sexy sports car. It easily becomes ingrained as unskillful habit patterns, even as addiction.

This is quite an indictment against lust, one that the Buddha makes repeatedly. Why, then, do most of us tend to think of lust as something positive? I think it is because we confuse lust with pleasure. Lust seeks pleasure, and pleasure tends to evoke lust for more of the same, or for an escalation of pleasure. Together they are commonly bound in an intimate cycle of mutual conditioning, and are thereby mistakenly identified with one another. However, the two are quite distinct: lust is painful, pleasure is, uh, pleasurable. Addiction is where this cycle spins out of control. The failure to properly understand the cycle of lust and pleasure, and to recognize which is which, has miswritten many lives, and even the histories of nations. The Buddha warns us,

There is no satisfying lust, even by a shower of gold pieces. He who knows that lusts have a short taste, and cause pain, he is wise; Even in heavenly pleasures he finds no satisfaction, the

disciple who is fully awakened delights only in the destruction of all desires. (Dhp 186-7)

Caught up in such a cycle of pleasure and pain, we imagine we are having ... fun. The following question is worth personal investigation, "Proportionately, how much of my 'fun' is pleasure, and how much of it is pain?" An experientially derived answer may be surprising.

4.5. Renunciation

Our job at this point is to become fully aware in our own experience of the nature of lust, and particularly of the dangers it brings. This tends to go against the grain of commonsense attitudes about lust. Aren't passions the spice of life? Isn't it better to have loved, and lost, rather than never to have loved at all? Isn't life drab, and aimless without the quest for sensual pleasures? Are we to renounce all that? In fact, we are in good company in these considerations. The Bodhisatta entertained similar doubts,

Even I myself, before my awakening, when I was still an unawakened *bodhisatta*, thought, "Renunciation is good. Seclusion is good." But my heart didn't leap up at renunciation, didn't grow confident, steadfast, or firm, seeing it as peace. The thought occurred to me: "What is the cause, what is the reason, why my heart doesn't leap up at renunciation, doesn't grow confident, steadfast, or firm, seeing it as peace?" Then the thought occurred to me: "I haven't seen the drawback of sensual pleasures; I haven't pursued it. I haven't understood the reward of renunciation; I haven't familiarized myself with it. That's why my heart doesn't leap up at renunciation, doesn't grow confident, steadfast, or firm, seeing it as peace." (AN 9.41)

We do well to follow his example. The point, at least at this stage, is not to squelch sensual passions, but to understand them, and see how they get us into trouble. In fact, this is what is described in the next two steps in the gradual instruction that we are tracing through in this exposition of the Buddhist life:

(Buddhist Life)

- ...
- The drawbacks, degradation, and corruption of sensual passions.
- The rewards of renunciation.
- ...

When lust arises, this is an opportunity for investigation. When we act out of

lust, this is another opportunity. The unfolding of consequences upon acting out of lust provides yet another opportunity. The re-arising of lust in association with this unfolding provides still another opportunity for investigating “the drawbacks, degradation, and corruption of sensual passions.”

At the same time, we do well to contrast these qualities of sensual pleasures with those pleasures that arise rather independently of lust, including the sublime pleasure of generosity practiced with purest intentions as described in 2.3. The primary example referred to by the Buddha of such *supramundane* (*lokuttara*) pleasures are those that arise through meditation (*samādhi*, or *jhāna*), which we will discuss when we take up the Buddhist path. In this way, we come to understand the rewards of renunciation. In fact, the passage just cited about the unawakened Bodhisatta goes on to contrast worldly (lust-entangled) pleasures with the supramundane pleasure found in the states of meditation, along with the need to set worldly pleasures aside, at least temporarily, in order to enter into a meditative state. In this way we discover that the pleasure of those meditative states has a much more profound and purer quality than mere worldly pleasures. Giving up worldly pleasures for the supramundane pleasures is a good trade.

Renunciation (*nikkhamana*) takes this understanding of the drawbacks of sensual passions a step further by avoiding them. A primary way to practice this is through *sense restraint* (*indriya-saṃvara*), or *guarding of senses* (*indriyāṇaṃ gutti*), whereby we avoid the sensual contact (seeing, smelling, etc.) that gives rise to passion in the first place,

On seeing a form with the eye, do not grasp at any theme, or details by which, if you were to dwell without restraint over the faculty of the eye, demeritorious, unskillful qualities such as greed, or distress might assail you. Practice for its restraint. Guard the faculty of the eye. Secure your restraint with regard to the faculty of the eye. (SN 35.199)

This is a challenging practice which can be implemented gradually by becoming progressively less self-indulgent. In this way we live our lives less on the basis of sensual pleasure with its attendant suffering, and more on the basis of supramundane pleasure without concomitant suffering. Another of the many functions of the monastic community is to embody this kind of practice.

Monastics are in principle renunciates, and observably on average the most joyful members of a Buddhist community. Their presence in the community provides a reality check for the more profligate members of the community, supplementing the inner work of studying drawbacks and rewards as described here. With them in our midst, we begin to realize the futility of finding lasting

happiness in sensual pleasures.

In practice, renunciation can also occur quite naturally, almost without notice, without squelching anything. Through careful investigation of the drawbacks of passion, one experiences—in one area of human affairs, or another—*dispassion* (*virāga*), which is much like to losing interest in childhood toys in favor of more adult things as we grow older. In fact, we might think of the goal of Buddhist practice as that of growing up, of becoming adults in a more profound way than we might have imagined. A fully awakened being has no regard whatever for sensual passions, but enjoys the constant bliss of supramundane tranquility. Such is the end result of renunciation.

Further progress in purity, renunciation, and dispassion distinguishes the Buddhist adept. We will see in *Buddhist Path* that there are points at which we will get stuck along the path, largely related to recalcitrant delusional conceptualizations that need to be broken down through very refined practices. This is why the Buddha also gave us a noble eightfold path, and a very sophisticated understanding of the human mind. Walking the Buddhist path will be seen to extend the practice of purity, and awakening will perfect it.²

4.6. Abode of the gods

Purity is generally associated with the abandonment and renunciation of unwholesome, and worldly qualities, which thereby attract wholesome, and supramundane qualities to fill the vacuum. There are also practices that directly develop wholesome, and supramundane qualities. The *brahmavihāras* are virtues that we try to encourage in Buddhist contemplative practice. They are almost always known by their Pali name, which means “abodes of the *Brahma* gods.” The *brahmavihāras* have ethical implications, and can be developed as an aspect of purity at an early stage starting with reflection and simple visualizations. They are four in number:

- kindness,
- compassion,
- non-envy,
- equanimity.

Kindness (*mettā*) is the opposite of ill-will, or aversion. It is the root virtue here.

We have already encountered it as the basis of generosity. Something like kindness is found close to home in the affection we feel for family and friends. However, in Buddhism we encourage a kind of kindness that extends far

beyond our realm of self-interest in that it embraces also those toward whom we would otherwise feel indifferent, and then, further, those for whom we would otherwise feel animosity. Kindness, when perfected, covers everyone equally, like rain that falls on chums and scoundrels alike. Compassion and non-envy are manifestations of kindness.

Compassion (karuṇā) is the particular kindness we feel toward those who suffer bad fortune.

Compassion is a primary motivator to relieve the suffering of others, for instance, by feeding the hungry, and rescuing the vulnerable.

Non-envy (muditā), sometimes translated as ‘empathetic joy,’ is the kindness we manifest toward those who experience good fortune.

If our neighbor puts in a new swimming pool, wins the lottery, or purchases a new BMW, many of us experience envy, a form of aversion. We fume, “That should be me!” The exceptional among us are glad for our neighbor’s good fortune. (... until we feel compassion that they lust for such things)

Equanimity (upekkhā) perfects the other *brahmavihāras* by ensuring emotional calm.

It is common to become emotionally entangled in our own *brahmavihāras*, particularly compassion. The etymology of the word ‘com’ + ‘passion’ is literally ‘suffering along.’ This is to introduce an impurity, leading to unskillful craving and frustration with regard to desired outcomes, poor decision-making as the *brahmavihāras* motivate our actions on behalf of others, and eventually to burnout. Equanimity gives us a cool head. The *brahmavihāras* become ornaments of the mind, and sources of supramundane joy rather than personal pain.

The *brahmavihāras* are often developed and cultivated through meditative visualization techniques, with special emphasis on developing kindness (*mettā*), for instance, by imagining that we are extending kindness in all directions to an ever widening swath of beings.

4.7. The practice of purity

I hope none of this discussion evokes images of goose-stepping thought police in the minds of readers. In fact, if you have entered into the practices of generosity and harmlessness, you have inevitably already stepped into the practice of purifying mind. This is because you are forced to confront intentional impulses wherever they tend toward harm, or away from benefit. Every time you

override a contrary mental factor in order to adhere to a precept, you are de-conditioning an existing unskillful disposition, and thereby purifying mind. Every time kindness or generosity inspires your good deeds, you are strengthening your tendency in that direction, and thereby purifying mind. Even mixed motives, such as responding to peer or authority pressure, or a sense of obligation in the absence of kindness, have a way of eventually giving way to purer motives.

For instance, recall the precept not to assault living beings. Maybe you do not initially understand why the life of an ugly twiddle bug matters one snippet, but a twiddle bug is a living being, and you want to be a good Buddhist, so you don't kill twiddle bugs. After a few months you will discover something that was not there before: a warm heart with regard to twiddle bugs; they will have become your little friends. You will find that this result generalizes to other ugly beings as well, and even to certain people that you had once put into the same category with twiddle bugs. Your mind has become purer. Try it! Put away the bug swatter, and the Twiddle-Enhanced Raid®, and see if you don't soften right up. This explains why precepts are called *sikkhāpada* (training steps): they train our mind in purity.

We have seen above that a number of precepts actually have little directly to do with refraining from evil, except insofar as they produce, through purification, the kind of mind that will want to avoid evil. Idle chatter, for instance, while the topic of a precept, is rather victimless, especially given that cases in which it spills into disparagement of others are covered by other precepts concerning speech. Nonetheless, if you refrain from idle chatter over many months you will discover a quieter mind, less prone to proliferation of spurious thought, and therefore less prone to delusion. You will have, simply through observing this precept, made the mind purer.³ The ethics-neutral precepts develop purity of mind in much the same way as ethical precepts, but avert eventual, rather than immediate harm for others.

Just as precepts, and other physical practices define habit patterns that over time purify mind, existing habit patterns that characterize your lifestyle may inadvertently de-purify mind. You do well to avoid those. A rather complex precept, commonly observed by householders every quarter moon, and by monastics always, is the following:

I undertake the training step to refrain from dancing, singing,
music, going to see entertainments, wearing garlands,
smartening with perfumes, and beautifying with cosmetics.

These are activities that would turn the mind toward lust, and pride. Similarly,

the modern pursuits of playing violent video games, and watching violent television programs, or listening to hateful speech on the radio will turn the mind toward recurring thoughts of anger and fear. Channel or web surfing will turn the mind toward restlessness and discontent. Entertainments that excite lust will tend similarly to de-purify mind, even while doing no outward harm. You do well to moderate such habitual activities. Today we are awash in the playing out of unskillful habit patterns, encouraged by the ubiquity of electronic media, so that the process of sensual restraint is even more challenging, but even more appropriate than ever before. In summary, there are kinds of bodily, or verbal actions that have few immediate consequences in terms of benefit, or harm to the world, yet carry *kammic* fruits insofar as they condition mind toward decreasing skillfulness.

Moreover, merit-making asks of you that you constantly monitor your intentions. Such monitoring may be the first introspective encounter with the inner, subjective world for the gregarious minglers and mixers among us. Introspection is generally extolled in Asian cultures, while Western cultures praise the outwardly directed individual, quick of response, and versatile of task, but short on ethics and wisdom.

At the same time that you note your basic intentions, you should notice when discomfort, such as stress or anxiety arise—this is suffering—as well as the moments of satisfaction and joy that come with benefiting others. How is this satisfaction and joy different from the pleasure of buying new clothes, say, or an new electronic tape dispenser? You should observe when greed or neediness or lust arises, and when aversion, or fear arises. At what point do you feel satisfaction as you pursue sensual pleasures? You should observe when you fall into the cycle of lust, and pleasure, and ask how much suffering there is in that cycle (particularly the anxiety of anticipation), relative to actual pleasure. When you might be experiencing pleasure, when are you instead already lusting after the next pleasure? You should observe delusion in the excuses and rationalizations you probably fabricate, if you are like most people, to explain your actions. These are delusive acts of mental *kamma* that have their own intentions behind them; look at these. With the observation of your own suffering and pleasure, along with your intentional impulses, insight into the human condition will deepen.

Shifting topics, I highly recommend that you begin a regular meditation practice at this point if you have not already. This can be a Yoga meditation instead of a specifically Buddhist form of meditation. Buddhist meditation is an advanced topic, not discussed until Chapter ten of this book, that builds on many prerequisite practices. However, a general meditation practice will bring

immediate benefits:

- (1) Meditation will take the edge off the hectic flash and dazzle, and the anxious ebb and flow of modern life, and settle the mind in a way that comes more naturally in simpler societies. You will find it therapeutic.
- (2) With the tranquility you achieve in meditation, you will find that the mind slows down, thoughts are fewer even off the cushion, and the introspective world becomes more accessible. This is a boon for practicing purity of mind.
- (3) You will probably begin to experience, as your practice deepens, the supramundane pleasure of the meditative states discussed above, and even learn to enter them at will. This will give a better appreciation of the rewards of renunciation.
- (4) You will be in a better position to take up the Buddha's more specialized practices that turn meditation into a refined tool for generating insight.

Resources for simple meditation instruction abound, and its practice is generally very enjoyable, and rewarding.

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1. I have an theory about how humans ended up with two contrary motivational directions. What most distinguishes humans from our ape ancestors is our hyper-sociality, our ability to cooperate and communicate with each other at a very deep level, our ability to assimilate and share common cultures and languages, and our capacity for participation in symbolically based social cognition. These qualities seem to have appeared several hundred thousand years ago, during a period of rapid *group* evolution, when which our brains tripled in size. Nonetheless the ape remains in each of us, alongside the human, giving us an individualistic ape motivational direction alongside a prosocial human one.
 2. Thanissaro (1999) is a nice essay on the advantages of renunciation over lust.
 3. Similarly, there have traditionally been practices in which accomplishing good is *enacted* but not actualized—such as making food offerings to an inert and definitely not hungry Buddha statue—that serve to develop generosity and reverence that are found in virtually every later Buddhist tradition, but also make practical sense from the perspective of early Buddhism.

5. Harmony

... although they wish to live without aversion, harming, hostility, or malignity, and in peace, they yet live in aversion, harming one another, hostile, and malign ... (DN 21 ii 276)

We are a social species; we live in relationship to others, occupy social roles, and obligations, and are in constant negotiation with one another. But our interpersonal, and communal lives are all too often marked by discord, ruffled feathers, infighting, argument, insult, exploitation, violence, and war.

At the same time, it is substantially within the realm of interpersonal, and communal relations that the practices of generosity, harmlessness, and purity of mind that we have discussed in previous chapters play out. As we perfect our generosity, our harmlessness, and our purity, our relationship with our fellow social beings improves. We treat them with more kindness and compassion, we take care not to step on their toes, nor harm, nor insult them, and we do what we can to help them rather than to exploit them. Imagine what the world would be like if *everyone* developed in this way!¹

5.1. Be careful of what you say

A primary—perhaps *the* primary—conditioning factor of interpersonal, and communal harmony, or disharmony is how skillfully we wield the instrument of speech. The Buddha has a lot to say about this skill. Here are the primary requisites for speaking skillfully, in a nutshell,

Bhikkhus, possessing five factors, speech is well spoken, not badly spoken; it is blameless, and beyond reproach by the wise. What five?

- (1) It is spoken at the proper time;
- (2) what is said is true;
- (3) it is spoken gently;
- (4) what is said is beneficial;
- (5) it is spoken with a mind of kindness.

Possessing these five factors speech is well spoken, not badly spoken; it is blameless, and beyond reproach by the wise.
(AN 5.198, enumeration mine)

We notice that all three systems of ethics intersect here: avoiding harm, producing beneficial consequences, and checking the purity of one's intentions all come into play. Furthermore, finding the right time and speaking gently harmonize with the delicate nature of human sensitivities. Notice, also, that truthfulness is a necessary, but not sufficient, basis for speaking. Our job is not to shine light in every dark corner (except in our own minds) when no benefit results.

For instance, a common, and one of the most awkward, social situations arises when there is need to reproach someone for doing something felt to be inappropriate or harmful—someone is stepping on our foot, for example, or has returned your car in less than its former condition—and to do this with kindness, without causing offense, and in such a way that the proffered advice is actually usefully accepted. Considering the right time takes note of such things as whether the person to be admonished is now in a good, or receptive mood. Sometimes a bit of friendly small-talk will serve to set the mood before the topic is broached. In spite of his critique of idle chatter in general, we frequently find the Buddha initiating a conversation with a bit of small talk.

Nonetheless, many people are difficult to admonish, easily offended, and ready to fly off the handle no matter how skillfully we present the situation. If no benefit is likely to accrue, then nothing we say is likely well-spoken. Rather than ruffling feathers, we do better to preserve harmony. On the other hand, monks and nuns are required to correct each others' behavior as a primary way of enforcing monastic discipline. However, among the many rules monastics follow is a rather important precept that *prohibits* monks or nuns from being *difficult* to admonish, for instance, from being argumentative, or conjuring up counter-admonitions. This practice typically makes us more thick-skinned, and our egos—if present at all—less easily bruised, so that we begin to welcome admonishment as beneficial advice rather than personal attack. Nonetheless, outside of the *Saṅgha* people generally remain fragile.

One of the greatest dangers to communal harmony that the Buddha warns us about is speaking maliciously. Rather than attempting to admonish someone privately for their perceived errors, this person speaks about them to others, generally in their absence, often falsely. Unfortunately, once unleashed, such speech is often repeated with little deliberation by others, and may even, in this day and age, go viral,

Having heard something here, he repeats it elsewhere in order to divide [those people] from these; or having heard something elsewhere he repeats it to those people in order to divide them from these. Thus he is one who divides those who are united, a creator of divisions, one who enjoys factions, delights in factions, a speaker of words that create factions. (AN 10.176)

Divisive speech may target individual people, or entire groups of people. It can occur quite frivolously, often as an attempt at humor, or wit, or it can be used as a way of building countervailing group solidarity. Many people routinely speak ill of others in an attempt to build self-esteem, or to reassure themselves of their own righteousness. Increasingly, particularly with the rise of mass communications, such speech arises deliberately, and with great precision, spreading half-truths, or total fabrications as a way of controlling whole populations.

Consider that racism and ethnic cleansing begin with divisive speech, and colonial empires could not have been built without the policy of “divide and conquer.” Divisive speech is poison both to large societies and to small communities. It undermines our trust in the targeted people, and populations, and ultimately undermines our trust in each other. We should take great care not to divide with our speech, nor to repeat divisive speech we have heard elsewhere. Even if it happens to be true, the potential for harm in communicating to those of ignoble intent can be great.

5.2. The error of retribution

Much of natural human behavior is based on reciprocation. Friendship is reciprocated, our economy is based on the principle of mutually agreeable exchange. The natural response—for many non-human species as well—when someone harms us is retaliation. “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” is a pervasive ethic to this day. Much of American criminal justice, not to mention foreign policy, is based on retaliation.

Buddhist ethics is different. Recall that generosity is not pure if some kind of payback is expected, and an equal exchange is two missed opportunities for merit-making. Harmlessness is practiced toward all living things across the board, just as the mental qualities of renunciation and kindness are not selective,² for we exclude no one as not “deserving” the benefit of our pure intentions. This makes our practice simple: our job is to embody generosity, harmlessness, and kindness toward all others in all circumstances, regardless

of how *they* behave. Their practice is their own, ours is our own; we cannot do it for them. The closest we can come is to inspire them through our example.

The *Dhammapāda* wisely states in this regard,

Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world.
By kindness alone is hatred appeased.
This is a law eternal. (Dhp 5)

Hatred is both a cause and a result of abuse. Where hatred is aflame, bringing more hatred to bear only adds fuel to the fire. Yet this is how foolish people generally think and behave. Kindness is that which seeks benefit, and is, therefore, most capable of correcting disharmony,

He practices for the welfare of both,
His own, and the other's,
When, knowing that his foe is angry,
He conscientiously maintains his peace. (SN 11.4, SN 7.2)

The famous simile of the saw presents perhaps the most strikingly gruesome of the Buddha's images. Through this vivid image the Buddha challenges us to give up the error of retribution even under the most challenging circumstances.

Monks, even if bandits were to sever you savagely limb by limb
with a two-handled saw, he who gave rise to a mind of hatred
towards them would not be carrying out my teaching.
(MN 21 i 129)

We should, in brief, do everything we can in our effort to maintain harmony even under the most adverse conditions. This is one of those high standards that few can be expected to fully achieve.

Anger, a kind of aversion, is our great retributive emotion, and one of the primary, and most immediate conditions of disharmony. There is no wisdom in anger; it knows only one thing. Yet many of us are so afflicted by anger that ridding ourselves of its grip becomes a primary focus of our practice. In one of the Buddha's discourses (AN 3.132) he describes three kinds of persons: The first is like a line etched in *stone*; this one gets angry, and anger persists for a long time. The second is like a line etched in the *ground*; this one gets angry, but his anger erodes quickly. The third—and this is what we should aspire to be—is like a line etched in *water*; even if spoken to harshly, this one does not anger, but “remains on friendly terms with, mingles with, and greets” the one who would make the first two types of people angry. The last has the mind most conducive to harmony.

We are inclined to reserve our most virulent anger for fellow humans. We do not, for instance, generally get angry at gravity, or rain, no matter how implicated these may be in our personal hardships. Yet even a hint of disrespect, or an unskillful word from a human can put us into instant rage. Anger also has a tipping point past which the object of our vexation becomes dehumanized, demonized, a source of irremediable evil, rather than a conditioned complex of pleasing virtues, and vexing faults, a complex like most of us. This is the great delusion anger evokes. Once the anger disperses, this demon might return to being one of our dearest friends.

Anger is a conditioned response that can be unlearned as a part of purification of mind. However, there are also a number of reflections, or thought experiments that many find useful in this regard. The Buddha suggests that we put ourselves in the shoes of others (SN 55.7) by fully recognizing our common humanity, our suffering, and our desire for happiness. He also points out, in view of anger's *kammic* implications, that in responding with anger (which is inherently painful), we are doing to ourselves just what our most ill-intentioned foe would want for us (AN 7.64). In the end, we should be able to echo Sāriputta's "lion's roar," spoken to the Buddha,

Just as they throw pure, and impure things on the earth—feces, urine, spittle, pus, and blood—yet the earth is not repelled, humiliated, or disgusted because of this. So too, Bhante, I dwell with a mind like earth: vast, exalted, and measureless, without enmity, or ill will. (AN 9.11)

This is how we learn to harmonize in a disharmonious world.

5.3. Respect

Another condition for harmony in the Buddha's teachings is *respect* (*gāraṇa*). The larger ascetic tradition to which the Buddha and Buddhism belonged in ancient India could sometimes also be raucous and disrespectful.³ The Buddha was different: he placed great emphasis on the social lubricants of courtesy, etiquette, and respect. The *Saṅgha* met with mutual respect, was expected to meet, "in concord, with mutual appreciation, without dispute, while blending like milk and water, viewing each other with kindly eyes," (MN 31 i 206), and to adjourn in harmony. A large part of the monastic code consists of rules of etiquette. The attention Buddhist monastics characteristically gave to proper attire and neatness, in contrast to the disarray of matted-hair ascetics, also encouraged respect.

Respect has two aspects: mental attitude, and physical, or verbal expression. The attitude of respect is to regard something or someone as worthy of attention, to keep in mind the *value* of something or somebody. Literally, the English word *respect* means “see again.” It is what we do when we refuse to dehumanize, or to demonize someone who annoys us. There is wisdom in respect. We don't have to agree with someone or to find them agreeable to respect them as a human, someone who is in the most essential aspects just like us. It is easy to appreciate that respect can contribute to harmony, and, as a matter of fact, as we practice non-harming and develop qualities of kindness towards living beings, we find we naturally come to respect them more and more. As we respect them more, it becomes harder for us to harm them, feel anger toward them, or speak divisively about them. In fact, respect alleviates the dehumanizing quality of anger discussed above.

The most basic physical expression of respect in India was, and still is, placing one's palms together in *añjali* (in Pali, or in Sanskrit), much like the Christian prayer posture. The fact that *añjali* has been preserved in all of the diverse Asian cultures into which Buddhism has been transmitted indicates the importance accorded to respect. Just as acting ethically toward living beings encourages respect for them, acknowledgment through this physical expression encourages a respectful attitude toward them. This coming together of attitude and expression is not unfamiliar to us in the West, though perhaps not so ubiquitous as in Indian, or in Buddhist culture: a handshake, a hug, or a wave is also an expression that engenders, or amplifies related attitudes of mind.

The famous *Sigalovada Sutta* (DN 31) tells of a young man, Sigala, the son of a householder, who rises early in the morning, leaves town with wet clothes, and wet hair, and then bows to the East, the South, the West, the North, up and down. Then the Buddha comes along with a valuable lesson for young Sigala.

Then the Exalted One, having robed himself in the fore-noon, took bowl and robe, and entered Rājagaha for alms. Now he saw young Sigala worshipping thus, and spoke to him as follows:

“Wherefore do you, young householder, rising early in the morning, departing from Rājagaha, with wet clothes, and wet hair, worship with joined hands these various quarters: the East, the South, the West, the North, the Nadir, and the Zenith?”

“My father, Lord, while dying, said to me, “The six quarters, dear son, you shall worship,” and I, Lord, respecting, revering and honoring my father's word, rise early in the morning and leaving Rājagaha with wet clothes, and wet hair, worship with

joined hands, these six quarters.”

“It is not thus, young householder, that the six quarters should be worshiped in the discipline of the noble ones.”

“How then, Lord, should the six quarters be worshiped in the discipline of the noble ones? It is well, Lord, if the Exalted One would teach the doctrine to me, showing how the six quarters should be worshiped in the discipline of the noble ones.”

(DN 31 iii 181)

After some preliminary discussion, the Buddha replied,

“The following should be looked upon as the six quarters:

The parents should be looked upon as the east, teachers as the south, wife, and children as the west, friends, and associates as the north, servants, and employees as the nadir, ascetics, and *brahmins* as the zenith.” (DN 31 iii 188-9)

Now, although Sigala's practice was motivated by respect for his father, and involved a lot of bowing, the six quarters toward which Sigala was bowing seems to have had no particular significance for him. The physical aspect was present, but the mental attitude alluded him. The Buddha's reply is a primary example of the Buddha giving a non-Buddhist conceptual scheme a Buddhist interpretation, in this case turning that which to Sigala was an empty ritual into a valuable teaching about living harmoniously and responsibly in the world. The Buddha provided an interpretation of each of the six quarters as a distinct social relation that would, or at least should, matter to him, and the Buddha did not stop there, as we will see momentarily.

Deference is an escalation of respect that bestows some degree of authority, or elevated status, on the other. We find a heightened state of deference for the Buddha himself clearly expressed physically in the early sources through full prostrations, sometimes touching the Buddha's feet, by circumambulation while keeping the Buddha on one's right, by covering one's otherwise bare shoulder with one's robe, by sitting on a lower seat than the Buddha, by standing when the Buddha would enter the room, by walking behind the Buddha, or not turning one's back to the Buddha, and by using proper forms of address. In the English language deference is expressed through title: “sir,” “your honor,” “doctor,” etc. Most European languages, but not English, also have variants of a pronoun for “you,” to underscore deference, such as German *du* vs. *Sie*, or French *tu* vs. *vous*. The military similarly salutes according to rank.

Deference harmonizes human relations in two ways: First, it makes us subject to the influence of another. We cannot learn from a teacher, for example, that we do not defer to. Deference opens channels of authority through which wisdom flows. The alternative to such deference in the functioning of human cooperation is the imposition of coercive authority. Second, deference helps us develop humility by knocking the ego out of its accustomed position at center of the universe. It also undercuts the tendency in groups of people to compete for authority. We will have more to say about respect, and deference in the context of refuge in 6.6.

5.4. Social responsibilities

Two other conditions of harmony in the Buddha's thought have to do with how we fulfill our social roles, and what we expect of others concerning their social roles. Where fulfillment and expectation are in accord, harmony generally results. Reading further in the *Sigalovada Sutta*, we find that each of the six quarters actually corresponds to two reciprocal roles, each of which carries five responsibilities, except for six responsibilities accorded to monastics in the last case.

In five ways ... a child should minister to their parents as the east:

- (1) Having supported me I shall support them,
- (2) I shall do their duties,
- (3) I shall keep the family tradition,
- (4) I shall make myself worthy of my inheritance,
- (5) furthermore, I shall offer alms in honor of my departed relatives.

In five ways ... the parents thus ministered to as the east by their children, show their compassion:

- (1) They restrain them from evil,
- (2) they encourage them to do good,
- (3) they train them for a profession,
- (4) they arrange a suitable marriage,
- (5) at the proper time they hand over their inheritance to them.

In these five ways do children minister to their parents as the east, and the parents show their compassion to their children. Thus is the east covered by them, and made safe, and secure.

In five ways ... a pupil should minister to a teacher as the south:

- (1) By rising from his seat in salutation,
- (2) by attending on him,
- (3) by eagerness to learn,
- (4) by personal service,
- (5) by respectful attention while receiving instructions.

In five ways ... do teachers thus ministered to as the south by their pupils, show their compassion:

- (1) They train them in the best discipline,
- (2) they see that they grasp their lessons well,
- (3) they instruct them in the arts, and sciences,
- (4) they introduce them to their friends, and associates,
- (5) they provide for their safety in every quarter.

The teachers thus ministered to as the south by their pupils, show their compassion towards them in these five ways. Thus is the south covered by them, and made safe, and secure.

In five ways ... should a wife as the west be ministered to by a husband:

- (1) By being courteous to her,
- (2) by appreciating her,
- (3) by being faithful to her,
- (4) by handing over authority to her,
- (5) by providing her with adornments.

The wife thus ministered to as the west by her husband shows her compassion to her husband in five ways:

- (1) She performs her duties well,
- (2) she is hospitable to relations, and attendants,
- (3) she is faithful,
- (4) she protects what he brings,
- (5) she is skilled, and industrious in discharging her duties.

In these five ways does the wife show her compassion to her husband who ministers to her as the west. Thus is the west covered by him, and made safe, and secure.

In five ways ... should a clansman minister to his friends, and associates as the north:

- (1) By liberality,

- (2) by courteous speech,
- (3) by being helpful,
- (4) by being impartial,
- (5) by sincerity.

The friends, and associates thus ministered to as the north by a clansman show compassion to him in five ways:

- (1) They protect him when he is heedless,
- (2) they protect his property when he is heedless,
- (3) they become a refuge when he is in danger,
- (4) they do not forsake him in his troubles,
- (5) they show consideration for his family.

The friends, and associates thus ministered to as the north by a clansman show their compassion towards him in these five ways. Thus is the north covered by him, and made safe, and secure.

In five ways should a master minister to his servants, and employees as the nadir:

- (1) By assigning them work according to their ability,
- (2) by supplying them with food, and with wages,
- (3) by tending them in sickness,
- (4) by sharing with them any delicacies,
- (5) by granting them leave at times.

The servants, and employees thus ministered to as the nadir by their master show their compassion to him in five ways:

- (1) They rise before him,
- (2) they go to sleep after him,
- (3) they take only what is given,
- (4) they perform their duties well,
- (5) they uphold his good name, and fame.

The servants, and employees thus ministered to as the nadir show their compassion towards him in these five ways. Thus is the nadir covered by him, and made safe, and secure.

In five ways ... should a householder minister to ascetics, and *brahmins* as the zenith:

- (1) By lovable deeds,
- (2) by lovable words,

- (3) by lovable thoughts,
- (4) by keeping open house to them,
- (5) by supplying their material needs.

The ascetics, and *brahmins* thus ministered to as the zenith by a householder show their compassion towards him in six ways:

- (1) They restrain him from evil,
- (2) they persuade him to do good,
- (3) they love him with a kind heart,
- (4) they let him hear what he has not heard,
- (5) they clarify what he has already heard,
- (6) they point out the path to a heavenly state.

In these six ways do ascetics, and *brahmins* show their compassion towards a householder who ministers to them as the zenith. Thus is the zenith covered by him, and made safe, and secure.” (DN 31 iii 188-91)

This *Sigovada Sutta* is often considered to be to the householder as the *Vinaya* is to the monastic. It is the householder *Vinaya*.

We can note a few important qualities of this system of responsibilities. First, it is balanced, allocating more-or-less equal responsibilities to each side of each reciprocal relation. In this way, it is not exploitive as long as all adhere to their own responsibilities. I think the point is that if the reciprocal relation is out of balance, as when employees or wives are simply treated as property, harmony suffers. Second, this itemization focuses on responsibilities, not on rights. A common modern tendency is to see the social landscape in terms of *my* rights but *their* responsibilities. Finally, although the specifics might require some adaptation to modern cultural roles, this allocation of responsibilities still applies remarkably well, and very critically, to our modern circumstances.

5.5. The ideal society

An important conditioning factor in communal harmony or disharmony that goes beyond individual interactions, and relations is certainly governance, or the institutional structures of the society. This also was not beyond the Buddha's purview, for the Buddha was the architect of a community, the *Saṅgha* of monks and nuns, regulated by his monastic code, the *Vinaya*. It is instructive to see what kinds of choices the Buddha made to form this ideal society writ small.

In Gotama's time, the Gangetic plain encompassed a number of small kingdoms and republics. The two dominant kingdoms of the region were Magadha and Kosala. The republics were largely lined up along the northern edge of the Gangetic plain in the foothills of the Himalayan mountains, which were coming under increasing dominance of the kingdoms. The westernmost of these was the Sakyan Republic where the Bodhisatta grew up. These republics were generally governed by an unelected assembly of elders from the *khattiya*, or warrior/administrative caste. It is likely that the Buddha, as a *khattiya*, was trained in matters of governance. This was also a patriarchal society that would become more patriarchal with time, such that spiritual practice and education were widely (though not entirely) considered masculine pursuits, and women were generally subject in all stages of life to masculine authority.

Although there were ascetics in India before the Buddha, "... among all of the bodies of renouncers it was only the Buddhists who invented monastic life,"⁴ that is, who provided an organized institution capable of sustaining its practice, and teachings. The Buddha never attempted to organize the householder community in this way, except indirectly by putting the monastic community in their midst, and letting them sort out what to do with it. The monastic *Saṅgha* is a multi-functional institution, defined in the *Vinaya* with a mission statement, a code of conduct, rules of governance, guidelines for handling grievances, and many other features.

Some of the notable hallmarks of the *Saṅgha*, as conceived by the Buddha, are as follows: The *Saṅgha* observes no class distinctions, and an exemplary level of gender equality.⁵ It is regulated in a way to avoid conflicts and maintain harmony, and observes procedures to negotiate disagreements should these arise. It rules by consensus of all monastics in a *local* community, and, as such, is only minimally hierarchical. For instance, there is no system of pope, and bishops, so that, although monastics live under the code of the *Vinaya*, they are not subject to any centralized authority. Serious transgressions of the monastic code entail no corporal punishments, but rather, for the most part, minor sanctions, the greatest of which is expulsion from the local community. Rectifying transgressions is much dependent on acknowledgment of guilt. Committing one of the most serious offenses, for instance killing another person, is simply *by definition* no longer to be a monastic; if one hides the offense, one is impersonating a monastic.

Aside from very limited coercive control over each other, monastics have no coercive power whatever over householders. There is, for instance, nothing like excommunication. Their authority derives entirely from the respect they receive as teachers and as role models for those committed to the *Dhammic* life. In fact, householders have significant coercive power over the *Saṅgha*,

since displeased householders can at any time withdraw the support on which the *Saṅgha* depends on a daily basis.

The constitution of the *Saṅgha* embodies so many social ideals that it might seem rather pie-in-the sky. Nonetheless, the *Saṅgha* has outlived every other contemporaneous institution, and almost every one that has arisen since. It has seen great empires come and go, and yet persists, regulated by the same monastic code (*Vinaya*) to this day. This is evidence that the Buddha brought to bear a profound and practical comprehension of the mechanisms of human society—alongside his understanding of the human mind—as he carefully engineered the monastic *Saṅgha*. He created something unprecedented, something that just keeps going.

The Buddha did not actively champion the similar reformation of civil society, but did have a bit to say about responsibilities of kings toward their subjects, sometimes describing the *righteous*, or *wheel-turning king* as a kind of ideal. For instance, he recommended that such a king seek ethical guidance from wise monastics,

Whatever ascetics and *brahmins* in your kingdom have renounced the life of sensual infatuation, and are devoted to forbearance and gentleness, each one taming himself, each one calming himself, and each one striving for the end of craving, from time to time you should go to them, and consult them as to what is wholesome, and what is unwholesome, what is blameworthy, and what is blameless, what is to be followed, and what is not to be followed, and what action will in the long run lead to harm, and sorrow, and what to welfare, and happiness. Having listened to them, you should avoid wrong, and do what is good. (DN 26 iii 61)

This is quite a bit different than depending on corporate lobbyists for advice. This passage is significant in view of the common understanding that monastics should not get involved in political, or social matters, and are perhaps ill-equipped to do so. It clearly opens a nonpartisan role for them as ethical advisors.

5.6. The practice of harmony

The skill of harmonizing with others is developed on top of the skills of generosity, harmlessness, and purity. It adds to these the specialized skill of dealing with the complexities of human cooperation and human institutions. It

also adds to these a handle on some of your most deeply rutted inclinations, for we humans are vulnerable to strong self-serving impulses, and have a particularly pronounced capacity for harshness toward our fellow humans.

As you practice harmony you may often be frustrated with what should be easy. Harmony is something shared by people in relationship, or in community, yet you exercise some degree of control over only one side of the relationship, and over one agent in the dynamics of a community. The best you can do is to uphold, in your practice and from your side, the conditions conducive to harmony, but you must leave the rest up to others, who may have entirely different understandings, and less pure intentions than your own. Recall that your practice and its fruits are your own. That way you at least do not contribute to the disharmony when it arises in spite of your best intentions, and you may even set a good example for others.

For instance, a knotty case arises when the behavior of others is unacceptable, given how resistant people are to being corrected. Unless this is done with great skill, a resolution risks still greater disharmony. There are ways, however, in which you can influence others in the direction of greater harmony. For one thing, when others begin to realize that you consistently refuse to participate in the kinds of social behaviors that precipitate disharmony—such as responding to insult with insult—you become a kind of refuge for them from such behavior, a safe place in which they do not have to be so defensive, and soon they might begin to emulate your behaviors. You may become a role model, sometimes of significant influence.

Also, within any culture certain other people enjoy a degree of authority in relationship to others as wise advisors, or teachers, either by role, or by reputation. In the *Sigovada Sutta*, parents, teachers, ascetics and *brahmins* may enjoy this status. Granting deference to another is an act of trust, or faith that opens you up to their influence, making of them a role model, sometimes of significant influence. The Buddha, to take the primary example, certainly received that degree of deference from his thousands of disciples, and thereby gained a free hand to admonish many others. It is only through granting this level of respect or trust to the wise that the Buddhist movement (*sāsana*) has grown. Likewise monastics traditionally enjoy this authority born of deference in Buddhist cultures.

As you interact with others, a range of unskillful thoughts will likely come up, involving anger, resentment, envy, arrogance, vanity, personal insult, conceit, and so on (unless you happen to be an *arahant*). In the practice of purification, you gradually let go of your tendency toward such thoughts. Your first line of defense is not to act bodily or verbally on the basis of such thoughts as they

continue to arise, but instead to remain physically and verbally harmless, wherever the mind might be pulling you. If you can do this you are already, to a degree, accomplished in not contributing to disharmony. Precepts about speech in particular—not speaking falsely, not speaking harshly, not speaking divisively, and not speaking frivolously—will take you far in this direction.

One of the most dangerous ways you can act on the basis of such thoughts is through divisive speech. It is helpful to guard against this with a further rule of thumb: Do not speak ill of others at all. There will be cases in which this rule of thumb cannot be sustained, for instance, where you need to warn others, out of compassion, of the sailor of dubious intent around the corner who is swigging rum, swearing, and brandishing a cutlass. But consider that speaking ill of others is generally a huge responsibility:

First, in the situation where it is likely to come up, you may well be speaking falsely, or repeating rumors; if there is personal anger involved, there will almost certainly be some degree of misperception on your part, and therefore bias in what you communicate.

Second, the consequences of your speech might easily get out of hand, even if you are speaking truthfully. Even if your intentions are relatively pure, how about the intentions of those to whom you speak who are likely to repeat what you say to others, and so forth? Furthermore, if you are talking with someone who lacks familiarity with the person, or group of which you speak ill, what is said is likely to become their dominant impression for a long time to come. The hearer of such disparagement may then repeat it much less skillfully than you have, and with quite impure intentions.

Third, it is difficult to maintain kindness in a mob. Never take sides in interpersonal disputes, even if you are friends with one party; don't become part of an emotionally charged coalition set in opposition to some other person, or group.

It is advisable to become open to, familiar with, and demonstrative of Buddhist gestures of respect and etiquette. Be aware that Buddhist etiquette has evolved into somewhat different forms through different Asian cultures. It is also wise to become adept in non-Buddhist standards of etiquette of the prevailing culture. Although these are generally different from those found in most Buddhist communities, they generally serve much the same function.

1. Bodhi (2016) is a very valuable overview of the early teachings on social and communal harmony.

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2. There is a kind of reciprocation in the personal experience of *kammic* results, but this is not reciprocation between agents, rather a personal balancing out. In fact, when we keep karma and its results in mind, we are likely to be less concerned with reciprocation between agents.
 3. ... as Thanissaro (2001b) points out.
 4. Gombrich (2006, p. 19).
 5. See Cintita (2012) on the issue of gender equality in Early Buddhism.

6. Refuge

The one who has gone for refuge to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and his Saṅgha, penetrates with transcendental wisdom the four noble truths: suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the noble eightfold path leading to the cessation of suffering. (Dpd 190-1)

Refuge (saraṇa) is the trust in, and wholehearted devotion to the three sources of Buddhist wisdom: the Buddha, the *Dhamma*, and the *Saṅgha*, known as the three refuges (*ti-saraṇa*), or as the triple gem (*ti-ratana*). With refuge we take up the Buddha way wholeheartedly as a foundation for, or as the very shape of, our lives, devote ourselves to the practice of *Dhamma*, and begin to make rapid progress toward the perfection of character.

The discussion of this chapter fulfills the next step of the Buddha's gradual instruction, the last step in what we have classified as the Buddhist life, and the step that puts us at the trail head of the Buddhist path. Recall that the gradual instruction consists of the following steps:

(Buddhist Life)

- Generosity.
- Precepts.
- Heavens.
- The drawbacks, degradation, and corruption of sensual passions.
- The rewards of renunciation.
- On the basis of the understanding, and pursuit of the foregoing, “a ready mind, a softened mind, an unbiased mind, an elated mind, and trusting mind,” a precondition for the last step.

(Buddhist Path)

- The four noble truths.

Refuge is represented here by the phrase “a mind ready, softened, unbiased, elated, and trusting.” Refuge might have been sparked earlier than it is here

represented, or it it might have grown as we tested the waters of the Buddhist life, such that the *Dhamma* has had a chance to have established a track record and to have earned the practitioner's trust. In any case, it is required to embark fully on the Buddhist path.

6.1. Faith

Refuge is best described as the core of the Buddhist version of *faith* (*saddha*). Before some modern readers shelve this book right before the entrance into the higher teachings, I should assure you that Buddhist faith here is quite different from what you might think, and quite distinct from “blind faith.” However, it is also not entirely a product of human rationality either (which is for the most part illusory in any case). *Saddha* is sometimes translated as ‘trust,’ or ‘conviction.’ I prefer ‘faith,’ because it is fundamentally driven by intuition and emotion.

In fact, faith, in the intended sense, belongs to the nuts and bolts of human cognition, and it is not at all unique to religion. We live in a relentlessly uncertain world, and yet we are active agents, and therefore must make decisions, but virtually always in the absence of certitude. I always like to say,

Faith is that which bridges the gap between the little we actually know, and the plenty we would need to know in order to act with certainty.

Although we have no fully rational choice about where we place our faith, we can be, to a degree, discerning about *who*, or *what* to trust. For instance, if a bridge creaks, and groans as we pass over it the first time, we might decide to entrust our safety to another bridge the next time. But, even with discernment, in the end we necessarily make what feels like a jump, big, or little, into the unknown,

“[Gulp] Well, here goes!”

In this way we have placed our faith, for better or worse, in our parents, in our teachers, in our accountant, in TV pundits, in our dentist, in our national leaders (once upon a time), or in our GPS system.

Life-altering decisions generally arise from a sense of urgency and demand a leap of faith, and therefore enormous courage; they are well beyond the reach of the timid, or of the deniers who cling fearfully to their certitude. This is the courage of the great explorers, of the hippies of yore on quest in India with nothing but a backpack, and more commonly of the betrothed, or of the career bound, stirred either by deep longing, or by desperation. Establishing

ourselves on the path toward awakening will shake our life to the core, and this will demand particularly courageous faith.

For adults Buddhism may represent a fresh perspective, but our minds may be unready, closed, or biased because of our presuppositions. Presuppositions here are tacit assumptions, often instilled at a young age before our faculty of discrimination has fully developed, or are so widely accepted in our society that we too have accepted them without ever having examined or questioned them. They are, in fact, a kind of calcified, unquestioned blind faith. Such presuppositions are shaped by, but not limited to, whatever “faith” we are raised in, including for the Buddhist born. Many of us have learned at an early age likewise to place faith in some version (sometimes a Victorian era understanding) of science. We call this “scientism.”

Some tacit and generally unexamined assumptions that many of us share include the following: “All reality is physical, that is, matter and energy in space and time, such that all mind or consciousness is reducible to physical phenomena, particularly to neurological processes in the brain. There is an objective reality that exists prior to human observation, and humans are capable of understanding that reality. There are good people and evil people in the world, and evil people must be fought, and defeated decisively. They deserve no sympathy. Spirituality arises along with creativity from within an inner core with which each of us is endowed, but which is commonly suppressed by social conventions, and institutions.”

Tacit and unexamined assumptions like these, which may, or may not be wrong, are generally attributed to “common sense,” since we are generally unaware of any other source for them. In fact, many of them common in Western culture arose with Protestant Christianity, with the European Enlightenment, or with European Romanticism, and have simply been carried along in our culture ever since.¹ Others have been enforced by messages implicit in the many war movies, adventure movies, thrillers, romances, and news stories we’ve watched. In this modern age we are mired in unwholesome faith; the marketing industry manufactures faith relentlessly in the craziest things. Unfortunately, faith in our presuppositions hinders our receptivity to fresh perspectives, even while we imagine we are exercising powers of rationality and free-thinking. This is why we require “a ready mind, a softened mind, an unbiased mind, an elated mind, and trusting mind.” In this way we let the Buddha speak for himself. Buddhist faith does not require the end of discernment. In fact, it is tempered by questioning. The Buddha himself was a radical skeptic.

6.2. The triple gem

Going for refuge (sarana-gamana) to the *Buddha*, to the *Dhamma*, and to the *Saṅgha* acknowledges the course of Buddhist wisdom from its original source to its realization in our present-day practice: from the Awakened One, to the what he taught, and though the hundred generations of noble Buddhist adepts who have carried the Buddha's understanding forward into our own time.

Refuge in the triple gem is essential, because Buddhist understanding and practice requires wholehearted dedication. Some initial degree of trust and enthusiasm in the Buddha's wisdom is what first turns our heads toward exploring the Buddha way. Devotion allows us to settle into the practice comfortably but resolutely as a matter of daily routine, and without the frustration of daily striving for quick results. Results come profoundly but slowly, and especially slowly if we continuously strive for them. Instead, we simply devote ourselves to continual practice, from which wholeheartedness makes our minds softened, unbiased, and receptive to what Buddhism taught, and ready to put the teachings into practice.

Buddhism includes many sophisticated understandings and refined practices that take time and effort to engage in, grasp, and internalize. As we gain some direct experience of what it is the Buddha realized, what it is the Buddha taught, and what it is the *Saṅgha* has upheld, we gain more discernment about where the practice is leading us. With increasing discernment, our trust, devotion, and wholeheartedness deepen.

We first encounter Buddhism in different ways. Most of those born into Buddhist cultures, and families are taught refuge in the triple gem from infancy, before they possess the gift of discernment. Similarly, we modern people have often been taught trust in science or free enterprise from a young age, but then we come to Buddhism typically at a more discerning age. Many of us gain an initial degree of interest through encounters with, or images of Buddhists and their artifacts—people and things that often exhibit profound peace and kindness—or through the brilliance that shines through the Buddha's teachings, long before we grasp more than a hint of its full import.

We need a small degree of faith to begin receiving instruction and taking up practice in the first place, with no certitude about where it might lead. Acquiring and beginning to read this book is an act of faith. That initial faith will grow progressively more discerning, and acquire more depth, as we repeatedly have the opportunity to check things out in our own experience. By the time our minds become “ready, softened, unbiased, elated, and trusting,” there is a lot of experience behind our discernment. There is actually an

advantage in encountering Buddhism at a discerning age. It is on the basis of this that we are ready to set out boldly and wholeheartedly on the higher path of practice.

The trust we place in the triple gem often arises from a sense of urgency which in Pali is called *saṃvega*, not easily translated, but a kind of alarm at the realization of the full nature and depth of the human condition (AN 5.77-80). It is said in later tradition that the Bodhisatta experienced *saṃvega* when he learned, to his dismay, of sickness, of old age, and of death, and in response began his quest. *Samvega* arises when we lose our capacity for denial. The *Bodhisatta* then recognized, at the sight of a wandering ascetic, an option that gave rise to the bold resolution to address his despair. It is said that he then experienced the sense of calm relief associated with *pasanna*, ‘a gladdened and trusting mind,’ and the antidote to the distress of *saṃvega*.

Underlying the metaphors of both refuge and gem is protection, or safety. A refuge at the Buddha's time was understood as the protection provided by a mentor, patron, or benefactor in return for a vow of allegiance.² Gems, similarly, were generally believed to have special protective properties. Refuge in the triple gem represents, particularly for those not born Buddhist, the resolve to entrust oneself to a way of life, understanding and practice that will at first have all the uncertainty and mystery that virgin territory has to the explorer or castaway, or that a deep and dark cave has to the spelunker. But a solid plan of action will be a refuge to relieve the panic of uncertainty.

6.3. Refuge in the Buddha

Most religions venerate some personality. Buddhism is striking in that the object of veneration is occupied primarily by a now deceased human being rather than a deity, or supernatural being, albeit a person who attained some remarkable qualities, and achievements in his lifetime. We already tend to venerate people with remarkable qualities, for instance, our favorite geniuses like Einstein or Mozart, or compassionate agents of change like Gandhi, or King, sometimes hanging their pictures on our walls as reminders of what they represent. The Buddha's most remarkable quality is his awakening, such that trust in the reality of his awakening is an important aspect of refuge as one embarks on the path. The wisdom and virtue of the Buddha, as well as his skill as a teacher, are included in the well-known recollection of the Buddha,

The *Bhagavā* is an *arahant*, perfectly awakened, accomplished in true knowledge, and conduct, illustrious, knower of the world, unsurpassed trainer of persons to be tamed, teacher of gods and

humans, the Buddha, the *Bhagavā*. (AN 11.11)

Bhagavā here is an epithet for the Buddha, alongside *Tathāgata*, that we learned in 1.2 translates as ‘the Illustrious One.’ Also, *arahant* translates as ‘worthy one’ in reference to anyone who has attained the Buddha’s awakening.

In 5.3 we discussed the ways in which the Buddha was venerated in his lifetime, through prostrations, circumambulation, covering one’s otherwise bare shoulder, sitting in a lower seat, standing upon the Buddha’s arrival, not turning one’s back on the Buddha, and walking behind the Buddha. Such physical practices of respect, along with periodic recollection of the Buddha, actually help to open ourselves to the influence of the Buddha as a part of developing faith, or trust. The text above continues,

When a noble disciple recollects the *Tathāgata*, on the occasion his mind is not obsessed by lust, aversion, or delusion; on that occasion his mind is simply straight, based on the *Tathāgata*. A noble disciple whose mind is straight gains inspiration in the meaning, gains inspiration in the *Dhamma*, gains joy connected with the *Dhamma*. (AN 11.11)

After the Buddha’s death devotees would venerate symbols of the Buddha as well: *stupas*, bodhi trees, representations such as footprints of the Buddha, and eventually Buddha statues.³ It is important to note that these practices are not worship, in the sense of appealing for help from the object of veneration. Rather their function is within the mind of the devotee in whom refuge is thereby encouraged. Even the practice of offering such things as food, incense, and water to a Buddha image—found in almost all current schools of Buddhism—is similarly an *enactment*, integrating many of the same ancient expressions of veneration, to experience a sense of intimacy with the Buddha. Ritual has no special efficacy in early Buddhism—that is left to the brahmins—beyond the wholesome *kammic* effects of ritual on the human mind.

6.4. Refuge in the *Dhamma*

The formula for recollecting the qualities of *Dhamma* is as follows,

The Dhamma is well expounded by the *Bhagavā*, directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, applicable, to be personally experienced by the wise. (AN 11.11)

Most religions have some form of doctrine, or belief system, generally provid-

ing a metaphysics, an account of the origin of the world, of mankind, or of a particular tribe, and so on. The *Dhamma* stands out in its enormous sophistication (particularly when we get to the path in the second half of this book), and its emphasis on mind rather than on external forces. It deals with the human dilemma, existential crisis, anguish, suffering, dissatisfaction, delusion, harmfulness, meaninglessness, and the rest, as *human* problems with *human* causes that arise in *human* minds, and as problems that have *human* solutions. The *Dhamma* provides a program whereby the mind is tuned, honed, sharpened, tempered, straightened, turned, and distilled into an instrument of virtue, and wisdom. The *Dhamma* itself is among the greatest products of the human mind, skillfully articulated by the Buddha. It is on the basis of faith in the triple gem that we begin to study, practice, develop, and gain insight through the practice of *Dhamma*. As the Buddha states,

... when someone going for refuge to the Buddha, *Dhamma*, and *Saṅgha* sees, with right insight, the four noble truths: suffering, the arising of suffering, the overcoming of suffering, and the eightfold path leading to the ending of suffering, then this is the secure refuge, this is the supreme refuge. By going to such a refuge one is released from all suffering. (Dpd 190-192)

6.4.1. *Dhamma* is practical. The *Dhamma* also stands out in its parsimony. The Buddha characteristically took care not to teach more than was necessary. As a result, he carefully avoided useless speculation, or expression of views on topics irrelevant to the understanding or practice of the *Dhamma*. This method is made clear in the famous handful-of-leaves simile,

What do you think, monks? Which are the more numerous, the few leaves I have here in my hand, or those up in the trees of the grove?"

"Lord, the *Bhagavā* is holding only a few leaves: those up in the trees are far more numerous."

"In the same way, monks, there are many more things that I have found out, but not revealed to you. What I have revealed to you is only a little., and why, monks, have I not revealed it? Because, monks, it is not related to the goal, it is not fundamental to the holy life, does not conduce to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, tranquility, higher knowledge, awakening, nor *nibbāna*. That is why I have not revealed it." (SN 56.31)

Recall that the doctrine of the Buddha is only useful insofar as it promotes skillful practice. The resulting agnosticism with regard to many religious

views and folk beliefs gives Buddhism its characteristic tolerance that allows it to blend easily with the presuppositions of various cultures. For instance, whether one believes in tree spirits or in the flying spaghetti monster doesn't really matter, as long as these beliefs are compatible with virtue, and practical wisdom, and do not obstruct the supporting faculties. On the other hand, the Buddha did not hesitate to criticize views that detract from spiritual development, such as *annihilationism* and *eternalism*. The first is the widely held view that nothing remains, including our *kammic* effects, after the death of the body. Annihilationism limits our willingness to take responsibility for the future. The second, opposing view is that some essence (our soul) survives death. Eternalism promotes obsession. The middle way that the Buddha advocated led between these views.

6.4.2. *Dhamma* is observable. The *Dhamma* also stands out in its empirical quality, as the formula for recollecting the *Dhamma* indicates. The *Dhamma* points *almost entirely* to what can be verified in our direct experience. Many cautious people in the West are inspired to trust the *Dhamma* in the first place upon learning of this refreshing see-for-yourself quality of the *Dhamma*. However, some caution is in order, lest one think this entails that we should trust our own experience above all else. In fact, for the Buddha the typical “*uninstructed worldling*” (most of us) is actually astonishingly deluded. Most of us get hopelessly confused in trying to see, much less interpret, our own experience, and trying to verify the *Dhamma* against those experiences is that much more difficult. The *Kālāma Sutta* warns us *not* to see certainty in one's own thinking, or in much of anything else:

Come, Kālāmas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing, nor upon tradition, nor upon repetition, nor upon what is in a scripture, nor as a result of thought, nor upon an axiom, nor upon careful reasoning, nor out of delight in speculation, nor upon another's seeming ability, nor upon the thought, “The monk is our venerable teacher.” Kālāmas, when you yourselves know: “These things are good, these things are not blamable, these things are praised by the wise, undertaken as a whole these things lead to benefit, and happiness,” then enter on, and abide in them. (AN 3.65)

The formula for recollecting the *Dhamma* suggests that there is a degree of effort in verifying the *Dhamma* against experience, since the *Dhamma* is “personally experienced by the wise,” not necessarily by the worldling. The Buddha invites us “to come and see” (*ehi-passiko*) in the recollection of the *Dhamma*, but when he says “Come,” he is shouting down to us flatlanders

from the mountaintop. To arrive at his vantage point we need to scramble up hills, struggle through brambles, and ford creeks. When the Buddha says “See,” we need to focus our eyes intently in the right direction to barely make out what the Buddha sees with great clarity of vision.

6.4.3. *Dhamma* is to be taken seriously. In order to be willing to do all of this we have to establish from the beginning trust that the Buddha knew what he was talking about. This is refuge. What else would induce us to make the difficult climb up the mountain? Investigation, and personal verification are necessary parts of following the *Dhammic* path, but they take time and effort before we can say, “I have come, and now I see.” Until then refuge is essential. “Come” is based on faith, and “see” is the eventual verification in our own experience.

For instance, the Buddha taught that craving is the origin of suffering (the second noble truth). At first this may seem, at least to some, to be an abstract proposition which we must ponder, and try our darnedest to match up with observation. The most likely hasty outcome is to dismiss this proposition as simply mistaken. It seems pretty clear to us, for instance, that buying that snazzy shirt we so want would make us exceedingly dashing, and that that would lead to improved prospects for romance, and other forms of social, and perhaps even business success. Therefore, we conclude, “Craving clearly leads not to suffering, but to happiness!”

However, refuge entails instead that we decide to trust the *Dhamma* before we draw naive, or premature conclusions from our own experiences. Eventually, perhaps after years of investigation on and off the cushion, we might discover that the second noble truth is not an abstraction at all; it is something that bites us on the nose over and over all day every day. It is helpful at this point to review the discussion of the fruits of *kamma* in 3.3 and 4.3. We begin to notice that as soon as craving comes up the suffering is right behind. In fact, as soon as we feel we need that snazzy shirt there is stress and anxiety, unmistakably. We might discover we have been living in a world of incessant suffering, a world aflame, all along without noticing it.

In brief, faith (how we deal with uncertainty) bears a close relationship to wisdom (what we see for ourselves). One becomes the other like this:

Faith/trust ⇒ Practice ⇒ Wisdom

6.4.4. *Dhamma* is to be held loosely. The *Dhamma* also stands out in how loosely it is held. When we have *faith* in the *Dhamma*, this does not mean that we *believe* the *Dhamma*, rather that we *accept* it in the sense that we at least

take it seriously as a working assumption. In fact, notice that in the passage from the *Kālāma Sutta* as referenced above the ultimate criterion for evaluating a teaching is ethical, or practical; it depends on whether practice on the basis of the teaching is of *benefit*. In the *Caṅki Sutta* we learn that anything accepted through faith, approval, oral tradition, reasoning, or pondering may, or may not, turn out to be true. At this the young brahmin Caṅki asks how, then, truth is to be “preserved,”

If one has faith, his statement, “This is my faith,” preserves the truth. But he doesn't yet come to the definite conclusion that “Only this is true; anything else is worthless.” To this extent, Bharadvaja, there is the preservation of the truth. To this extent one preserves the truth. I describe this as the preservation of the truth. But it is not yet a discovery of the truth.

If one approves of something ...

If one follows an oral tradition ...

If one has reasoned something out by analogy ...

If one has views he has pondered out ... (MN 95 ii 171)

In short, nothing is to be believed unconditionally, and so blind faith does not arise under the Buddha's instructions. The Buddha then shows how truth is *discovered*, and then finally *realized*, such that a proper teaching first accepted as a *working assumption* might eventually lead to something experienced directly—that is, be known for oneself—with wisdom, as one's practice progresses.

This passage is a remarkable illustration of the subtle distinctions the Buddha makes in the sphere of faith, belief, truth, and direct experience. We accept no proposition as conclusive, but rather keep its provisional nature in mind. Views are no more than working assumptions. Nonetheless, some provisional assumptions should be accepted, and others not. The criterion is in terms of human benefit, including what we learn from them, not in terms of absolute truth. The Buddha gives us an example;

There are some contemplatives and *brahmins* who hold this doctrine, hold this view: “There is nothing given, nothing offered, nothing sacrificed. There is no fruit, or result of good, or bad actions. There is no this world, no next world, no mother, no father, no spontaneously reborn beings; no *brahmins*, or contemplatives who, faring rightly, and practicing rightly, proclaim this world, and the next after having directly known, and realized it for themselves.” (MN 60 i 401)

These views deny many of the teachings on Buddhist life that we have

entertained so far. He then points out how denying these views are likely to condition the behavior of such contemplatives and *brahmins* in an adverse way:

It can be expected that ... they will adopt, and practice these three unskillful activities: bad bodily conduct, bad verbal conduct, bad mental conduct. Why is that? Because those venerable contemplatives and *brahmins* do not see, in unskillful activities, the drawbacks, the degradation, and the defilement; nor in skillful activities the benefit of renunciation, as cleansing. (MN 60 i 402)

In short, these views deny provisional working assumptions that otherwise provide a beneficial way of framing our practice to keep it on the right track. Here is the kicker: people of these skeptical views cannot win, whether, or not their views turn out to be true in the end,

Assume there is no other world, regardless of the true statement of those venerable contemplatives and *brahmins*. This good person is still criticized in the here and now by the observant as a person of bad habits, and wrong views: one who holds to a doctrine of non-existence. If there really is a next world, then this venerable person has made a bad throw twice: in that he is criticized by the observant here and now, and in that with the breakup of the body, after death he will reappear in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell. Thus this in-controvertable teaching, when poorly grasped, and poorly adopted by him, covers one side. He gives up the skillful option. (MN 60 i 403)

Fundamentally, this describes a purely pragmatic basis for accepting one of two alternative theses on the basis of a kind of cost-benefit analysis, or a means of covering one's bets, that by itself justifies its acceptance as a working assumption. The Buddha makes a similar argument in the *Kālāma Sutta* (AN 3.65) with regard to realizing the fruits of *kamma* in the next life. It is clear that he recommends that *kamma* and rebirth be accepted as working assumptions by the skeptical. Ultimate truth is beside the point. A similar argument can be made for the modern benefit of accepting the working assumption that money, private property, or a football game is real, even though we know that they are social constructs: they are made up, but useful.

6.4.5. Practicing refuge in Dhamma. So far we've had a lot to say about the

qualities of the *Dhamma* but little about the practice of refuge in the *Dhamma*. Perhaps the most thorough way to venerate the *Dhamma* is to put it into practice, and, over time, repeatedly verify aspects of the *Dhamma* in our own experience, for these teachings are profound, and wise. As its track record becomes established, our trust will naturally grow, and, with that, the depth of our practice, and accordingly the rate of continued verification in direct experience. Additionally, memorization of scriptures is perhaps the most ancient way of venerating the *Dhamma*. Physical books did not exist in the early Buddhist period, but treating these with great care alongside memorization became a natural part of practice in later traditions.

6.5. Refuge in the *Saṅgha*

The formula for recollecting the *Saṅgha* is as follows,

The *Saṅgha* of the *Bhagavā*'s disciples is practicing the good way, practicing the straight way, practicing the true way, practicing the proper way; that is, the four pairs of persons, the eight types of individuals. This *Saṅgha* of the *Bhagavā*'s disciples is worthy of gifts, worthy of hospitality, worthy of offerings, worthy of reverential salutations, the unsurpassed field of merit for the world. (AN 11.11)

The *Saṅgha* is almost always identified in the early texts with the ascetic community (*bhikkhu-saṅgha*) of fully ordained monks and nuns, who live according to the standards of the monastic code (*Vinaya*), in which they are made responsible for preserving the integrity of *Dhamma* for future generations, and for teaching it for the current one. This *Saṅgha* easily recognizable by its robes, bald heads, and daily alms rounds, during which they are “worthy of gifts, worthy of hospitality, worthy of offerings.” Refuge in the *Saṅgha* is trust in the living representatives of the Buddha, those who understand, embody, impart, and maintain *Dhamma*. They, like the Buddha, and *Dhamma*, are sources of Buddhist wisdom, worthy of reverence.

Nonetheless, there is, strictly speaking, a second definition of *Saṅgha* in the early texts, whose membership is determined by attainments on the path to awakening. This is the *noble Saṅgha* represented by the “four pairs of persons” in the *Saṅgha* recollection above: *stream-enterers*, *once-returners*, *non-returners*, and *arahants*, representing four progressive stages of awakening. For each of these stages we further distinguish between the *path*, and the *fruit*, yielding “eight types of individuals.” The initial attainment of stream-entry (discussed in 7.3) qualifies one to take full possession of the

noble eightfold path. The “stream” here refers to the path. Attainment of stream entry—thereby becoming a noble one—is the pivotal point at which one living the Buddhist life fully enters the Buddhist path.

Although the two *saṅgha* largely overlap, one clearly does not become a stream-enterer simply by ordaining as a monk or nun, and one clearly *can* become a stream-enterer as a devout but unordained householder. However, the Buddha routinely equates the two, as in the passage above. It is if he insists that monastics practice *post haste* to become noble ones, if they haven’t done so already, and that noble ones ordain and become monastics as the optimal support for their progress, if they haven’t done so already.

The point of refuge in the *Saṅgha* is to establish a deferential and ongoing relationship to the living source of Buddhist wisdom. This might be implemented individually by establishing a relationship to a teacher. However, early Buddhism did not articulate the role of teachers per se, apart from the Buddha himself, but instead extolled the *admirable friend* (*kalyāṇa mitta*), a wise person who can perhaps provide teachings, but also from whom we can learn by emulating their conduct, and who provides inspiration in the *Dhamma* overall. In general, those of higher attainment or spiritual progress are those from whom we are likely to learn the most. The importance of the admirable friend is expressed in this curious but well-known passage,

As he was seated to one side, Ven. Ānanda said to the *Bhagavā*,
 “This is half of the holy life, lord: having admirable people as friends, companions, and colleagues.”

“Don’t say that, Ānanda. Don’t say that. Having admirable people as friends, companions, and colleagues is actually the *whole* of the holy life. When a monk has admirable people as friends, companions, and colleagues, he can be expected to develop, and pursue the noble eightfold path.” (SN 45.2)

Admirable friends put us at the trail-head of the path. The *Saṅgha* itself is a source of admirable friends for worldlings, for these are where we are likely to find people advanced, or even perfected in virtue, and in understanding, virtuous, apt, and wise. These tend to be the contemporary teachers and protectors of the *Dhamma*. Members of the *Saṅgha* themselves are expected to seek out admiral friends ideally of even higher attainment.

The monastic *Saṅgha* is the natural home of the noble ones, and the noble *Saṅgha* arises under the influence of the monastic *Saṅgha*. We have seen that the monastic *Saṅgha* provides an ideal context for Buddhist practice by defining the life most conducive to upholding Buddhist principles, a life so barren

of any opportunity for personal advantage that a self can scarcely find anything to do, though personal needs might continue for a time to haunt the mind. Into this life flow wisdom and compassion that, liberated from the tyranny of personal neediness, burst here and there into the progressive stages of awakening. As an ascetic renunciate community, monks and nuns depend completely on material support from the householder community. Not only does this afford the monastic the leisure of practice, study, and accomplishing good, but it insulates the monastic from the ups and downs of the contingencies related to the competitiveness of the common world.

In this way the monastic *Saṅgha*, as long as it follows the discipline scrupulously, tends to produce noble ones of progressively higher attainment from among its ranks. The flourishing of the monastic *Saṅgha* in this way ensures the flourishing of the noble *Saṅgha* as well. The Buddha stated that,

... if the monastics should live the life to perfection, the world should not lack for *arahants*. (DN 16)

The world will even less lack for noble ones still aspiring to become *arahants*. The monastic *Saṅgha* is therefore both training ground and dwelling place for the noble *Saṅgha*, much like a university is both training ground and dwelling place for scholars.

Noble ones, in turn, ennoble the general Buddhist community. Just as it benefits us to have artists, good plumbers, and those educated in the humanities among us, it ennobles us to have saints, and sages, adepts, and *arahants* in our midst, the more the better. These noble ones, disciples of the Buddha who root their lives entirely in the *Dhamma*, and are an inspiration and a resource for us all, constitute an effective civilizing force. Where there are noble ones, faith will be inspired, for they display firsthand the peace and happiness, wisdom and compassion that result from complete immersion in the Buddhist life. The noble ones are close at hand: they teach, they inspire with their deportment, their good works, and their knowledge. They inspire self-reflection concerning one's own life, and tend to dispel *samsāric* tendencies. They keep the flame of the Buddha's teaching alive.

It is through these admirable friends that the meaning of the Buddha's life and awakening is revealed, and through these admirable friends that the highly sophisticated teachings of the *Dhamma* are clarified step by step to lead the instructing toward, and along the path. Keeping the flame of the *Dhamma* burning bright is critical for the perpetuation of the teachings in their full integrity: because those teachings are so subtle, and sophisticated, they are easily misinterpreted and corrupted if they are not put into practice and

experienced by the noble ones among us.

Many of the same physical expressions of veneration that applied to the Buddha were also applied to the monastic *Saṅgha* in his day, and continue to be applied in the present day in Buddhist lands. Because of their formal status in the Buddhist community, the monastic *Saṅgha* also symbolizes the attainments of all of the noble ones. It is the *Saṅgha* that has preserved the essential core of the *Dhamma* and has upheld it for one hundred generations.

6.6. The practice of refuge

To practice faith in the triple gem is to open your heart and mind to the influence of the Buddha, the *Dhamma*, and the *Saṅgha*. The point is not to put discernment aside. Indeed you want, with time, to verify point by point for yourself what these sources of wisdom have to teach, until faith is no longer necessary. The point is to listen attentively to what these sources have to teach you, to consider them seriously, and to make them the basis of your own life, and exploration of *Dhamma*. Refuge opens the mind; blind faith closes it. Refuge is necessary for entering the path. Refuge comes with vow, a series of bold commitments to live and practice in certain ways, a determination that this will be the shape of your life.

We have seen that veneration for the Buddha was clearly expressed in the early sources.⁴ He understood that without such deference he was wasting his time talking to an unreceptive audience. Likewise, reverence for the *Dhamma* for many years after the Buddha was naturally enacted in the effort to recite, remember, and preserve his words.

Deference toward the *Saṅgha* is, in a sense, easier, because it applies to the only *living* gem, and therefore assumes a particularly personal quality. The reverence for the monastic component of the *Saṅgha* dovetails with the project of satisfying their material needs, a practice of generosity discussed in 2.4. Monastics were also recipients of many of the same kinds of physical expressions of respect accorded to the Buddha during his life. One of the issues we encounter in western cultures is the sparseness of the monastic *Saṅgha*. Nonetheless, there are many highly qualified householder teachers; think of them as *Saṅgha*, and treat them with respect.

Refuge is often a physical practice. To bow to the Buddha is to enact reverence for the Buddha, to enact reverence for the Buddha is to feel reverence for the Buddha, to feel reverence for the Buddha is to put aside one's presuppositions, and open one's heart to the teachings of the Buddha. To do this is to

align with the Buddha's path. We tend to be dismissive of reverence in modern and certainly American culture, and yet reverence is recommended by the Buddha.⁵ You will be surprised (as I once was) to learn how much power there is in bowing.⁶

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1. See McMahan (2008), Thanissaro (2002).
 2. Thanissaro (2001a, p. 16).
 3. The earliest known Buddha statues were not produced until the first century CE, in Mathura and Gandhara, the latter under strong Greek influence.
 4. Veneration of the Buddha was enhanced in virtually all of the later traditions, by treating symbols of the Buddha, for instance, pagodas and later statues, in the way a devotee would have treated the Buddha. In addition, some traditions accorded to the Buddha a supernatural status unknown in early Buddhism.
 5. In fact, traditional Indian cultural expressions of veneration, such as *añjali* (palms together), have been carried with Buddhism to every land in which it has alighted. That it became associated with Christianity suggests a early history that has yet to be thoroughly explored.
 6. Zen master Suzuki Roshi, the Japanese founder of the San Francisco Zen Center, discovered that many of his American students had a resistance to the three full prostrations traditionally performed during morning service. Accordingly, he decided to modify the tradition for his American students: Instead, they were required to perform *nine* full prostrations during morning service. They got over it, and maintain this practice today.

PART TWO: BUDDHIST PATH

7. Higher training

As a great flood carries away a sleeping village, so death seizes, and carries away the man with a clinging mind, doting on his children and cattle. For him who is assailed by death there is no protection by kinsmen. None there are to save him—no sons, nor father, nor relatives. Realizing this fact, let the wise man, restrained by morality, hastens to clear the path leading to nibbāna. (Dpd 287-9)

The householder Upāli was a disciple of a prominent spiritual teacher at the time of the Buddha, and had sought out the Buddha in order to debate him on a matter of doctrine. After the Buddha had taken the wind out of Upāli's sails, as he always did in such circumstances, the Buddha explained the core principles of a Buddhist life.

Then the *Bhagavā* gave the householder Upāli the gradual instruction, that is, talk on generosity, talk on precepts, talk on heavens; he explained the drawbacks, degradation, and corruptions of sensual passions, and the rewards of renunciation. (MN 56 i 379)

In the preceding chapters we have outlined the values, attitudes, understandings, practices, and other conditions that constitute the Buddhist life. These are based on virtue, harmony and contentment, on refuge in the sources of Buddhist wisdom, and on a community supportive of the Buddhist life, supportive of the preservation of Buddhist wisdom, and supportive of admirable Buddhist practice. Together, these factors of a Buddhist life bring benefit to the world, and are conducive to personal well-being, and to fulfillment.

When he knew that the householder Upāli's mind was ready, receptive, unbiased, elated, and trusting, he expounded to him the teaching special to Buddhas: suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path. (MN 56 i 379-80)

Once generosity, and ethical conduct are fulfilled, the dangers of sensual

pursuits, and the benefits of renunciation understood, and an abiding trust in Buddhist teachings established, we are ready to move on to the next step, to receive, and to understanding the teaching special to *buddhas*, which is precisely the *four noble truths*. The fourth of these truths brings us to the noble eightfold path, the path of practice that culminates in awakening, and that provides the topic of the remaining chapters of this book.

As the Buddha continued expounding the gradual teaching, the effect on Upāli was profound, albeit one oft repeated in such circumstances and in many discourses,

Just as a clean cloth with all marks removed would take dye evenly, so too, while the householder Upāli sat there, the spotless immaculate *vision of Dhamma* arose in him:

“All that is subject to arising is subject to cessation.”

Then the householder Upāli saw the *Dhamma*, attained the *Dhamma*, understood the *Dhamma*, fathomed the *Dhamma*, he crossed beyond doubt, did away with perplexity, gained intrepidity, and became independent of others in the *Buddha-sāsana*. (MN 56 i 380)

Upāli had not fully awakened, but had embarked fully on the noble eightfold path, from which there could be no regression, even without the continued backing of others.

“All that is subject to arising is subject to cessation” is a formulation of impermanence (*anicca*). Arising and cessation are, in turn, both subject to the principle of *conditionality* (*idappaccayatā*), or *dependent coarising* (*paṭicca-samuppāda*): *That* is contingent on *this*. Without *this*, there is no *that*. Conditionality and impermanence undergird the teaching special to *buddhas*, and are constant themes in the remaining chapters of this book. The four noble truths themselves involve impermanence and conditionality, whereby suffering is contingent on our own craving.

Impermanence and conditionality, at the same time simple and profound, provide a distinctive lens with which to view the world, one that sees right through that which we have always taken to be substantial. To first see through this lens is to acquire the *vision of Dhamma* (*dhamma-cakkhu*, sometimes translated as the “*Dhamma eye*”). To acquire the vision of *Dhamma* is to become a stream-enterer (*sotapanna*), one who has taken full possession of the path, or entered the stream.

The noble eightfold path is the path for those who aspire to excellence in the

context of a Buddhist life. Indeed the path builds on and enhances the Buddhist life as it leads to the perfection of *nibbāna* (Sanskrit, *nirvāna*), which is variously described as awakening, as the end of all suffering, as escape from the round of rebirth, as freedom from sickness, old age and death, as the end of greed, aversion, and delusion, as the relinquishing of all appropriations, as the stilling of all passions and conceptualizations, as seeing things as they really are.

The Buddhist path, discussed in these remaining six chapters, is a systematic course of training, integrating many of the factors of the Buddhist life, but with an overarching emphasis on gaining penetrating insight into the nature of the world and of the intricacies of the human mind. Before that, the path takes us through many intermediary attainments, not only through stages of awakening but also progressively through greater virtue, through the purification of mind from defilements, through renunciation, through an increasing sense of tranquility and well-being, through the easing of personal suffering, through impartiality and clear seeing, and through the cutting away of delusions, views, and conceptualizations that give rise to misperceptions, particularly the misperception of a substantial self. The path cleared by the Buddha leads through the development, cultivation, and ultimately perfection of human character in its aspects of virtue and wisdom.

7.1. Introduction to the noble eightfold path

The remaining step of the Buddha's gradual instruction, discussed in *Buddhist Life*, is the *four noble truths*, which are:

- (1) the truth of suffering,
- (2) the truth of the origin of suffering,
- (3) the truth of the cessation of suffering, and
- (4) the truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of suffering.

The fourth truth is just this noble eightfold path (*ariya atṭhaṅgika magga*), first taught in the very first discourse of the Buddha, the discourse known as the *Turning of the Wheel*. In this discourse he first declared the *middle way* as a path between the practices of austerity and indulgence, then continued,

And what is that middle way? It is simply the noble eightfold path, that is to say,

- (1) right view,
- (2) right attitude,
- (3) right speech,

- (4) right action,
- (5) right livelihood,
- (6) right effort,
- (7) right recollection,
- (8) right composure.

That is the middle way discovered by the Perfect One, which gives vision, which gives knowledge, and which leads to peace, to direct acquaintance, to discovery, to *nibbāna*. (SN 56.11)

Part Two: Buddhist Path is organized according to this noble eightfold path. We will come back to the rest of the four noble truths as part of right view.

The word *right* here in each of these eight factors is normative, much as *skillful* and *meritorious* were normative when we discussed ethics in Part One. In fact, *skill acquisition* is an apt way to describe the development of human character: we develop behavioral qualities, mental faculties, and comprehension to try to produce certain results. As with other skills, there is generally a right way to realize these results, and a wrong way that fails to produce the desired results (or maybe a couple of right ways, and an array of wrong ways).

Without proper training in the right and wrong ways of doing things we might still be able to cook a meal but not an appetizing one, we might be able to produce a teapot out of clay but neither a beautiful nor a functional one, we might be able to accomplish life's tasks and experience what life offers but not with fulfillment and joy, nor without causing great harm to others. What we do in Buddhism is the same as what the potter does, except we are shaping our characters and our lives, rather than clay. To do this, we need to distinguish the right way from the wrong.

Right view is the development of correct understanding of the *Dhamma*, or Buddhist doctrine, the insights of the Buddha that underlie Buddhist life, and practice, and the *internalization* of this understanding, so that it becomes fully natural and spontaneous.

Reading this book is practicing right view. So is contemplating individual teachings on the cushion in meditation. Through such contemplations we seek to internalize right view so that our grasp of right view becomes more intuitive, subtle, and less conceptual—know-how, rather than know-what. We will see that these teachings are substantially grounded in human psychology, and verifiable in our own experience. The content of right view includes, for instance, the four noble truths along with the noble eightfold path itself, the understanding of *kamma*, and the fruits of *kamma*, and dependent coarising

(the Buddha's core teaching on human psychology).

Right attitude is the application of set of foundational Buddhist values as we navigate life, briefly,

- (1) renunciation,
- (2) kindness, and
- (3) harmlessness.

Whereas right view provides the map, right attitude provides the compass to ensure we set our course in the right direction when the complexity of the map becomes obscure.

Right speech is to practice so that our speech becomes beneficial, harmless, and conducive to the purity of mind that we seek to develop on the path, and that is perfected in awakening.

This, and the next factor have been discussed in detail in the context of Buddhist life, but will be refined in Chapter nine.

Right action is to practice so that our physical actions become beneficial, harmless, and conducive to the purity of mind that we seek to develop on the path, and that is perfected in awakening.

Right livelihood is to choose one's career path carefully so that we do not obligate ourselves to conditions that require wrong speech, or wrong action, nor that undermine the various other aspects of practice.

This is the one factor of the path in which monastic life and householder life are distinguished, for monastics have no livelihood. Here we see the footprints of early household stream enterers who have passed this way. Wrong livelihood would be a major detriment of our success on the path.

Right effort is to actuate *Dhamma* in body, speech and mind in spite of obstacles. It is the energy of practice that steadfastly enforces what is wholesome, and avoids what is unwholesome.

Right recollection is the executive function of practice. What is recollected here is *Dhamma*, or *Dhammic* know-how, as a guide for discerning the proper course of action given the current practice situation.

Ever present, right recollection manages practice much like a thermostat manages room temperature. For instance, it brings the appropriate precept to mind when an unwholesome urge arises, and keeps kindness in mind to guide our encounter with a rude cashier.¹

Right composure is the optimal arraying of mental faculties. It is the arising

and deepening of the meditative state, first through centering attention on the current practice task, then through progressive curtailment of cognitive factors, insofar as the task has been sufficiently internalized that conceptual deliberation is no longer necessary. Composure is the meditative state.

One *sutta* adds two factors not found in standard descriptions of the path, which are experienced as we reach the goal of the path.

- (9) right knowledge,
- (10) right liberation. (MN 117)

Right knowledge refers to the consummation of wisdom, a penetrative, intuitive apprehension of things as they really are.

Right liberation is awakening.

We will revisit right knowledge in 10.4, and right liberation in 12.

The practice of the noble eightfold path can be seen to perfect two fundamental qualities of human character: virtue and wisdom. Perfected virtue is to be outwardly generous, and harmless, and inwardly disposed to be incapable of being otherwise, without greed or aversion, but selfless, manifesting a vast reserve of kindness, and compassion. Perfected wisdom, realized in right knowledge, is unbiased apprehension into how things really are. Moreover, wisdom and virtue are inseparable, and enter together into awakening.

Wisdom is purified by virtue, and virtue is purified by wisdom: where one is, the other is, the virtuous man has wisdom and the wise man has virtue, and the combination of virtue and wisdom is called the highest thing in the world. (DN 4 i 123-4)

To follow the path is to develop toward perfection. This means that to follow the path is to train in a skill, or rather a set of skills. In fact, this follows a learning curve analogous to acquiring any other skill, to learn to play the ukulele, to make pottery, to conduct scientific research, to drive a car, or to play virtuoso violin. Acquiring each of these skills starts with some conceptual learning, or else emulation, the “what” that provides standards of performance. In order to make a ceramic object a potter needs to understand their materials, and tools: the varieties of clay, how much water to add to the clay, how the clay behaves under pressure, what conditions will cause a pot to crack, or explode in the kiln, what happens to clay at different baking temperatures, the various types, and properties of glaze, etc.

Skill acquisition continues through relentless practice to develop and cultivate an intuitive “knowhow” that accords with the standards. This is *internalization*, through which we become progressively less dependent on conceptual thought and deliberation, so that the practice of *Dhamma* becomes automatic, second nature, often not even conscious, yet even more refined than the written or spoken words.

The language of *Dhamma* reflects that of skill acquisition. *Kamma* is skillful (*kusala*) or unskillful (*akusala*). Establishing a conceptual basis through study is *pariyatti*, ‘practice’ is *paṭipatti*, and practice according to *Dhamma* is *Dhamma-paṭipatti*. The *Dhamma* serves only to provide a basis for practice. Skill acquisition is ‘development and cultivation’ (*bhāvanā-bahulīkata*), where *bhulīkata* means literally ‘do a lot’).

7.2. Three groups of path factors

The nun Dhammadinnā delivered a discourse in which she divided the noble eightfold path into three parts, which are recognized to this day: the *wisdom group*, the *ethics group*, and the *composure group* (MN44).

The *wisdom group* (*paññak-khandha*) consists of:

- (1) right view,
- (2) right attitude.

These practices develop an understanding of what is, and what is not *Dhamma*, in the case of right view a broad understanding of all of practice. However, wisdom is particularly concerned with proper apprehension of the experiential world, prior to behavior in that world. This is, at least initially, conceptually acquired from hearing or reading *Dhamma*. With continued practice and internalization, this apprehension becomes less conceptual, more subtle, more intuitive, and more refined.

The *ethics group* (*sīlak-khandha*) consists of:

- (3) right speech,
- (4) right action,
- (5) right livelihood.

It is concerned with proper behavior in the experiential world, properly apprehended. It presents a refinement of the practices of virtue found in *Buddhist Life*.

The *composure group* (*samādhik-khandha*) consists of:

- (6) right effort,
- (7) right recollection,
- (8) right composure.

The factors of effort, recollection, and composure are commonly classified as faculties (*indriya*, for instance, in SN 48.10), much as eyes, ears, etc. are faculties. This suggests that they are auxiliary practices that enable, or optimize other tasks. For instance, the practitioner most effectively engages in *mettā* contemplation if they, at the same time, bring effort, recollection, and composure to the fore, which seems to describe what full engagement in *mettā* practice would be. Improving the efficacy of these mental faculties is itself a critical matter of development through practice. At least the first two of these faculties seem broadly applicable for full engagement even in non-Buddhist practices. However, composure is a particularly refined faculty not generally considered outside of Buddhism, but critical in advanced Buddhist practice.

That Dhammānā chose to name this group after its last factor, might reflect the role of *samādhi* as the natural culmination of the other two; it's a bit unclear. This group is more commonly known as the *development* (*bhāvana*) group in later tradition, also indicative of its role in carrying training in the first five of the path factors forward. For clarity, I will call these last three factors of the path the *faculty group*, since its constituents are in fact mental capabilities that serve to optimize the first five steps in the path, and are moreover identified as “faculties” by the Buddha in another context.

Chapter eight will be concerned with the wisdom group, Chapter nine with the ethics group, and Chapter ten with the faculty group. Chapter eleven will follow up on some of the most profound and sophisticated of the Buddha's wisdom teachings. Finally, Chapter twelve will discuss the last stages of practice, and the experience of awakening.

Having distinguished the three groups, I now point out that they work together, support each other, and are often so intertwined that they become indistinguishable. Consider ethical behavior: It is *relatively* easy to bring the physical manifestation of reckless driving, or harsh speech under control. It is much more difficult to bring the angry impulses which seek physical expression through reckless, bodily or verbal attack under control. It is much, much harder still to bring the *dispositions* for anger that are triggered by certain kinds of circumstances under ultimate control.

These behavioral choices at all three levels will depend on how we apprehend the situation. We consider the potential consequences of our overt actions, and how current circumstances condition our urges, or intentional choices.

Dispositions are hardest to fathom. They are unconscious habits acquired and strengthened through repeatedly making similar choices, much as an ox-cart digs deeper ruts along accustomed routes.

Ethical behavior is directed toward easing the pain of *samsāra* for self, and others, but does not lead to release from the soap-operatic drama of life altogether. The mechanisms of *samsāra* reveal themselves with growing wisdom, whereby *samsāra* appears increasingly as a sham. The final breakthrough to awakening comes through a radical reworking of the habituated cognitive mechanisms with which we are all afflicted until that point. The interactions of these various factors will be developed further in the remaining chapters.

7.3. The stream-enterer

Buddhism does not expect uniformity of practice among its members, as many religions do. In fact, such uniformity is not possible because its highest standards are *extraordinarily* high: its benchmark is the rare attainment of complete awakening, which entails perfect purity in action and thought, penetrating insight, and imperturbable equanimity, all acquired through rigorous dedication to practice, sustained over years or over lifetimes.

Individually we do what we can to make progress toward that goal, or do what we have the opportunity, and inclination for, or what we are inspired to accomplish. Refuge and admirable friends stand behind our aspirations, as we saw in 6.5. Some of us jump exuberant off the diving board into the deep end, and some of us swim content with dog-paddling. Most remain unclear about the four noble truths and never fully embark on the path, but nonetheless lead fulfilling lives within the framework of the understandings and practices that define the Buddhist life. Many enter the path rather tentatively, or else take up meditation—an advanced practice—long before virtue is strong, while the mind is neither ready nor trusting. Still others have nearly perfect virtue, absolute trust in the sources of Buddhist wisdom, and an immediate grasp of the four noble truths, become firmly established on the path, and dedicate their lives to it. It is a matter of personal choice of personal opportunity.

Stream-entry (sotapatti) is a kind of tipping point in our practice life in which the entire Buddhist path and what precedes it make sense. The *stream (sota)* is a synonym for the noble eightfold path itself. Stream entry completes the transition from Buddhist life to Buddhist path, from which we can no longer regress.

Any one of us can take up the noble eightfold path, or some part of it, prior to

stream entry. However, until we reach stream-entry, we are not fully in possession of it, and easily wander off the path. It is a bit like taking night classes for many years at a local college, but with no degree in sight, rather than being fully on a course of training in a degree program with a recognizable outcome, for stream-entry is an attainment that allows us to see the entire path ahead.

The one who has accomplished stream-entry is the *stream-enterer* (*sotapanna*). We also call one of such, or higher attainment a *noble* (*ariya*) one, as in the *noble* eightfold path, for noble ones fully possess the path, whereby the rest of us are mere *worldlings* (*puthujjana*). Similarly, a noble one, who has entered the stream, is also called a *trainee* (*sekha*), one is training in accordance with the path. Although the term “noble” applies also to those of higher attainments beyond stream-entry, including *arahants*, the term “trainee” ceases to apply to *arahants*, who have completed their training, and are therefore known as ex-trainees (*asekha*).

The stream-enterer is also subsequently worth seeking out as an *admirable friend* who will serve others as an inspiration and guide for undertaking the path; we do well to get to acquire admirable friends, and to try to emulate them as we practice. The stream-enterer is personally fully possessed of all of the qualities necessary for establishing themselves firmly on the path, and therefore provides an apt role model for our practice. The stream-enterer has not only embarked on the path, but also knows where it leads. Where the worldling might have reached the trail-head, and can view the path ahead until it makes a turn, and disappears into the trees and underbrush, the stream-enterer has been able to scale a tree, seen the entire path from on high, and has found its end to be even more sublime than anticipated.

To get more precise, stream-entry is often described in two stages: *path*, and *fruit*. The *path of stream-entry* is the training that directly results in stream-entry, not to be confused with the noble eightfold path itself. To be on the path of stream-entry is generally described as guaranteeing the fruit of stream-entry in this very life. The *fruit of stream-entry* is the attainment of stream-entry *per se*, and the simple term “stream-entry” will refer to the fruit unless stated otherwise.

7.3.1 Fruit of stream-entry. The qualities developed in the stream-enterer are described in various ways.

And which are the four factors of stream-entry with which he is endowed? There is the case where the disciple of the noble ones is endowed with:

- unwavering faith in the Buddha ...
- unwavering faith in the *Dhamma* ...
- unwavering faith in the *Saṅgha* ...
- virtues that are appealing to the noble ones: untorn, unbroken, unspotted, unsplattered, liberating, praised by the wise, untarnished, leading to composure. (AN 10.92)

Here we learn that a stream-enterer is possessed of faith, which is wholehearted refuge in the Buddha, in the *Dhamma*, and in the *Saṅgha*, described in Chapter six (and distinct from the common western understanding of faith). Virtue here is a high degree of purity, which will have developed through the standards and practices of Buddhist life that begin the gradual instruction.

Elsewhere, the stream-enterer is said to have eliminated the first three of ten *fetters* (*saṃyojana*). As a set, the fetters are used to distinguish four stages of awakening as practice attainments, from the lowest to highest: stream-enterer, once-returner, non-returner, and *arahant*. The fetters are kinds of unwholesome dispositions, that is, they arise repeatedly in the mind rather than being constantly present. The first five are as follows (the entire set will be discussed in 12.3):

And which are the five lower fetters?

- (1) self-existence view,
- (2) doubt,
- (3) perversion of norms, and observances,
- (4) sensual desire, and
- (5) ill will.

These are the five lower fetters. (AN 10.13)

In this community of monks there are monks who, with the total ending of [the first] three fetters, are stream-enterers, steadfast, never again destined for states of woe, headed for self-awakening. (MN 118 iii 82)

The fetter of doubt (*vicikicchā*) is clear enough: it is the opposite of trust in the the Buddha, *Dhamma* and *Saṅgha*. The stream-enterer has lost doubt.

Self-existence view (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*) is the the established conceptualization of ourselves as a fixed self, however that might be conceived. Common examples are within the frameworks of eternalism and annihilationism, the view of an enduring self, or of a self cut off at death of the body. The steam enterer sees bodily and mental processes in the absence of a self, much as the worldling

sees rain and floods in the absence of a rainer. The stream-enterer has thereby attained a significant insight. It makes sense that the practice of ethics (a practice of *selfless* behavior) will have supported this breakthrough in wisdom.

The third fetter, *perversion of norms and observances* (*sīlab-bata-parāmāso*), is sometimes misleadingly translated as “attachment to rites, and rituals.” The compound here is *sīla* + *vata*, where *sīla* refers to precepts, or simply behavior which follows norms or standards, and *vata* to vows, or practices that we devotedly follow, such as bowing, merit-making, guarding the senses, or meditation. Although certain behaviors and practices have been strongly endorsed in a Buddhist life, these are easily perverted through striving for achievements and toward goals manifest in seeking *kammic* fruits, personal improvement, or perfection. Striving is craving, which entails suffering. The stream-enterer has lost this form of perversion, finding satisfaction in practice for its own sake, even as it leads progressively toward the goal of awakening.

7.3.2. Path to stream-entry. How do we become a stream-enterer? By one account,

- (1) association with people of integrity is a factor for stream-entry,
- (2) listening to the true *Dhamma* is a factor for stream-entry.
- (3) appropriate attention is a factor for stream-entry.
- (4) practice in accordance with the *Dhamma* is a factor for stream-entry.
(SN 55.5)

People of integrity are admirable friends (discussed in 6.5), particularly noble ones who inspire and inform us in our practice. Listening to the true *Dhamma* is critical because both the gradual training and the path involve an interplay between understanding and practice. It is through *Dhamma* that we acquire common understandings to support common practice, and it is through the *Dhamma* that we engage the practice of the path. Of course, in modern times we also *read* the *Dhamma*, a privilege unavailable in the early days of Buddhism, and *listening* to the *Dhamma* is often just a mouse click away.

The practice of ethics, the development of selfless virtue, and an understanding of the merits of renunciation as factors of the Buddhist life have already prepared us for the abandoning of identity-view. Going for refuge has prepared us for the abandoning of doubt. The understanding of *kamma* and its fruits has prepared the way for ending the perversion of norms and observances. *Appropriate attention* (*yoniso manasikāra*) is hugely important in Buddhist practice. Abandoning self-existence view goes hand in hand with appropriate attention, as we learned way back in 2.5. The Buddha stated,

Appropriate attention is a quality of a monk in training: nothing

else does so much for attaining the superlative goal. A monk, practicing appropriately, attains the end of suffering. (Iti 1.16)

The Pali for “appropriate attention” is more literally translated as “thinking from the source,” and involves a skill for avoiding distraction through speculation, or conceptual abstractions, in accord with the Buddha’s understanding of conditionality. An example in 6.4 recognizes poverty as a direct conditioning factor for crime. A king can control poverty. He cannot control criminals whose behavior is conditioned by poverty, even by violent means. Appropriate attention also recognizes birth as a direct conditioning factor for death, alongside ill health, and craving as a more direct conditioning factor for suffering than irksome circumstances. Phenomena arise from conditions, and appropriate attention traces those conditions in the most direct way.

Appropriate attention is described in another account of the path to stream-entry, where it specifies some degree of insight into the four noble truths,

He attends appropriately, This is suffering... This is the origination of suffering... This is the cessation of suffering... This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering. As he attends appropriately in this way, three fetters are abandoned in him: self-existence view, doubt, and perversion of norms and observances. (MN 2 i 9)

Notice the absence of agents, such as thieves, in the foregoing examples. An agent, or a self, is one of those conceptual abstractions that become eventually transparent as far as appropriate attention is concerned. Generally, the insight reported for the stream-enterer is not so much about craving and suffering as it is more generally about the conditionality which relates craving and suffering, and many other factors as well.

It seems that there are also two tracks of development on the path to stream-entry, depending on the relative weights of faith in, and apprehension of, *Dhamma*.

One who has faith, and conviction that these phenomena are this way [impermanent] is called a *faith-follower*: one who has entered the orderliness of rightness, entered the plane of people of integrity, transcended the plane of the run-of-the-mill. He is incapable of doing any deed by which he might be reborn in hell, in the animal womb, or in the realm of hungry ghosts. He is

incapable of passing away until he has realized the fruit of stream-entry.

One who, after pondering with a modicum of discernment, has accepted that these phenomena are this way is called a *Dhamma*-follower: one who has entered the orderliness of rightness, entered the plane of people of integrity, transcended the plane of the run-of-the-mill. He is incapable of doing any deed by which he might be reborn in hell, in the animal womb, or in the realm of hungry ghosts. He is incapable of passing away until he has realized the fruit of stream-entry.

One who knows, and sees that these phenomena are this way is called a stream-enterer, steadfast, never again destined for states of woe, headed for self-awakening. (SN 25.1-10)

The *faith-follower*, and the *Dhamma-follower* are both on the *path* to stream-entry prior to the fruit of stream-entry, but ultimately the fruit of stream-entry ripens in clear insight for both faith- and *Dhamma*-follower. Faith is refuge in the Buddha, *Dhamma* and *Saṅgha*. *Dhamma* here is what one has, substantively by that point, verified for oneself.

7.3.3. Vision of *Dhamma*. Although inconsistently mentioned in these various accounts of stream-entry, a special moment of insight seems to be required, a *vision of Dhamma*, also equated with a glimpse of the *deathless*, the *unconditioned*, *nibbāna*, and the stilling of *fabrications*. In each of these descriptions our normal way of viewing what we think is “reality” dissolves, if only for a moment, with the recognition that it is all mentally fabricated. We could just as well fabricate “reality” otherwise, or else not fabricate it at all. The latter would result from stilling the process of fabrication, undercutting the most critical condition for experiencing a world of things, people, or a self that could, for instance, die. The world that otherwise seems so real to us is extinguished (= *nibbāna*). This explains the loss of self-existence view in the stream-enterer.

Recall (1.4) the story of Sāriputta’s encounter with one of the Buddha’s first five disciples, in which Assaji evoked the vision of *Dhamma* in Sāriputta by quoting this passage,

Of those things that arise from a cause,
The *Tathāgata* has told the cause,
and also what their cessation is.
This is the doctrine of the Great Recluse. (Mv i 23.1-10)

Sāriputta claimed to have *seen* the deathless, yet he was not yet an *arahant*.

The vision of *Dhamma* seems to provide a glimpse of *nibbāna*, but not an enduring realization of *nibbāna*. As the monk Nārada described it in himself,

My friend, although I have seen properly with right discernment, as it actually is present, that “the cessation of becoming is *nibbāna*,” still I am not an *arahant* whose corruptions are ended. It's as if there were a well along a road in a desert, with neither rope nor water bucket. A man would come along overcome by heat, oppressed by the heat, exhausted, dehydrated, and thirsty. He would look into the well, and would have knowledge of water, but he would not dwell touching it with his body. In the same way, although I have seen properly with right discernment, as it actually is present, that “The cessation of becoming is *nibbāna*,” still I am not an *arahant* whose corruptions are ended. (SN 12.68)

7.4. The practice of higher training

This chapter has provided an initial pass through the noble eightfold path, one that will be fleshed out in the chapters to come. There we will learn how to practice with each of the eight folds of the path. For now you can appreciate that the noble eightfold path gives you a handy checklist of higher practice. You should remember that you do not need to be a stream-enterer to begin these eight points of practice; initially you will likely take them on only at a fairly mundane level without complete understanding. In the next three chapters we will describe these eight folds of higher training in more detail, and provide pointers to their successful practice. Then we will take up in detail the more recalcitrant issues. Finally we will break through to awakening.

We have emphasized in our discussion the transition from the Buddhist life to the Buddhist path, which the stream-enterer exemplifies. Through a devout Buddhist life you will have already satisfied most of the requirements for stream-entry. The tipping point will come with realization of the vision of *Dhamma*, also known as the *Dhamma* eye, a kind of insight into the contingent nature of reality, and with appropriate attention. As you begin to explore the path, you will want to give particular attention to these factors, for if you reach this tipping point you will be in complete possession of the path.

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1. Recollection (*sati*) is often translated as ‘mindfulness.’ At the time that translation was coined, the meaning of ‘mindfulness’ was almost synonymous with ‘conscientiousness.’ However, beginning in the twentieth century, within the

growing “mindfulness movement,” it came to mean something like “bare awareness,” or “being present non-judgmentally with whatever arises,” surprisingly having altogether lost the root meaning of *sati*. See Cintita (2025, chapter 4).

8. Cultivating wisdom

When the Dhamma, and Vinaya declared by the Tathāgata is being taught, he listens well, gives ear, applies his mind to knowledge, rejects what is worthless, takes up what is worthwhile, and is endowed with the patience to conform with the teaching. (AN 6.88)

The wisdom group consists of the first two factors of the path:

- (1) right view (*sammā diṭṭhi*), and
- (2) right attitude (*sammā saṅkappa*).

Wisdom (*paññā*) can be understood in a number of ways, from conceptual understanding or apprehension of the world, to an intuitive understanding resulting from years of directly engagement with the world for oneself through practice, as Dhammic skills are acquired. The place of wisdom at the beginning of the path highlights the intellectual, or conceptual understanding of *Dhamma*, since this is where we must begin through hearing or reading, then pondering, effectively through study. For this reason this chapter is called “Foundational Wisdom.” This foundational wisdom will be perfected by end of the path, with the attainment of *knowledge and vision of things as they are* (*yathā-bhūta-ñāṇa-dassana*).

8.1. Right view

The Buddha tells us that there are two levels of right view: *mundane* (*lokiya*), and *supramundane* (*lokuttara*) right view

And what, bhikkhus, is right view? Right view, I say, is twofold: there is right view that is affected by corruptions, partaking of merit, ripening in the acquisitions; and there is right view that is noble, without corruption, supramundane, a factor of the path.

And what, bhikkhus, is right view that is affected by the corruptions, partaking of merit, ripening in the acquisitions?

- (1) There is what is given and what is offered and what is sacrificed.
- (2) There is fruit and result of good and bad actions.
- (3) There is this world and the other world.
- (4) There is mother and father.
- (5) There are beings who are reborn spontaneously.
- (6) There are in the world good and virtuous recluses and brahmins who have realized for themselves by direct knowledge and declare this world and the other world.

This is right view affected by corruptions, partaking of merit, ripening in the acquisitions. (MN 117 iii 72)

This formula for mundane right view echoes points of doctrine that belong to Buddhist life, as well as a passage cited in 6.4.4 to illustrate how views are to held loosely. It is a good thing we are holding these views loosely, because here we learn they are not entirely free of corruptions. *Corruptions* (*āsava*) are fundamental dispositions that keep us locked in *samsāra* (see 11.1). Their *destruction* (*āsava-khaya*) constitutes full awakening.

(1) is generosity, (2) is merit, or *kammic* fruits, (3) is the long-term personal benefits of practice, extending into felicitous future lives, (4) is living responsibly in relation to others, (5) elaborates the cosmology referred to in (3), and (6) is the efficacy of practice toward awakening. In another vein, the Buddha continues,

And what, *bhikkhus*, is right view that is noble, without corruption, supramundane, a factor of the path? The wisdom, the faculty of wisdom, the power of wisdom, the *Dhamma* investigation awakening factor, the path factor of right view in one whose mind is noble, whose mind is without corruption, who possesses the noble path and is developing the noble path. This is right view that is noble, without corruption, supramundane, a factor of the path. (MN 117 iii 72)

This is right view at another level, which is addressed in the noble eightfold path, which the stream-enterer is prepared to take possession of, and which the vision of *Dhamma* opens up to development and cultivation. This chapter is concerned with this supramundane right view. The role of *Dhamma-investigation* is especially acknowledged here, which is the second of the seven *awakening factors*. We will discuss *Dhamma* investigation by the end of this chapter. Supramundane right view will be further elaborated throughout Book Two.

Right view is very psychological. The practice of supramundane right view is highly introspective, oriented toward apprehending the cognitive factors that lead to the corruptions, much as a disease must be diagnosed before it can be cured. In order to fashion a life in the *Dhamma*, we must understand the body, the mind, the nature of the world we are embedded in, how thoughts are triggered, how actions are triggered, how our habit patterns evolve, and so on. As a (somewhat rusty) cognitive scientist myself, I always like to say,

The Buddha was the first great cognitive scientist.

In fact, the Buddha's insights compare with, and have even influenced modern cognitive research, though his methods differed from modern science. Right view develops a very practical nuts-and-bolts understanding about things that we can see for ourselves, without abstract theorizing, to see firsthand how we entangle ourselves and others in unsatisfactory lives, and how we can disentangle ourselves and others by reshaping the workings of the mind, to emerge with a fully matured character that experiences the world otherwise. Supramundane right view is grounded in direct subjective experience of events, and their causal relations.

8.2. The experiential world

From the beginning, it is important to recognize the strongly subjective orientation of the wisdom teachings in the early *Dhamma*. Specifically, they are concerned consistently with investigating the processes with which we experience the world (epistemology), not with accounting for what exists, or occurs in some *objective world* (ontology) that extends beyond experience. I cannot overemphasize the importance of this point: if we overlook it (which is common even among Buddhist scholars), a large part of the wisdom teachings will likely remain incomprehensible.¹

In fact, the world (*loka*) itself is understood in early Buddhism not as something “out there,” but precisely as this *world of experience*.

In this fathom-long living body, along with its perceptions, and thoughts, lies the world, the arising of the world, and the cessation of the world. (AN 4.45)

It is in this world of experience that our craving and suffering arise, that the conditions for these are open to observation, that our practice progresses, and that we awaken. It is in terms of experiential observables that we verify the *Dhamma*. These *observables*, or *phenomena* are called *dhmmas* (lower case) in Pali.² Recall that the Buddha also said,

Mind precedes all phenomena. Mind is their chief; they are all mind-made. (Dhp 1)

Nonetheless, virtually all of us presume an *objective world* of things outside of ourself, which would be there even if no one were experiencing it. Not only that, but we think we have immediate local access to this objective outer world, that we need do nothing to experience it except to show up. There it is: our plush arm chair, the cat on our lap, the pipe in our mouth, a cup of tea, a snifter of cognac and a dog-eared copy of *Buddhist Life/Buddhist Path* on our side table.

This objective world “out there,” that we also call “reality,” that we experience so vividly is itself necessarily fabricated in mind. After all, (objectively speaking) the brain sits in the skull in total darkness and total silence, communicating with the independent outer world through raw neural impulses originating in the retina, the eardrum, etc. If the brain in this fathom-long body is the source of our experience, then anything beyond neural sense impulses must be fabricated by the brain (or emergent processes running on the brain architecture) to produce its experience. We have no more direct access to an “objective” outer world than that. Moreover, in our world of experience, and through attention to detail in Buddhist contemplative practice, we can observe mental processes fabricating our experience of the world “out there.”

To illustrate the Buddha’s subjective perspective, let’s dive right into two of the Buddha’s most prominent wisdom teachings, those of the five aggregates, and of the six sense spheres, and into how we bring them into practice.

Aggregates. The *five aggregates (khandha)* provide a scheme to divide up the world in terms of categories of mental awareness. The practice of categorizing in this way tends to enforce the subjective perspective in examining how we fabricate “reality.” It thereby demonstrates that nothing experienced is separate from mind. As I like to say,

To experience something as real is not the same as experiencing something real.

The word *khandha* in Pali refers simply to any mass, heap, or pile, that is, to an unstructured grouping. The word *aggregate* is a little fancy for this, but is the standard translation. Each of the five aggregates is a collection, or category specifically of *awareness* events. Awareness distinguishes itself from other mental events in that they appear to *refer* to something outside themselves (we are aware *of* something). The five aggregates are differentiated in terms of ascending conceptual complexity as follows:

A *form* (*rūpa*) is an appearance mediated by the eye, the ear, the nose, etc., manifesting, for instance, as shapes and colors. It starts out a raw sense field.

A *feeling* (*vedanā*) is a “standing out” of an experience as pleasant, unpleasant, curious, or some other form of interest or mattering. Feeling tends to attract attention for further cognitive processing.

A *perception* (*saññā*) is a spontaneous recognition of an object as belonging to some conceptual category, something recognized as familiar, and generally given a name.

A *fabrication* (*saṅkhāra*) is of the nature of a choice driven by learned *dispositions*. It has an intentional quality, and so includes *kammic* activities, and it is involved in apprehending relations, or composites through inference.

Consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is an instance of deep 3D awareness, lead by attention, and filling in the rich details of objects in a highly presumptive manner beyond direct observation, generally with the conviction that they exist “out there.”

In investigating the aggregates in contemplative practice, the momentary experience of things “out there,” particularly objects that we *appropriate* as “me” or “mine,” is thereby broken down into five categories of ascending cognitive complexity. Keeping the aggregates in mind, we break each object down to reveal the mental dependencies that constitute the mechanisms behind consciousness. The result is that we see, as in shoddy merchandise, the cognitive seams left from the fabrication of what we think is “out there.” We are no longer so convinced of the independent reality of the things “out there.” that we once experienced and cherished. The five aggregates in this contemplation are called *aggregates of appropriation*.³

This is not an abstract teaching, quite the contrary. The Buddha is simply pointing out a generally overlooked sphere that we are able to verify in our own experience. However, the finer details require refined mental faculties and deep contemplation. Later factors of the path provide this refinement. Once this sphere becomes familiar, we are able to see the mechanisms by which our experience of a world “out there” is fabricated.

Sense spheres. An additional, orthogonal way the Buddha proposes for arraying our experiential world is through the *sixfold sphere* (*saḷāyatana*, aka the (six) *sense spheres*), much to the same effect. Here our experiences are grouped in accord with which sense sphere they arise in: visual, auditory,

olfactory, etc. A visual form appears in the eye sphere (shapes, and colors), and immediately visual consciousness arises (a cow in a field under tree). The eye is the faculty that enables cow and tree, and therefore must possess a lot of worldly knowledge to produce the content of consciousness.

Without the senses, there could be no experience. But wait: even if the five senses were cut off, we would still experience thoughts, and emotions, wouldn't we? Yes! That is why in Buddhism, rather than five senses, we have six! We have the five that we are already familiar with: eye, ear, tongue, nose, and body, but in addition we have, a sixth, a mind sense (*mano*) through which we experience our inner thoughts, and mental processes, for instance, in times of introspection, or daydreaming. Thereby, happiness, lust, products of reasoning, and dreams fit snugly into our world of experience.

Many *suttas* variously list a number of factors that belong in each of the six spheres. For instance, in the eye sphere we have:

... eye, form, eye consciousness, eye contact, and whatever arises with eye contact as a condition. (SN 35.24-28)

Contact is the presumption itself (a fabrication) that we are experiencing objects that exist “out there,” and is an almost ever-present ally of consciousness. Extending this to other senses we find the world arrayed as follows:

Eye	form	eye-consciousness	eye-contact	eye-feeling ...
Ear	sound	ear-consciousness	ear-contact	ear-feeling ...
Nose	odor	nose-consciousness	nose-contact	nose-feeling ...
...				

Once contact occurs, a series of factors dependent on contact arise in relation to the object imputed to exist “out there”: feeling and attention, craving it, thinking about it, and so on.⁴

Various *suttas* refer to the six sense spheres as *the all* (*sabba*), in the sense that they exhaust the world, that is, the realm of experience. The *All Sutta* states with reference to the six spheres:

If anyone, bhikkhus, should speak thus, “Having rejected this all, I shall make known another all,” that would be a mere empty boast on his part. ... that would not be within his domain. (SN 35.23)

Conceptualizing the world of experience in terms of the six spheres highlights the senses as the initiators of experience, and (as for the aggregates) reveals

some of the cognitive mechanisms that produce consciousness of things “out there.”⁵ Modeling the world in terms of a closed system of experiential events comes with a claim: that this gives us a basis for rooting out the sources of our suffering and for bringing them under control. Buddhist practice, directed at the end of suffering, needs nothing beyond this all:

In the six the world has arisen,
 In the six it holds concourse.
 On the six themselves depending,
 In the six it has woes. (SN 1.70)

8.3. Conditionality

Conditionality is the fabric of the world, relating experiential events to each other. The Buddha recognized that experiential elements arise from causes, and conditions, and, in turn, are themselves causes, and conditions for the arising of other phenomena. The teaching of *conditionality* (*idappaccayatā*), is typically formulated in the *suttas* as follows:

When this is, that is,
 From the arising of this comes the arising of that.
 When this isn't, that isn't.
 From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that. (Ud 1.3)

This, in a nutshell, might be considered the heart of the Buddha's method of investigation, the one which cracked open our deluded and persistent misperception of the world to reveal the true nature of reality. This way of thinking is associated with the breakthrough to stream-entry that establishes ourselves firmly on the path. Recall, from 1.4, the words that the Buddha's disciple Assaji spoke to Sāriputta, and that Sāriputta repeated to Moggallāna, in each case arousing the *vision of Dhamma*:

Of those things that arise from a cause,
 The *Tathāgata* has told the cause,
 and also what their cessation is.
 This is the doctrine of the Great Recluse. (Mv i 23.1-10)

It should be noted that the actual underlying *mechanisms* of conditionality, whatever they might be, are not of particular relevance, for they are generally beyond immediate experience, only the fact that the arising, persistence, or cessation of one phenomenon observably correlates with the rising, persistence, or cessation of others. It should be appreciated that conditionality makes

all elements of experience contingent on other elements. Since a given element is both effect of something, and cause of something, experience is in constant flux. The most prominent example of conditionality in all of the *Dhamma* is the second noble truth.

... and this, monks is the noble truth of the origination of suffering: the craving that makes for further becoming—accompanied by passion, and delight, relishing now here and now there, i.e., craving for sensual pleasure, craving for becoming, craving for becoming other.

The Buddha's reliance on conditionality is refreshingly satisfying to the "rational" modern person. Applied to the objective world, it would exclude the supernatural, which would violate natural laws, and thereby ignore the norms of conditionality. However, although we moderns readily acknowledge the conditioned structure of the physical world, we do not so readily do this for the mental world, perhaps because we assume this world to be dominated by oodles of unconstrained "free thinking." Although the Buddha attributes a degree of intention to the mental realm, he views it as highly conditioned by factors that can be deliberately overridden only with great effort.

The understanding of conditionality allows us to engineer desirable outcomes by steering the conditions upon which those outcomes depend. For example, we cannot directly will a fire to extinguish itself, nor to burn more brightly, but we can control a fire by understanding its necessary conditions: heat, oxygen, and fuel. Blowing on it may give it more oxygen but also reduce its temperature. Dousing it with water deprives it of oxygen and reduces its temperature. Building a fire break, or removing a log might deprive it of fuel. Ultimately we hope, through Buddhist practice, to bring the fires of suffering under some degree of control. We cannot will suffering to end with the command, "Don't worry, be happy!" So we try to control its conditions, such as craving and contact. We cannot will craving to end with "Don't be so needy," so we look for the conditions of craving, in turn, and then try to control *those*, and so on. Origination of undesirable factors is matched by their cessation, as in the third noble truth:

... and this, monks, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: the remainderless fading, and cessation, renunciation, relinquishment, release, and letting go of that very craving.
(SN 56.11)

Conditionality, for the Buddha, is taken as a universal principle, underlying all

experience and events. Nothing happens of itself, but only through conditions, and there is no first condition for anything. Conditionality is the fabric of the world. Although conditionality is described as a relation between a phenomenon, and its cause, or its set of conditions, when scaled up into a mesh of such phenomena, the resulting system can exhibit a quite complex dynamic, which can be difficult to track, with many loops and collateral effects. The dynamics of such a net of conditionality is called *dependent coarising* (*paṭicca-samuppāda*). For clarity, the *suttas* tend to attribute a single condition to a single effect when talking about conditionality, or dependent coarising. But properly, any single factor generally has multiple conditions, and multiple effects. Accordingly, there are many references to linear causal chains in early Buddhism, each of which really represents a thread through a dense causal net of contingency.

We will see that such chains can line up desirable, wholesome factors, such as the seven *awakening factors*:

recollection → investigation → energy → rapture → calm →
composure → equanimity (see MN 118 iii 85-6)

We will also see how individual factors can be strengthened, in this case to strengthen factors further downstream for a more beneficial outcome. Other times such chains line up undesirable, unwholesome factors, such as these,

... → feeling → craving → seeking → gain → valuation →
fondness → possessiveness → ownership → avarice →
guarding → ... (see DN 15 ii 58-9)

8.4. Insubstantiality

I like the English word ‘contingency’ in lieu of ‘conditionality’ because it includes not only the notion of conditionality, but also the notion of *impermanence* that conditionality suggests, and even the image of a world that is in constant flux as changes in conditions ripple through the world. It suggests that the world is less like a landscape, and more like a cloudscape.

Perception tends to idealize an outer world as more permanent, more pleasurable, more personalized, and more beautiful than things really are. Once we *presume* (but never directly and fully observe) a world of rather fixed things, we are free to appropriate them as “me” or “mine,” and suffer as a consequence. In fact, our own self is the primary example of a presumed fixed

thing. To see the fault in the conventional way in which we fabricate the world, the Buddha asks us to keep always in mind the *three signs* (*tilakkhaṇa*) underlying a more useful way to experience the world:

- impermanence (*anicca*),
- suffering (*dukkha*),
- non-self (*anatta*).

These signs are widely obscured in our perception of the world because of the *presumptions* (*maññita*) that we make freely in an attempt to make sense of the world. About presumptions, the Buddha says,

Whatever one presumes [*maññati*], presumes at, presumes as, presumes to be ‘mine,’ thereby it turns out otherwise. (SN 35.31)

Because of contingency, everything in our world is in a state of flux, continually born from conditions, and also dying with conditions: the food we buy, our furniture, our car, our own bodies, even mountains. Everything and everyone we cherish will be lost to us one by one ... until the ones that remain lose us. Because the world is presumed, it is slipping by like sand through our fingers. There is no “happy ever after” with regard to the things, or people of the world.

Our conceptual fabrications simply do not keep pace with the unfolding of the world. Because things are impermanent, when we seek gratification in something fixed, we forget that *samsāric* life has been a continual series of broken promises. That which is craved causes us suffering because we cannot rely on it. If we’ve lost what we cherish, we suffer. If we still have it, we are anxious that we will lose it. We suffer particularly when we identify what we cherish closely with ourselves, such as our immediate family members, our speed boat or our bowling championship. We crave because we do not fully understand the three signs.

Contemplating impermanence, suffering, and non-self reveals the false premises that underlie much of the world as we have grown to know it. As an empirical matter, the three signs win all debates, yet we find it perplexingly easy to overlook them. The three signs remind us of the primary human absurdity, that we grow the world “out there” in our own minds in a certain way, then we take it seriously as something real and substantial, then we become infatuated with its objects, and finally we crave them, much like Pygmalion of Greek legend, to our own detriment. The three signs remind us that these objects are by nature unreliable, and explain why they cause us distress when we have a stake in them, or try to identify with them. These reflections aim at *dispassion* (*virāga*): Our infatuations are over things that are too hot too han-

dle, things that are not what they promise. A meaningful life lies elsewhere.

To the extent that our conceptualizations of the world are presumptive, concepts do not reach any kind of basis in an ultimate truth, should there be such a thing. In this sense our concepts are empty (*suñña*). The practice of emptiness (*suñnatā*) is to experience the world absent the referents of those concepts. Most significantly we learn to experience the world without experiencing a self. This is the practice of *non-self* (*anatta*). We will see in 8.8 below that this practice is integrated into *Dhamma* investigation. There are philosophical arguments that there is no self (a claim that the Buddha actually never makes), and these may aid, but are not sufficient for, the practice of experiencing the world without a self. More broadly, the practice of emptiness is to experience the world absent anything that is conceptualized.

If our concepts are insubstantial, so are our views (*diṭṭha*). Ever the skeptic, the Buddha challenges all views as insubstantiated, and awakening as entailing the loss of all views. Nonetheless, he distinguishes right view from wrong view in the noble eightfold path, as we saw in 8.1 above. Right view is not that which has some kind of basis in any ultimate truth. It has been described as a “detached order of seeing,” not a doctrine representing something that is ultimately “true,” not something that needs to be believed in, but something that is practiced. It is an “ought” not an “is.”⁶ In short, it is a working assumption as discussed in 6.4. It is worth accepting as a working assumption for practical reasons, for its potential as a guide to practice leading to awakening.

8.5. The four noble truths

The four noble truths (*cattāri ariya-saccāni*) give us the most recognized instance of conditionality, along with the means through practice of engineering more beneficial results. Understanding and practice are paired as follows:

- (1) This noble truth of suffering (*dukkha*), which is to be understood. ...
- (2) This noble truth of the origin (*samudaya*) of suffering is craving, and which is to be abandoned. ...
- (3) This noble truth of the cessation (*nirodha*) of suffering is to be realized. ...
- (4) This noble truth of the path (*magga*) of the way leading to the cessation of suffering is to be developed. ... (SN 56.11 v 422)

We are also told in the same *sutta* that the origin of suffering is craving, and

that the way leading to the cessation of suffering is the *noble eightfold path*: right view, right attitude, right action, right speech, right livelihood, right effort, right recollection, and right composure. Although a truth would appear to be an empirical proposition subject to verification, we are given a practice to pursue for each of these truths: understanding, abandoning, realizing, and developing, respectively. These guide wholesome action (*kamma*), which is to say practice, with beneficial results. This establishes the role of right understanding as a guide to practice referred to earlier.

Together these practices conspire to rid us of suffering. Suffering is where we begin our spiritual quest. If we did not suffer, if life were already nothing but delight and joy, it would never occur to us to have spiritual aspirations, nor to begin Buddhist practice in the first place. But few understand the nature of our suffering; it needs to be examined carefully. When we understand suffering, we discover its origin in craving.

Recall, from 4.2, that unskillful mental factors are those based in greed, aversion, and/or delusion, and that the arising of an unskillful factor has suffering as its shadow. Greed, and aversion are forms of craving—craving to gain what is desired, and to avert what is not desired—, and delusion is the source of greed and aversion, particularly the delusion of a fixed self. If we abandon greed, aversion, and delusion, we realize the cessation of suffering, and our spiritual quest is at an end. We find that the full understanding of all of these truths brings in, indeed, the whole of the *Dhamma*, and in this sense the four noble truths by themselves exhaust right view.

The formulation of the four noble truths has been compared to a doctor's evaluation, which also merges understanding and practice. Suffering is the *symptom*, the origin is the *diagnosis*, cessation is the *prognosis*, and the path is the *cure*. The Buddha uses this same basic formula with respect to other mental factors besides suffering, and craving, as we will soon see, with the treatment in each case consisting, significantly, of this same noble eightfold path.

8.6. Dependent coarising

We have seen that dependent coarising (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) occurs in various contexts. However, most often this term is used to refer to a specific causal chain though the network of contingencies. We will refer to this as the *standard chain*, or as the *twelve links* of dependent coarising when we need to be clear. The standard chain is as follows:

ignorance → fabrication → consciousness → name and form →
 sixfold sphere → contact → feeling → craving →
 appropriation → becoming → birth →
 this mass of suffering

This particular chain winds its way through the center of Buddhist psychology, in which it exposes the arising step-by-step of the near-universal pathology that characterizes the human condition. Occurring with sometimes more or fewer links, its most common variant in the *suttas* are the twelve links shown here. The chain not only describes the arising of the human pathology, but also what we do about it: our practice is directed at weakening, or breaking its various problematic links. If we break one, the rest of chain ceases to function. How do we do that?

Each link ceases in exactly the same way suffering ceases in the four noble truths: through the practice of the noble eightfold path. The path is a kind of universal elixir for all that ails us. Each conditional relation can be expanded by applying the *four truths formula*. For instance, applying it to craving, gives us:

- (1) craving, which is to be understood,
- (2) the origin of craving, which is feeling, and which is to be abandoned,
- (3) the cessation of craving, which is the cessation of feeling, and which is to be realized,
- (4) the path to the cessation of craving: right view, right attitude, right action, ... , and which is to be developed. (see MN 9)

The path, as the cure-all for all that ails us, serves to weaken, and finally break down the standard chain. In fact the various factors of the path tend to have some specialization in this regard. For instance, the ethics group tends to weaken the downstream links, including craving, the weakest link in the chain. As craving weakens, so do subsequent factors. The wisdom group tends to weaken the upstream links, and ultimately ignorance, which, in the end, results in the breakdown of the entire chain.

The chain of dependent coarising above is deceptively simple. When we actually understand the various factors involved, each of which the Buddha describes in many *suttas*, we find that their dynamics is quite complex, with many branches, loops, and new instantiations of the chain, conditioned by which the illusory sense of self in all of its contingent complexity emerges. The Buddha, in describing this chain, presented us with a most profound model of the common, dysfunctional mind. Because of its complexity, I will devote a separate chapter to exploring this particular chain: Chapter eleven

“Disentangling *samsāra*.” The chain of dependent coarising will be easier to grasp by the time we come back to it.

8.7. Right attitude

Right attitude, the remaining wisdom factor of the noble eightfold path, is also sometimes translated as “right intention,” “right resolve,” or “right thought.” If right view is the map, right attitude is the compass that keeps us headed in the right direction. A potter, in crafting a bowl, not only needs to know about clay, glaze, and the potter’s wheel, they also need to have an idea of what they hope to produce. This is their right attitude. For the potter, right attitude might be to make a bowl of exquisite elegance and beauty, and at the same time of practical functionality. For the Buddhist, right attitude is to fashion a character based in three primary virtues,

And what is right attitude? Being intent on renunciation, on freedom from ill-will, on harmlessness: This is called right attitude. (SN 45.8)

By golly, we’ve seen these three factors before. Recall for 4.1 that the Bodhisatta delineated what is unwholesome by setting on one side thoughts of sensual desire, thoughts of ill will, and thoughts of cruelty, and what is unwholesome by setting on the other side thoughts of renunciation, thoughts of kindness, and thoughts of harmlessness. These are also the motivating principals of purity, generosity, and precepts respectively. These are all ethical values that will have been internalized through diligent practice of the gradual instruction. Right attitude is a commitment to wholesome intentions, and thereby to meritorious deeds.

Renunciation, kindness, and harmlessness are not, for worldlings, an obvious set of qualities around which to orient their lives. Many might think that the perfected character is wealthy, attractive, popular, fun-loving, sporty, and ever young. Others might have come to Buddhist practice because of inner pain and with the intention to fix themselves and to suffer less. Buddhism might not make us sporty, but it will ease our suffering as a consequence of pursuing right attitude.

Renunciation, in particular, runs counter to our cultural norms—at some point in any culture, but particularly in a consumer culture like ours—yet the whole path is a matter of renunciation, for progress on the path entails repeatedly letting go of what we cling to. At the material level renunciation is to live simply, with a small personal footprint. At the mental level it is to hold what we

possess lightly, not to be needy, but rather to be easily contented. Disenchantment and dispassion, mentioned in the last section as essential to liberation, are at the endpoint of renunciation. Liberation is awakening. I always like to say,

Liberation in the *Dhamma* is not to get what we want, but rather not to want.

Nonetheless, renunciation should be implemented in a balanced way, with deliberation rather than with unyielding discipline. With appropriate attention it tends to come naturally—much like children outgrowing toys—as we realize increasingly the spiritual cost of clinging to things. Renunciation also enables generosity and harmlessness.

Overall, the compass of right attitude keeps our mind oriented consistently in the direction of virtue. This becomes our constant attitude, our resolve, our aspiration as we tread the path.

8.8. The practice of foundational wisdom

The practice of right view proceeds by taking up each of various themes of *Dhamma* in two phases. The first phase focuses on developing a conceptual, or intellectual understanding of *Dhamma*. In a modern context this might proceed much as we study an academic topic like biology. The second phase focuses on “contemplation,” primarily sitting cross-legged meditating on chosen *Dhammic* themes. This opens up the investigation, verification, refinement, and internalization of *Dhamma* to direct experience, leading with repeated practice to an effortless, intuitive apprehension of *Dhamma*. Effectively, we learn to see the world through the eyes of the Buddha.

The first, intellectual phase involves listening to the wise expound the *Dhamma*, by reading books on the *Dhamma*, by considering what is thereby learned, by asking questions about what is uncertain, and so on.

When the *Dhamma*, and *Vinaya* declared by the Tathāgata is being taught, he listens well, gives ear, applies his mind to knowing, rejects what is worthless, grabs hold of what is worthwhile, and is endowed with the patience to conform with the teaching. (AN 6.88)

There is a wealth of *Dhammic* textual material available for study; a modicum has been provided here to get started. But be aware that the *Dhamma* comes alive only with practice; the *Dhamma* is inert if it remains in the head. A

would-be potter does not read *Pottery for Dummies* then claim to be a potter. A would-be chef does not read *The Joy of Cooking* then claim to be a cook. A would-be explorer does not sit around reading *National Geographic* then claim great adventures. A would-be follower of the Buddhist path does not read this book then claim to be a stream-enterer.

This brings us to the second phase, analogous to feeling the clay between your fingers, to whipping the eggs, or to getting chased by overwrought natives. It is becoming intimate with suffering, craving, and the rest of the multitude of factors mentioned in your *Dhamma* books, by observing them arise and fall in your own experience. There are contemplative practices that fulfill the requirements of right view. The most significant is the well-structured technique of *Dhamma investigation (dhamma-vicaya)*, which is the second factor of the *awakening factors* (10.4), and also known in Pali as *satipaṭṭhāna*. *Satipaṭṭhāna* in turn is historically the precursor of the various modern forms *vipassanā*, or insight meditation. The Pali term is most often poorly translated as ‘foundations of mindfulness,’ so I will use ‘*Dhamma*-investigation’ and *satipaṭṭhāna* interchangeably.⁷

Step by step, *satipaṭṭhāna* investigates a chosen *Dhamma* teaching in terms of experiential observables that verify the teaching, The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (MN 10) itself is a tutorial based on a limited set of such teachings, such as impermanence, craving, suffering, the aggregates, and the sense spheres. A qualifying teaching must have corresponding observables that can be directly experienced. Non-self is the major theme of *satipaṭṭhāna*, but in which it is necessary to investigate the absence of observables. The general case looks like this,

Dhamma ⇒ investigation ⇐ observables

Here is how it works: take your place on your cushion, cross your legs, adjust your posture, put aside worldly concerns, and take a few long breaths. Next choose a *Dhamma* teaching as a *theme* of investigation. Let’s use as an example the five aggregates already discussed in 8.2 above. By this time, you will already have a working conceptual understanding of the teaching. Next you will determine the scope of observables. In the case of the aggregates, you simply monitor whatever momentary awareness events arise. Your objective is to comprehend the observables clearly in terms of the *Dhamma*, and the *Dhamma* in terms of the observables. You might first look for forms, then for feelings, and so on. Over and over, observe how these events arise and vanish, condition one another, and so on, to completely familiarize the dynamics at work in fabricating the objects of consciousness.

Composure (samādhi) plays a critical role in the success of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice; the seven awakening factors describe the integration of Dhamma-investigation with composure. As you become familiar, and comfortable with the current exercise, and remain engaged, you will find that the mind settles quite readily. The meditative state of composure will quietly lock in your engagement, give rise to rapture, filter out abstract conceptualizations and narratives, and encourage insight. Composure also aids *internalization* (7.1) of a purely intuitive apprehension of Dhamma, through which you begin the see *Dhammically* without dependence on conceptual thought and deliberation, through which *Dhamma* becomes second nature. Composure, the awakening factors, and internalization of *Dhamma* will be discussed in 10.4.⁸

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1. Hamilton (2000) is perhaps the clearest advocate of this point.
 2. The word ‘phenomenon’ is so used in the philosophical school of phenomenology. Some Pali translators translate *dhamma* as ‘phenomenon,’ others as ‘mental object,’ etc.
 3. In the primary application of the aggregates, the Buddha does something clever: he compounds two contrary categories: the *aggregates*, and our *appropriations*, to form the *aggregates of appropriation (upādānak-khandha)*. Appropriations (11.3) are the objects of consciousness we take most seriously, things we identify with, such as our car, or our selves. Contemplating the aggregates from which these objects arise undermines our fixed ideas about such things. We are furthermore asked to consider, as if to drive this point home, “this is not me, this is not mine, this is not of me, I am not of this” (see the many discourses of SN 35).
 4. Later we will notice that what goes on in each sphere reflects the chain of dependent coarising, beginning with the following subsegment:

... → sixfold sphere → contact → feeling → craving → ...
 5. The epistemic investigation of consciousness reflected in the aggregates, and in the sense spheres are described in a wider context in Cintita (2025, 5.4).
 6. Fuller (2005).
 7. Cintita (2025, 2.2) discusses the etymology of *satipaṭṭhāna*.
 8. Cintita (2025) covers the technique of *satipaṭṭhāna* in detail, as well as its relation to composure.

9. Cultivating virtue

Of all the fragrances—sandal, tagara, blue lotus, and jasmine—the fragrance of virtue is the sweetest. Faint is the fragrance of tagara, and sandal, but excellent is the fragrance of the virtuous, wafting even among the gods. (Dpd 55-6)

The traveler on the path will become a saint long before they become an *arahant*. The ethics group (*sīlak-khandha*) consists of:

- (3) right speech (*sammā vācā*),
- (4) right action (*sammā kammanta*), and
- (5) right livelihood (*sammā ājīva*).

Together these represent exemplary conduct in the world. Of the three groups of the noble eightfold path, the ethics group has the greatest continuity with the Buddhist life. Consequently, the present chapter substantially overlaps but also supplements the discussion found in the first part of this book. There we discovered three primary ways in which ethical behavior manifests in Buddhist practice: through generosity, harmlessness, and purity.

Generosity (dāna) is found in speech, or action directed toward the benefit others, realized in many different ways, most typically in community.

Harmlessness (ahimsā) is found in speech, or action that respects the safety of others, realized conventionally through adhering to precepts, which are rules of thumb that disallow certain behaviors.

Purity (visuddhī) is an internalized quality of character that moves spontaneously, and effortlessly toward ethical conduct. Renunciation, kindness, and wisdom have become as natural as breathing.

These three forms of practice continue in the Buddhist path. However, the development of purity is the primary concern of the path. After discussing right speech, right action, and right livelihood, we will take up *kamma* (*karma*) once again, the underlying foundation of Buddhist virtue, but also the foundation of higher attainments along the path.

9.1. Right speech

It is important to appreciate how much emphasis the Buddha placed on *right speech*. This is true in many of the discourses, and in the *Vinaya*, the monastic code. The importance accorded speech is plausibly why it comes as the very first factor in the ethics group. It is easy to think that speech is relatively harmless when compared to bodily actions. We all know sayings like, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me,” and “Actions speak louder than words.” But consider that racism, sexism, nationalism, and eventually war, and ethnic cleansing all start with, and are driven by many acts of wrong speech. We abuse speech to seek vengeance, to turn one person, or group against another, to deceive, and manipulate, to get people to buy things they do not need, and cannot afford, and to exalt the magnificence of ourselves. Saying what is not true, in particular, undermines our trust in each other, a trust that society requires to function effectively.

In this modern age of mass communication right speech has become even more critical, as it finds immediate circulation through modern forms of media. The speech of each of us can easily reach mass, global audiences, sometimes even inadvertently going viral. Given a few advances in technology since the Buddha’s day, “speech” now includes the written word, blogs, videos, tweets, radio broadcasts, and maybe even pantomime.

The conventional five Buddhist precepts include an abstention from lying. The following enhanced set is specified in the context of the path (e.g., AN 10.99):

- Not to lie—“I have here in my hand the names of eighty communist agents who have penetrated the State Department!”
- Not to speak divisively—“He’s got two wives, and a bartender to support.”
- Not to speak harshly—“You %&\$(*@ jerk! Why don’t you learn how to drive?”
- Not to chatter idly—“Blah, blah, blah ... Moreover, yakety, yakety, yak.”

Violation of any of the first three of these precepts clearly brings harm, but the last precept, like the precept concerning intoxication, more specifically aims at purification of mind, in this case controlling our tendency toward restlessness, and obsession. Modern media strengthens our dispositions for this kind of wrong speech. For instance, watching talk shows or situation comedies is roughly equivalent to idle chatter.

As most of us are aware, there is an art to speech. We can use it skillfully to

involve others in desired results, to avoid offense, and maintain interpersonal harmony, to inspire, and to instruct. The Buddha, a master communicator, has a lot to say about the art of speech. He gives particular attention to interpersonal harmony, as we learned in Chapter five.

With regard to idle chatter, the Buddha provides us with examples of topics of conversation to avoid, at least for monastics, whose behavior is more highly regulated.

Whereas some *brahmins* and contemplatives, living off food given in faith, are addicted to talking about lowly topics such as these—talking about kings, robbers, ministers of state; armies, alarms, and battles; food, and drink; clothing, furniture, garlands, and scents; relatives; vehicles; villages, towns, cities, the countryside; women, and heroes; the gossip of the street, and the well; tales of the dead; tales of diversity [philosophical discussions], the creation of the world, and of the sea, and talk of whether things exist, or not—he abstains from talking about lowly topics such as these. This, too, is part of his virtue. (DN 1 i 7-8)

He also warned of our relentless tendency to cling to views, to debate, and to take pride in being right.

Whereas some *brahmins* and contemplatives, living off food given in faith, are addicted to debates such as these—“You understand this doctrine, and discipline? I’m the one who understands this doctrine, and discipline. How could you understand this doctrine, and discipline? You’re practicing wrongly. I’m practicing rightly. I’m being consistent. You’re not. What should be said first you said last. What should be said last you said first. What you took so long to think out has been refuted. Your doctrine has been overthrown. You’re defeated. Go, and try to salvage your doctrine; extricate yourself if you can!”—he abstains from debates such as these. This, too, is part of his virtue. (DN 1 i 8)

The ethics of speech is directly connected with purity of mind for the simple reason that thought is close to speech, or as the Buddha phrased it,

Thought and deliberation are that which is about to break into speech. (MN 44 i 301)

We can generally guess another’s intentions by noting which precept

concerning speech is being violated. Lying involves gaining some kind of personal advantage in competition with others' interests through deception. Speaking divisively is an attempt to destroy someone's reputation out of retribution or general ill-will. Idle chatter comes from restlessness in a fog of delusion. To encourage these forms of speech would be to encourage defiled thoughts. To restrain these tendencies provides a very good opportunity for insight into mind, and support for practicing purity of mind.

9.2. Right action

Everyone agrees that sticks and stones really *can* break one's bones. Right action is the core of ethics, and many examples have been given in *Buddhist Life*. However, discussions of right action generally highlight three precepts:

- (1) Not to assault living things.—“Take that [wack wack], cockroaches from hell!”
- (2) Not to take what is not given.—“Hmm [snatch], I don't think anyone will miss this.”
- (3) Not to commit sensual misconduct.—“With the wife out of town [suavely adjusting necktie], I can have some *real* fun.”

These are the first three of the conventional five precepts that Buddhists try to uphold. These are wide ranging, since the first inhibits intentions rooted in aversion, the second intentions rooted in greed, and the third intentions rooted in delusion. It is important that we give these precepts free range, for instance, extending the first to protecting living beings wherever they may be threatened, and developing kindness toward all living beings.

We should also recognize the importance of minor precepts, including rules of thumb of our own creation. Often these serve as an expedient for avoiding conditions in which a major precept might be violated. For instance, if I am a master safe-cracker newly released from prison but determined to live a blameless life ever more, I might want to shun my old colleagues in crime, lest they have new seductive perpetrations afoot.

Notably missing from the three-part account of right action is the fifth of the standard five precepts:

- (5) Not to enter the heedlessness of spirits, liquor, and intoxicants.
—“Shumbuddy shez ish bo'le ish half empty, but ... Where'd it go?”

This general precept is more of the nature of the proscription against visiting

old colleagues in crime, in that we can anticipate only eventual harm. Observing this precept shapes the purity of our *kammic* landscape, and of our characters at a more subtle, more cautionary level in avoiding a habit pattern that can easily spin out of control. The the following precept, commonly followed by monastics and monastic-like people, is of a similar nature:

- Not to dance, sing, play music, or watch shows.—“One, two, cha-cha-cha.”

This precept supports purity of mind at a deep level, in this case controlling our tendency to restlessness and obsession with sensual pleasures, by *guarding the senses*.

In addition to observing precepts, right action properly includes finding and implementing ways to bring benefit to others, as discussed in Chapter two “Generosity.” Much of the discussion of this in the early texts includes actions effecting local communities, such as supporting the monastics, and caring for the sick, or indigent. However, we now live in a smaller and more complex world of enormous suffering, such that higher and more complex levels of social engagement are appropriate as part of the practice of ethics, as long as these bring benefit to people, or to other living creatures.

9.3. Right livelihood

Right livelihood is the third and final factor of the ethics group of the path. Including it as a factor of the path addresses a critical issue in pursuing the higher path of practice. This is that our chosen career, or other activities that will occupy our time, might limit our *kammic* choices in unfortunate ways. Not only might we have substantially given up control of our practice during working hours, but—regardless of whether we are taking orders from another person—our actions are still a part of our practice, that is, they will still have our intentionality, and will produce harm or benefit. They will bear fruits that shape, or misshape our future development and well-being. Therefore, it is important that we choose our livelihood with great care.

So, when is a particular livelihood right? We might begin by looking at the job description. Is each task mentioned consistent with right speech, and right action, and conducive to wholesome thought? Does a task involve deceit? Does it involve killing, or otherwise harming living beings? Does it entail taking what is not given freely? Does it involve, or encourage misuse of sexuality? If a livelihood forces us to act habitually with greedy or cruel intentions, our character will become marked by greed or cruelty. Consider that when we take

on employment, we rent ourselves out, such that our boss predetermines many, or most, of our choices during our work day. Effectively, their practice becomes our practice. This means that our character might come more and more to resemble that of our boss rather than our *Dhammic* ideals.

The Buddha specifically points out the following as characteristic of wrong livelihoods,

... scheming, persuading, hinting, belittling, usury ... (MN 117)

These sound embarrassingly like a modern corporate business model. It suggests that it would be a challenge to find right livelihood in sales, in marketing, or in investment (exceptions are certainly found under certain circumstances).

The Buddha also listed the following as livelihoods to be avoided:

- (1) Business in weapons. This includes hunting, soldiering,¹ and even weapons design, or manufacture.
- (2) Business in intoxicants. This would include tending bar, selling, or producing alcohol, pushing drugs, and growing opium. Benedictine monks would no longer be able to brew beer if the Buddha had a say in the matter.
- (3) Business in meat. This includes slaughter, raising animals for slaughter, and selling meat.
- (4) Business in poison. This would include manufacturing pesticides, and herbicides but also applying them to crops or general pest extermination.
- (5) Business in human beings. In the Buddha's day this had to do with dealing in slaves or prostitutes. (see AN 5.177)

Notice that these criteria are broader than those of the more standard precepts in that they also proscribe providing supporting conditions for others to violate precepts. To manufacture a sword is not to kill directly, but certainly provides a condition for that. To sell someone a bottle of booze is to be implicated even if we remain completely sober ourselves. In this way, right livelihood reaches beyond the letter of the simple precepts. However, in wrong livelihood we are likely repeatedly, and relentlessly implicated in such behaviors over the course of an entire career. To make things worse, most of us are herded into limited options for employment, but need an income. If we have debt, or a family to feed, or if we cling to property or possessions that must be maintained and insured, we require a higher income, narrowing our options for livelihood even further.

Right livelihood raises an important question, already alluded to: If we are

compelled by our boss to sell pesticides to a customer (and to convince them they need four cans, where one would suffice), is it really *our* bad *kamma*? If our act of killing an enemy combatant is under orders of our commanding officer, are *we* breaking a precept, or is he? After all, if we don't do it someone else will, so aren't we off the hook? The Buddhist answer is much like the decision of the Nuremberg Trial: we are not off the hook, orders are not just orders, we are still the heir of our own *kamma*, as we will see below. This accurately reflects how such actions affect the mind; for instance, combat veterans are known to commit acts of domestic violence at rates much higher than the general population, presumably while no longer following orders. Military training and combat experience leave deep ruts, and soldiers often return from service with serious mental health issues, as bitter fruits of their *kamma*.

Now, monastics already have the great benefit of what might be called the ideal livelihood: none. First, in order to be ordained into the *Saṅgha* one must be quite free of conventional societal obligations: no wealth, no debt, no family responsibilities. Second, one lives outside of the exchange economy. Third, one has relative autonomy in day-to-day affairs; rarely is there anyone else who tells us what to do, and the communal activities of a monastery are benign. The factor of right livelihood was clearly included in the path with householders in mind, who must often find a balance between social obligations, and the *Dhammic* quality of livelihood. Reducing one's obligations as much as possible is nonetheless an option in the householder life, for instance, living simply, buying used merchandise, and avoiding credit-card debt. These might serve to expand the range of available options in choosing a livelihood.

9.4. *Kamma*

Kamma (Sanskrit, *karma*) is defined by the Buddha in terms of one's intention (*cetanā*) in performing a deed. *Kamma* is specifically "intentional action." *Kamma* has an ethical quality that depends on the nature of the intention that drives the deed, roughly, in modern terms, whether it is for personal advantage (self-centered), or for communal benefit (pro-social). The Buddha called self-centered intentions *unwholesome*, or *unskillful* (*akusala*), while what he called *wholesome*, or *skillful* (*kusala*) intentions are recognizably pro-social. Moreover, unwholesome intentions are rooted psychologically in greed, aversion or delusion. Wholesome intentions are rooted in their opposites: renunciation, good-will or wisdom. The practices of merit-making (performing generous deeds for the benefit of others), and adhering to precepts (avoiding the pitfalls that lead to harm to others), when performed without ulterior

motives—that is, with a pure mind—accord with wholesome intentions and discord with unwholesome intentions. Our practice upholds wholesome intentions and eliminates unwholesome intentions. The action itself may be of body, speech, or mind. For instance, a deluded thought is unskillful *kamma*. Notice that more generally *all* of Buddhist practice is *kamma*: meditation is *kamma*; every deed has the potential for being either skillful or unskillful, even if we are simply bustling about town. For this reason we should,

... see danger in the slightest fault. (MN 6 i 33).

Essentially, we practice all the time, whether we want to or not. This calls for the continual recollection of precepts, reflecting on (within narrow limits) the consequences of our actions in the world, and monitoring of the purity of our intentions under all circumstances.

It is natural for modern people to think that benefit, or harm for others, and benefit, or harm for ourselves are two opposing matters, and that ethical conduct is a balancing act between the two. The Buddha saw it differently,

I will be the heir of whatever deeds, good, or bad, that I do.
(AN 5.57)

Our *kammic* acts shape the world not only for others, but also shape our own world. Wholesome deeds work to our own benefit, alongside the benefit they tend to bring others. Unwholesome deeds work against our own benefit, alongside the harm they tend to bring others. For instance,

Greed, aversion, and delusion, friend, make one blind, unseeing,
and ignorant; they destroy wisdom, are bound up with distress,
and do not lead to *nibbāna*. (AN 3.71)

Renunciation, good-will, or wisdom have the opposite effects, and are bound up with a kind of *supramundane* (*lokuttara*) pleasure (seemingly characterized by a warm, “heart-felt” sensation in the chest). rather than with distress. Such effects of our own *kamma* on ourselves are the *results, or fruits of kamma* (*kamma-vipāka, or kamma-phala*). These shape the nature of our individual character. Distress or supramundane pleasure is experienced immediately, but doesn’t dissipate quickly in the manner of mundane pleasure. *Kammic* results also accumulate (which makes us the heir of our own deeds) through habituation in continued practice, or (in the case of painful results) in malpractice. The cumulation of *kammic* results is called *old kamma*, dispositions to act now as we have repeatedly in the past. Eventually our world can be like heaven, or hell in this very life, depending on the habituation of

either skillful, or unskillful intentions. This process can be verified if we consider what we intuitively all agree Scrooge's world must have felt like before and after that fateful night, or if we consider our own trajectory in life, or if we consider the trajectories of others around us.

I like to think of *kamma* as forming a *kammic landscape* deeply rutted by ox-cart tracks. The wheels are disposed to falling into the deepest ruts, and, when they do so, those ruts become ever deeper. But we are always, in principle, free to steer toward open ground, beginning a new rut, or to choose the rut least traveled on. Our *kammic* landscape is deliberately reshaped when we choose a new route, then follow the new one over and over again, while an old rut erodes. This is the essence of Buddhist practice, first to determine what is skillful, then to do that repeatedly, or to determine what is unskillful, then to avoid that.

In this simile, the current state of the rutted landscape, a product of past choices, is what is sometimes called *old kamma*, whereas any new choices in our direction of travel are called *new kamma*. *Old kamma* reflects our current dispositions, which is to say, our character in its current state of development toward awakening. Our reservoir of *old kamma* is continually being reshaped by *new kamma*, particularly by deliberate choices that defy the attraction of the ruts. Our practice of ethics takes us out of the ruts which have resulted from habitual greed and aversion, into directions that produce sweeter *kammic* fruits. The word *Vinaya* (literally 'leading elsewhere'), the guidebook of monastic conduct, fits into this metaphor."² It is through our *kammic* actions that we make and remake our *kammic* landscape, that we make and remake our character.

There is thereby an imperative in Buddhist practice to nourish what is skillful, and to weed out what is unskillful. By projecting *kammic* results beyond the bounds of the individual life, this imperative becomes even more emphatic. Practice is reframed as a kind of epic battle of *kammic* forces from beginning-less time, that will generally continue indefinitely into the future, carrying us relentlessly through *samsāra*, between realms of bliss and realms of woe.

It is curious how the landscape metaphor fits the epic battle metaphor: when we are born, we are born into an already well-rutted landscape, as if someone else had been driving an ox-cart hither and thither for many years before we appeared on the scene. Consider that your brother Bob to the east is dealing with an entirely different set of ruts in his field. Each of you has impulses toward anger, for instance, but they began manifesting themselves in entirely different ways from your earliest years. Yours flares up and turns to action

spontaneously, then dissipates. His is kept under wraps for days as he plans retaliation against the object of his ire, following well-rehearsed scripts that he would not have been clever enough to write himself. A question worth reflecting on is: Who was this prenatal ox-cart driver?

When we study *kamma* and *purity* of mind, we discover how ethics for the Buddha is psychologically rooted, and therefore inseparable from human nature. Many modern people are suspicious of ethics across the board, and have been for centuries, largely citing its lack of a natural basis: you cannot derive the “ought” of morality from the “is” of nature. Many claim that the “ought” must require the authority of God to tell us what is “good” and what is “bad.” Dhamma does not work that way. Keown (1992) draws our attention to the close similarity of Buddhist ethics to (later) traditions of *virtue ethics* in western thought, developed particularly by Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. Virtue ethics provides a well-articulated perspective that is useful in understanding the ultimate aim of *Dhamma* practice.

Virtue ethics relies on the concept of *natural function*. The heart has a natural function, which contributes to fulfilling the even higher function of the cardiovascular system, which contributes to fulfilling the even higher function of the whole organism (whatever that may be). Artifacts similarly have functions: your toaster, your car. People have functions with respect to their various roles: a pilot, a CEO, a teacher. The point is that as soon as we recognize a thing’s function, we are in a position to employ the words “good” and “bad.” We don’t need the authority of God to tell us what is “good” and “bad.” Someone can have bad heart, someone else is lucky to have good hiking boots. Humans also have a natural function, that remains obscure until we understand what a human is, which, I submit, *Dhamma* and *Dhamma* practice do for us.

Virtue is that which fulfills the natural function of the human being. However, we humans are like bad toasters; we require extensive training (repairing) before we can fulfill our function reasonably well, let alone optimally. This is where *Dhamma* practice really excels: the western traditions train the rational mind, our practice trains deeper levels of intuition and underlying dispositions, so that our ethics is internalized as something spontaneous, requiring little or no deliberation. The notion of the perfection of virtue as a quality of character and as an end goal, or telos, is shared in both *Dhamma* and the western teachings. In the *Dhamma*, this is nibbāna, final liberation or full awakening. Also in both, some form of supramundane well-being, dissimilar to worldly sense-based pleasure, supervenes on virtue practice, variously described as flourishing, living a meaningful life, a life worth living, or simply happiness.

9.5. The end of *kamma*

It is not enough that we stop producing unwholesome *kamma*. The fully awakened *arahant* produces no *kamma*. How do we stop producing *kamma* altogether?

And what, bhikkhus, is the way leading to the cessation of *kamma*. It is this noble eightfold path. (SN 35.145)

Of course: the elixir that cures all ills, the noble eightfold path. But wait, isn't the path a matter of practice, and isn't practice just *kamma* with *kammic* results? Yes, but the Buddha distinguishes four kinds of *kamma* that those of us who are yet to awaken produce:

- (1) dark *kamma* with dark result,
- (2) bright *kamma* with bright result,
- (3) dark-and-bright *kamma* with dark-and-bright result,
- (4) *kamma* that is neither dark, nor bright with neither-dark-nor-bright result, *kamma* that leads to the destruction of *kamma*. (AN 4.235)

Dark kamma is simply unwholesome *kamma*, and *bright kamma* is wholesome *kamma*. These new terms are fortunate because, rather than sounding like ethical categories, they hint at how our intentions actually feel as they arise. The third category is that of mixed intentions; most of our intentions are, in fact, complex, for instance, wishing benefit for others, yet being attached to results as a matter of pride, or of making favorable impressions. *Kamma* that is neither dark, nor bright weakens the conditions that otherwise give rise to *kammic* intentions in gradually *appeasing fabrications* (*sañkhāra-samatha*).

Ultimately, there is no actor, there are no actions. The end of *kamma* does not entail the end of virtuous behavior from the perspective of the outside observer—quite the contrary. What seems to occur is a shift in the cognitive mechanisms at work in manifesting virtue. This need not be as strange as it sounds. Consider a virtuoso pianist who sits down to play a concerto in a full concert hall. The conductor raises his baton. What does she do? Nothing! Intentionality ends right there. Her fingers already know what to do, independently of any sense of agency. In fact, the minute she tries to think or plan, a mistake in the observable behavior is more likely to occur. Charlie Parker famously said, “Don’t play the saxophone, let it play you.” Years of intense training ensure that the task at hand has been thoroughly *internalized*. Internalization is discussed further in 10.1.

A similar shift seems to occur for Confucian, and Taoist masters as *wu wei*

(‘non-doing’). Momentary experiences of *flow* (studied in positive psychology) seem to involve a similar process. For instance, a basketball player, at the moment when their actions are about to decide the outcome of the game, might have the sense of being a mere observer as the ball goes where it needs to go on its own accord. Likewise, as the self gets completely out of the way, virtue flows uninhibited, without bias or constraint, with no sense of agency, on its own accord. Pali makes a subtle distinction between the *arahant* who is purely virtuous (*sīlavā*), and the rest of us who are mere ethical constructs (*sīla-maya*) (MN 78).

9.6. The practice of virtue

When you first begin to follow precepts, conventional generosity or ritual, this regulation of your behavior may feel restrictive, like you've fit yourself uncomfortably into a box that affords little freedom of movement. It is possible that your non-Buddhist friends will think that that is exactly what you've gotten yourself into. Remarkably, within a short while, if you have been practicing diligently, these same practices will likely feel liberating. Certainly, most monastics seem to discover this sense of liberation even in following the hundreds of precepts we follow. How can this be?

I always like to say,

Liberation in the *Dhamma* is not to get what we want, but not to want.

You were already tightly restricted before coming to *Dhamma* practice by the ever deepening ruts of your *kammic* landscape that kept you locked mindlessly and relentlessly in certain unfortunate patterns of behavior and thought, much of which were unskillfully dedicated to the fruitless and painful search for personal advantage. The practice of virtue may give you your first taste of this higher standard of liberation by lifting you out of your *kammic* ruts, by showing that there is no inevitability in your *kammic* conditioning, that there is a different way of being in the world, a more deliberate and fortunate way, and that it is your choice. But the realization of this does take some discipline.

As you practice this different way of being in the world, you will get a clearer picture of the intentions that had been driving your actions in the world, intentions that you hadn't noticed while you were on autopilot, passively following the ruts of habitual action. But as you regulate your behaviors, and begin to bump up against the walls of the box your friends think you have fit yourself into, you will begin to see clearly your habitual intentions, some of

which support, and some of which hinder practice. Practice demands that you frustrate many of those intentions. Frustrated intentions are a prime opportunity for a deeper *investigation* of *kamma*. You will begin to see in what sense many of your thoughts, and impulses are indeed unskillful, dangerous, and (in fact) uncomfortable. Indeed, you will have the opportunity to discover what you are really made of.

You should learn to be very attentive to your intentions throughout the day. Unwholesome intentions are those carrying some degree of suffering—stress, anxiety, unease, or dissatisfaction—like a shadow. They will also give rise to misperception, will take you away from the path, and, when acted out, will commonly cause harm for others. They also fall under at least one of the categories of greed, aversion, and delusion.³ Giving attention to intentions, it should be possible to practice restraint, for instance, to stop at the point where urge turns to speech whenever you realize that the urge is unwholesome.

Particularly challenging is anger, which can overwhelm your discernment very quickly. But even this will come under control as you progress in practice. There are a variety of techniques for stopping at this critical juncture between urge, and bodily or verbal action, and you will discover some on your own. For instance, never ever write an email in an angry frame of mind; if some issue needs to be addressed wait until the mind is calm, then address it with gentle words, at the right time. Face-to-face encounters that turn to anger might require that you quietly, and abruptly leave the room to go simmer down, lest you utter something demeritorious.

As objects of practice in themselves, you learn to improve the quality of your intentions, to weed out the unwholesome, and to cultivate the wholesome. Sometimes this involves attending to the conditions that bring about these unwholesome factors. For instance, if you avoid stressful activities, anger is less likely to arise. Note that if the recovering alcoholic avoids the company of people who are drinking alcohol, they are less likely to have the impulse to do so. You can similarly avoid circumstances that tend to lead you into undesirable but accustomed ruts. Sometimes weeding out an arisen unwholesome intention involves simply diverting the mind away from it, or instead directing the mind *toward* it, but as an object of attentive *investigation*. These techniques all belong to right effort, the first of the three path factors of the faculty group, which we take up in 10.2.

Another way to practice virtue is to protect the purity of mind from activities that cause no imminent harm, but which develop unskillful habit patterns nonetheless. For instance, you do well to avoid playing violent video games, or watching violent television programs, or listening to hateful speech on the

radio, because these activities doubtlessly condition the mind toward anger and fear, with time scoring deep, ugly ruts in your *kammic* landscape. Likewise, channel-, or web-surfing may train the mind toward restlessness, and discontent. Entertainments that excite lust will tend similarly to depurify mind, even while doing no outward (verbal or physical) harm. Modern times have produced new channels for speech, or speech-like activities: situation comedies, talk shows, hate radio, crime dramas, war movies, soap operas, pundits, cell phones, attention-grabbing ads, video games, web surfing, email, texting, and social media. The volume and vacuity of much of this content have put what counts as idle chatter off the charts in our modern world.

Examples of divisive, or harsh speech along with more than occasional depictions of physical violence abound, which your *children* are particularly vulnerable to emulate. It is imperative that you, as a Buddhist practitioner, serious about the path, try substantially to limit your, and their media exposure to more elucidating kinds of content. Some modern Buddhist writers provide similar advice concerning modern media as a generalization of the precept that proscribes intoxication. This emphasizes the stupefying effect of much media, which also cannot be overemphasized.

With the time you save by making less use of modern media, you might think about fulfilling your practice of generosity through meritorious social engagement: show up to city hall meetings, visit some charitable organizations to see what help they need, find a way to make the world a better place. Or spend the time sitting on a cushion.

The practice of right livelihood focuses primarily on understanding the consequences of our major life choices, the benefits, and harm thereof. Such assessments might occur at a young age, before choosing a college major or embarking on a career plan. It might involve a reassessment of decisions already made. I used to do research and development (in what now seems like a previous life), sometimes under U.S. Defense Department contracts. One project, for instance, involved automated, intelligent, GPS-based route planning for some kind of small autonomous aircraft, whose description was highly redacted.⁴ This ended up being a major factor for me in ending my high-paid high-tech corporate career in favor of what I now do. However, the radical redirecting of my career path would have been extremely difficult if I were not at a point in life in which my children were reaching adulthood, and my family obligations were loosening up.

In these modern times it is probably particularly difficult to find a right livelihood. If you do not design weapons systems, you might work in marketing, trying to convince the public that ingesting some horrid concoction of petro-

chemicals, high fructose corn syrup, and saturated fats will add zest to their lives. You often have little choice of livelihood, because the modern economy offers few choices. Moreover, what is considered a respectable livelihood in our society may be quite a bit different from what is right livelihood in Buddhist culture. Being a soldier, or a banker, investing in real estate, exterminating insects and pests, or stretching the truth a little to make a sale is in good stead in one but not in the other.

Furthermore, large modern enterprises typically distribute decisions in such a way that obscure ethical responsibility, and wage slaves have little control over the content of their labor. You might consider yourself lucky to find a job at a retail store in which you will be required to sell pesticides, booze, meat, and (especially in the USA) guns, with whatever scheming, persuading, and hinting will close the sale. No religious exemptions are generally offered. More broadly, the contingencies of your life, and your decisions are likely to make your Buddhist practice a part-time matter. Unfortunately, our practice does not fit neatly into a part-time box, for your *kamma* committed throughout the day bears fruit, sometimes sweet, sometimes bitter.

Perfecting virtue is a long practice that requires patience. As you begin Buddhist practice you might think, “I am already a nice guy. I’ve got virtue covered.” Accordingly, you might place your primary focus on the more alluring practice of meditation or altar maintenance. However, if you sincerely engage with the practice of virtue, you are likely to discover that you are not as nice as you thought, far from it (at least this was my shocking experience). However, this discovery should never be cause for guilt or despair (which would just be a further accretion of unwholesome, aversive factors). You are human, and humans are intrinsically faulty beings; if it were otherwise the world would be a much saner, kinder place than it is. You can find enormous satisfaction in the realization that you are, after beginningless time, finally doing something to correct the intrinsic fault within human nature. Be forgiving of your own faults, and also of those of others.

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1. See SN 42.3 for more on being a warrior.
 2. Kalupahana (1995, p. 131).
 3. Refer back to 4.2 on purity, for more on the qualities of unwholesome intentions.
 4. The weapon system was doubtlessly the drone, and the guidance system seems to have become the GPS systems people use in their cars now. Although we discussed the latter application as a future possibility, no one in our team thought to file a patent for this potential consumer product. I’m grateful for this oversight: intoxicated by riches (“haha!”), I might never have become the simple monk with a laptop that I am today.

10. Cultivating faculties

But there comes a time when his mind becomes inwardly steadied, settled, unified, and composed. That composure is then calm, and refined; it has attained to full tranquility, and achieved unification; it is not maintained by strenuous suppression of the defilements. Then, to whatever factor realizable by direct knowledge he directs his mind, he achieves the capacity of realizing that factor by direct knowledge, whenever the necessary conditions obtain. (AN 3.101)

The first five factors of the noble eightfold provide a set of basic *primary practices* concerned with the performance and mastery of wisdom and virtue. The final three factors constitute the *faculty group*,¹ which serve to enable and optimize the five primary practices:

- (6) right effort (*sammā vāyāma*),
- (7) right recollection (*sammā sati*), and
- (8) right composure (*sammā samādhi*).

A *faculty (indriya)* can be understood as a particular capability that contributes to the efficacy of some primary task, or practice. A tightrope walker needs a good sense of balance, a salesperson needs a winning personality, a student needs to stay awake, a judge needs to be equanimous and unbiased. Absent these, one is said to have “little aptitude” for the practice they have undertaken. Let’s begin by looking at the *Dhamma* of the *five faculties*, also known as the *five strengths (bala)*:

- faith (*saddhā*),
- energy (*virīya*, similar to ‘effort’ *vāyāma*),
- recollection (*sati*),
- composure (*samādhi*), and
- wisdom (*paññā*). (See SN 48, 50)

Notice that the three middle factors correspond to the faculty group within the path. However, the first enables one to enter the path, and the last is a result

reached for having walked the path. There are, incidentally, also additional sets of faculties, most prominent of which is the *sense faculties* (eye, ear, nose, etc.), generally also referred to simply as *indriya*.

A Buddhist practitioner without faith is like a tightrope walker without a sense of balance. One without energy or effort is like a student who cannot stay awake, and so on. The five faculties are described as conditionally related: faith supports energy; faith and energy together support recollection; faith, energy, and recollection support composure; and all of the above support wisdom (SN 48.50). Wisdom here apparently corresponds to the *ninth* factor of the noble eightfold path, right knowledge, mentioned in 7.1.

Each of the three path factors is at root a natural human capacity, even composure (according to the Buddha, as we will see), and available for accomplishing challenging tasks outside of Buddhist practice as well. However, these faculties are developed, cultivated, and refined to a particularly refined degree in *Dhamma* practice to support *Dhamma* practice.

10.1. The role of the faculties in practice

Dhamma practice (*Dhamma-paṭipatti*) is skilled practice (primarily in virtue, and in wisdom) under the guidance of *Dhamma*. As a skilled practice, it is performed not just for some immediate benefit, but also for progressive acquisition of practice skills, potentially to extremely high standards. Outside of Buddhism such training eventually produces, say, the virtuoso concert pianist. Within Buddhism it eventually produces the awakened one.

Significant progress toward awakening is demanding in two ways. First, *Dhamma* practice must be relentless. In fact, the ubiquitous phrase ‘development and cultivation’ (*bhāvanā-bahulikatā*) literally means ‘development and doing a lot.’ Since practice is *kamma*, the opportunity for practice is ever-present. Second, *Dhamma* practice demands a lot from our naturally available mental faculties to optimize *skilled engagement* in our practice. These faculties themselves are accordingly also developed as part of *Dhamma* practice. We understand a lot about *skill acquisition* from cognitive science, and the basic elements of skill acquisition are easily recognized from the various mundane skills we all have acquired in everyday life, from walking and reading, to driving a car and playing chess. I hope that it will be appreciated by the end of this chapter that *Dhamma* practice is much like the practice toward advanced skills, such as that acquired by the virtuoso pianist.

This natural, broader perspective on development and cultivation in Buddhist

practice as advanced skill acquisition provides a coherent, functional explanation of a large number of key concepts in *Dhamma*. It also helps us understand how the Buddha's refined teachings on sharpening the faculties have found application outside of *Dhamma* practice, for instance, in the modern mindfulness movement. Ensuring skilled engagement in the practice task at hand will certainly require ardency, or dedicated effort. It will also require that *Dhammic* skills or principles be brought to mind at the right time. It will require targeted attentiveness to the present situation in which those skills are to be enacted. It will require that decisive choices be made quickly, with no unnecessary deliberation. It will require that no mental energy be wasted on what is not relevant to the task at hand.

The development and cultivation of *Dhamma* practice follows a familiar learning curve. In the initial phases our skills are informed conceptually by reading or hearing the Dhamma, for instance, by reading this book. This in itself does not take us far, any more than memorizing the entire *Joy of Cooking* is likely to produce a master chef who has never boiled water, nor peeled an onion. Moreover, mere conceptual understanding put into immediate practice is slow, clumsy and distressing. Consider your early attempts at driving a car. Your early attempts at following precepts, monitoring intentions, or guarding the senses will be similar. Instead, our conceptual understanding turns with repeated practice into dispositions that are triggered without thought. Driving a car becomes effortless. To understand development over the course of years-long practice, the simile of the ox-cart driving over a rutted field in 9.4 is helpful: Our on-going, fully engaged skilled practice reshapes our *kammic* landscape, producing better ruts that we no longer have to think about.

Most of the effort of acquiring a skill is dedicated to training our dispositions. "Dispositions" are mentioned often in early Buddhist teachings, albeit under different names in different contexts. They include *habit patterns* (*anusaya*, literally 'sleep-alongs') and *corruptions* (*āsava*). *Fabrication* (*saṅkhāra*, literally 'making together') is the most common and general term for dispositions, but is used in a dual sense, either as an implicit dispositional factor by which conceptualizations are fabricated,² or else as the fabricated conceptualizations themselves.³ In many contexts *kamma* and *saṅkhāra* are equivalent,⁴ and so "old *kamma*" likewise refers to previously acquired dispositions acquired through past practice, that then condition new actions (new *kamma*). Relentless practice guided by *Dhamma* reshapes our dispositions, and thereby our character, so that, given enough time, they too comply with *Dhamma*.⁵

I'm going to turn to a model of modern cognitive science for a few paragraphs, but one that is immediately recognizable in our own experience of acquiring new skills. The process of acquiring skills has been compared to a man training an elephant. Initially the elephant does what it wants, but after the trainer relentlessly redirecting its behavior over time, the elephant becomes disposed to comply with the man's will. However, if the man is up there swigging sura, his own faculties will be impaired and the behavior that the elephant is expected to emulate will become haphazard and lead to poor results. The man's faculties must be fully engaged if the elephant is to be properly trained. Modern cognitive science proposes a model similar to the man and the elephant, called *dual process theory*, in terms of two distinct systems of cognition:

The *explicit system* is the one in which observable, deliberate, conceptual reasoning processes operate, and in which the discursive thought stream runs its course. It is adept at solving novel problems, but it is slow, and effortful. It is the man atop the elephant in the metaphor.

The *implicit system* is based in underlying, largely non-conceptual (intuitive) dispositions, whose operation is largely unconscious. It recognizes and follows repeated patterns in cognition, and runs extremely fast and effortlessly in the human mind. Although it is less clever in solving novel problems, its ability to recognize the subtlest recurring patterns makes it capable of performing tasks of astonishing complexity. It is the elephant.

Since the implicit system feels compelled to follow patterns, the explicit system has a means to train the implicit system through deliberate, repeated, and consistent behavior, through "doing a lot."

Internalization is the process whereby the implicit system comes to emulate the behavior of the explicit system. This is at the heart of skill acquisition and the engine of progress toward awakening in *Dhamma* practice.

Effectively, the new skills of the explicit system are offloaded through internalization (requiring cultivation in repeated practice) onto the implicit system, where they operate quietly, spontaneously, and intuitively. Internalization explains why you can, after years of experience, drive a car effortlessly—a skill of mind-boggling complexity—while you direct most of the energy of your explicit system to less routine pursuits, like texting, or eating an egg sandwich, even as you drive. The eventual dominance of the implicit system in our skilled behavior is also responsible for urges, hunches, insights, and perceptions that seem to come out of nowhere, but tend to be

remarkably precise.⁶

10.2. Right effort

Right effort is the energy, ardency, inspiration, wholeheartedness of our skilled engagement in practice. It is easy to appreciate that the faculty of faith or wholeheartedness (*saddha*) gained through refuge (discussed in Chapter six) is a strong conditioning factor for right effort.

Right effort is the workhorse of our practice. It continually encourages *wholesome*, or *skillful* (*kusala*) actions (*kamma*), and discourages *unwholesome*, or *unskillful* (*akusala*) actions. Right effort is in alignment with *Dhamma*. Right effort is also involved in performance in accordance with every other factor of the path, that is, in abandoning wrong view, and entering into right view, in abandoning wrong attitude, and entering into right attitude, in abandoning wrong speech, and entering into right speech, in abandoning wrong action, and entering into right action, in abandoning wrong livelihood, and entering into right livelihood, in maintaining right recollection, and navigating right composure (See MN 117, repeated throughout).

More specifically, we practice right effort when we bring ...

... desire, work, persistence, and intent to bear:

- (1) ... for the sake of the non-arising of unskillful qualities that have not yet arisen ... ,
- (2) ... for the sake of the abandoning of unskillful qualities that have arisen ... ,
- (3) ... for the sake of the arising of skillful qualities that have not yet arisen ... ,
- (4) ... for the maintenance, non-confusion, increase, plenitude, development, and culmination of skillful qualities that have arisen. (SN 45.8)

I think of right effort as the work of a gardener. The first effort is like preventing weeds from growing, the second like pulling weeds that have grown, the third like planting desirable seeds and watering them so they sprout, and the last like protecting and cultivating the existing desirable plants so that they thrive.

Right effort provides the energy of practice. It is the discipline behind our practice. Every time there is resistance to right anything, then right effort is called for. If it is time to meditate and we are just too lazy, laziness is to be weeded out, and ardency needs to be watered. If we want to flirt with our neighbor's spouse, sensual passion is to be weeded out, and contentment with

our own hapless spouse watered. Often the effort required is enormous; it may be recruited to counter deeply ingrained habits, or natural, instinctive behaviors. Right effort is fundamental to our practice, beginning with living a Buddhist life, for we need to overcome unskillful tendencies in order to practice generosity, harmlessness, and harmony.

A variety of techniques are provided in the discourses for performing right effort. For instance, suppose an unskillful thought arises. Then we can:

- replace it with a different, skillful thought, like replacing a coarse peg with a fine one,
- consider the downside of unskillful thoughts, which will make us disgusted as if by a carcass hung around our neck,
- empty the mind, like shutting the eyes,
- step backward to the origin of the unskillful thought, like walking slowly instead of fast, or standing instead of walking slowly, or
- subdue, and beat it down with clenched teeth, like a strong man restraining, and subduing a weaker man (See MN 20 i 119-20).

As a result of removing such unskillful thoughts, we are assured that “the mind will stand firm, settle down, become unified, and composed.” (MN 20)

There is a short list of five categories of mental factors that turn out to be particularly disruptive to practice in general, particularly to the deployment of the other faculties. These are known as the *hindrances* (*nīvaraṇa*).

- (1) Lust. “Hubba-hubba.”
- (2) Ill-will. “That darn %&\$*@!”
- (3) Sloth, and torpor. “ZZZZZ.”
- (4) Restlessness, and remorse. “If only I had ... , I know, I’ll ...”
- (5) Doubt. “What do I think I’m doing here anyway?”

These factors are expressions of greed (1), aversion (2), and delusion (3-5), and are therefore unskillful. Removal of these when they arise serves as a good example of the weeding process of right effort. Holding these, at least temporarily, at bay is conducive to right recollection and to right composure. It is common for meditators to consider the hindrances briefly at the beginning of a session, and to weed out any that might be present. Skillful factors arising the mind rarely disrupt practice the way unskillful factors do. For instance, it is rare for our practice to suffer from an overflowing of just too darn much kindness.

10.3. Right recollection

Buddhist practice is the *Dhamma-practice* (*dhamma-paṭipatti*). *Right recollection* is where *Dhamma* meets practice. Practice is guided by *Dhamma*, much as cooking is guided by a cookbook, or by the additional know-how acquired through previous experience of following its recipes. Therefore we need to recollect *Dhamma* at some level while we attend to practice. ‘Recollection’ is *sati* in Pali, and corresponds to the verb *sarati* ‘remember.’ or ‘recollect.’ The Buddha’s choice of *sati* for recollecting *Dhamma* in particular is also reflected in the brahminical use of the cognate word in Sanskrit, *smṛti* in reference to memory specifically of sacred brahminic texts, or even to the texts themselves, as they were preserved in rote memory.

We recollect *Dhamma* in the practice of *Dhamma* in order to guide performance of some *primary* practice task (for instance, *mettā* contemplation, guarding the senses, *Dhamma* investigation, or adhering to precepts. Recollection puts the “skill” in “skillful practice.” The required attentiveness to the primary task, though not recollection per se, is closely bound to recollection. Accordingly, attentiveness is often explicitly attributed to recollection, and otherwise seems to be treated as a property of recollection by default.

Recollection is internally well-attentive: “In just such a way I will fulfill the training pertaining to good conduct that I have not yet fulfilled ...” Recollection is internally well-attentive: “In just such a way I will scrutinize with wisdom the teachings that I have not yet scrutinized, ...” (AN 4.245)

‘Attentive’ here is a translation of *upaṭṭhita*. To say that recollection is well-attentive is to say that it is sensitive to the needs of some primary practice in the current practice situation. This passage refers specifically to ethical practices (‘good conduct’) and wisdom practices (‘scrutinize with wisdom’). In either case, right recollection brings the *Dhamma* to mind, and keeps the *Dhamma* in mind as a guide to appropriate discernment of the current practice situation. For instance, recollection reminds us of precepts we are about to break, of whether our urges are skillful, or unskillful, or of whether the sense faculties need to be guarded, lest sensual passions ensue.

The attentiveness of recollection is also reflected in the very common occurrence of the compound *sati-sampajañña* (‘recollection-discernment’) in the early texts. Recollection is attentive in order to *discern* how the practice should proceed in light of *Dhamma*. This compound highlights the executive function that right recollection plays in the practice of *Dhamma*.⁷ Right

recollection is optimized as full *skilled engagement* in a primary practice when there are few external disruptions, when attentiveness precludes internal distractions, when effort is strong, and when composure is apt. These conditions are most likely realized in contemplative practices on the cushion, like *mettā* contemplation, or *Dhamma* investigation (*satipaṭṭhāna*).⁸

This combination of recollection, attentiveness, and discernment is notably a capacity that also supports non-Buddhist skilled tasks as well, pretty much across the board. It is there when a sniper is pulling the trigger that will neutralize what has some indications of being a possible enemy combatant. It is there with every move of a chess master. But it becomes *right recollection* when integrated into the eightfold path, when what is recollected is *Dhamma*. Here is right recollection described in terms of its executive function:

Right view is the forerunner. And how is right view the forerunner? One distinguishes wrong ◀action▶ as wrong ◀action▶, and right ◀action▶ as right ◀action▶. ... One tries to abandon wrong ◀action▶, and to enter into right ◀action▶: this is one's right effort. One remembers to abandon wrong ◀action▶, and to enter, and remain in right ◀action▶: this is one's right recollection. Thus these three qualities—right view, right effort, and right recollection—run, and circle around right ◀action▶. (MN 117)

This passage circles around right ◀action▶, but it is stated verbatim with each of { ◀view▶, ◀intention▶, ◀speech▶, ◀action▶, ◀livelihood▶ }, covering all of the five factors, and primary practices, of the virtue and wisdom groups. Right view is the basis of *Dhamma*. Right effort implements the practice of *Dhamma*. Right recollection is what coordinates the two. Right recollection is like a thermostat that monitors (attending to and discerning) the temperature according to standards (recollecting) of comfort, and then governs the running (effort) of the heater or air conditioner.

10.4. Right composure

The English word ‘meditation’ seems to correspond to two different aspects of Buddhist practice: The first is contemplation, thinking or ruminating about something difficult to understand or remember. *Contemplation* (*anussati*, *anupassanā*) describes various primary practices that fall under the wisdom, virtue, and (pre-path) refuge categories, such as recollection of the triple gem, *mettā* contemplation, *satipaṭṭhāna* (*Dhamma* investigation) practice, recollecting the qualities of the Buddha, *Dhamma*, and *Saṅgha*, and so on.

Contemplative practices are typically performed “on the cushion.”

The other meaning of the word ‘meditation’ has broadly to do with altered states of consciousness, trance-like or mystical states. The faculty of *composure* (*samādhi*, often translated as ‘concentration’) represents this meaning of meditation. Composure is a tranquil meditative state that most typically (but by no means exclusively) arises in conjunction with contemplative practices. Significantly, the term *samādhi* may well have originated with the Buddha himself,⁹ suggesting an intention on his part to distinguish *samādhi* from existing “yogic” meditative states. Nonetheless, later Buddhist traditions are replete with diverse meditative states, and means for attaining them, in spite of the clarity with which the Buddha describes composure in the early texts. Some of what the Buddha tells us about composure in the early texts may surprise some readers.¹⁰

10.4.1. The natural arising of composure. The Buddha’s account of composure demonstrably follows natural currents of human cognition. Accordingly, the Buddha reports that he *discovered*, rather than *invented* composure. He never describes a technique, or discipline that we need to impose on the mind. Rather composure seems to be a faculty we already possess, at least in an uncultivated form. The Buddha makes clear in *many* discourses that composure arises naturally of itself, spontaneously, without effort, given an appropriate conditioning context.

In whatever way ..., he experiences inspiration in the meaning, and inspiration in *Dhamma*. As he does so, delight arises in him. When he is delighted, rapture arises. For one with a rapturous mind, the body becomes tranquil. One tranquil in body feels pleasure. For one feeling pleasure, the mind gains composure. (AN 5.26)

Notice the chain of conditionality antecedent to composure: “delight → rapture → tranquility → pleasure → composure.” This chain of antecedent factors occurs repeatedly in the early texts, sometimes abridged as “rapture → tranquility → composure.”¹¹ In SN 12.23 the Buddha even compares the way composure arises to the way falling rain is carried to the sea effortlessly through slopes, gullies, creeks, pools, lakes, and rivers, and finally into the ocean, each step giving rise naturally to the next.

10.4.2. Skilled engagement as the origin of composure. What conditions give rise to composure? Certainly sitting on a cushion in a quiet environment is conducive. The Buddha never attributes composure to the application of a special technique specifically intended to induce a meditative state. This is in

sharp contrast to how meditation is currently taught by most teachers. Many scholars point out the absence of any such technique in the early texts.¹² Rather, we find the source of composure repeatedly in the context of skilled engagement of some practice task.

It is indeed to be expected, venerable sir, that a noble disciple, with faith, with energy aroused, of attentive recollection, will gain composure, will gain one-centeredness of mind, having made release the object. That composure of his, venerable sir, is his faculty of composure. (SN 48.50)

Effectively, composure is the flame that arises from the fuel, oxygen, and heat of faith, effort, and recollection, together engaged in some practice task. This close causal connection among the faculties may be why the faculty group is traditionally telescoped under the label “*samādhi* group,” much as fuel, oxygen, and heat together would be described as fire. The following affirms this account of the arrival of composure:

There are right view, right attitude, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, and right recollection. The unification of mind equipped with these seven factors is called noble right composure with its supports, and accessories. (SN 45.28)

The first five path factors provide the primary practices in which we become skillfully engaged. Effort and recollection are the faculties that optimize skilled engagement in these practices. Composure is the result of this skilled engagement.¹³ The same antecedent factors of composure are also reflected among the seven *awakening factors* (*bojjhaṅga*):

- (1) recollection (*sati*),
- (2) *Dhamma* investigation (*dhamma-vicaya*),
- (3) energy (*virīya*),
- (4) rapture (*pīti*),
- (5) tranquility (*passaddhi*),
- (6) composure (*samādhi*),
- (7) equanimity (*upekkhā*). (see MN 118)

The second factor, *Dhamma* investigation, tells us we are engaged in the primary contemplative wisdom practice, *satipaṭṭhāna*, described in 8.7, which investigates specific *Dhamma* teachings in terms of observable experience. *Dhamma* investigation is also explicitly affiliated in the early texts with other faculties that support skilled engagement. In particular the following phrase

occurs four times in the introduction of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*,

... ardent, discerning, and recollective, having put away
covetousness, and grief for the world ... (MN 10 i 56)

Accordingly, investigation is preceded in the awakening factors by the faculty of recollection and followed by the faculty of effort (actually ‘energy’). These three are then followed by the antecedent series we took note of earlier through which composure arises naturally given the skilled engagement in the primary task (investigation). The antecedent factors here are “... → rapture → tranquility.” Equanimity represents the deepest level of composure.¹⁴

10.4.3. The structure of composure. Composure differentiates into four progressively deeper levels in the early texts. First, we enter into composure with *one-centeredness of mind*, and remain there.

Samādhī is one-centeredness of mind. (MN 34 i 301)

A one-centered (*ekagga*) mind is a state of *concentration*, or focusing of attention. *Ekagga* is commonly translated as ‘one-pointed,’ with the understanding that the mind is thereby willfully fixed on a single, small object, and held there, as a technique to induce a meditative state. This *cannot* be what is meant here (nor does *agga* mean ‘point’), because in the *Dhamma* investigation (or any other practice task) attention must be free to range over whatever *Dhamma* teachings and experiential observables are relevant for the practice task to succeed. One-centeredness effectively limits the scope of attention to the *theme* of the primary practice. It serves to seclude us from distractions from that theme, not to keep us fixed on a single point.

Composure further undergoes four progressive stages of *jhāna*:

And what is right composure?

There is the case where a monk—quite withdrawn from sensuality, withdrawn from unskillful qualities—enters, and remains in the first *jhāna*: rapture, and pleasure born from seclusion, accompanied by thought and deliberation.

With the stilling of thought and deliberation, he enters, and remains in the second *jhāna*: rapture, and pleasure born of composure, unification of mind, free from thought and deliberation—internal assurance.

With the fading of rapture, he remains equanimous, recollective, and alert, and senses pleasure with the body. He enters, and remains in the third *jhāna*, of which the noble ones declare,

“Equanimous, and recollective, he has a pleasant abiding.”

With the abandoning of pleasure, and pain—as with the earlier disappearance of elation, and distress—he enters, and remains in the fourth *jhāna*: purity of equanimity, and recollection, neither pleasure nor pain.

This is called right composure. (SN 45.8)

The unfolding of these *jhāna factors* is observable in actual meditative experience. There is a system at work here. A table will clarify the logic of the most important factors listed for each of the *jhānas*,

Jhāna:	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
thought-deliberation	✓			
rapture	✓	✓		
pleasure	✓	✓	✓	

10.4.4. One-centeredness. One-centeredness (or seclusion) alone suffices for entry into the first *jhāna*. This is a state undistracted from skilled engagement in the primary practice task. This narrowing of attention shines a light onto even the most subtle details relevant to the investigation of the task, like a magnifying glass focusing the rays of the sun (but not narrowly enough to start a fire). Thought and deliberation (*vitakka-vicāra*) together form the discursive cognitive faculty responsible for active, explicit, conceptual cognition, and is already present in everyday life. The Buddha is clear about its discursive quality,

Thought and deliberation are the verbal fabrication, one breaks into speech. (MN 44 i 301)

However, everyday thought and deliberation tends to prattle. The one-centeredness of the first *jhāna* serves far more effectively, and attentively to keep the mind from wandering off the theme of the practice task, and thereby to remain skillfully engaged.

10.4.5. Curtailment. The onset of the second *jhāna* loses the capacity for thought and deliberation. How does *this* serve the efficacy and attentiveness with which the practice task is fulfilled? The answer has, I am convinced, to do with internalization. If the task has been sufficiently internalized, thought and deliberation are no longer necessary, just as they are not, or are only minimally necessary in performing any routine skilled task, such as driving a car, or juggling. With internalization, the implicit system performs skilled

tasks much more effectively on its own. In fact, to think during a task in which we have acquired considerable skill is often fatal to the performance of the task, as any reader of this book will have experienced, particularly in performing a challenging task in a public context.

The loss of thought and deliberation thus begins a process of progressive *curtailment* of cognitive/affective faculties. As operational faculties are shed, particularly the more energy-guzzling explicit faculties, the mind drops into a progressively less energized state, even as the practice task is maintained. The Buddha accordingly calls the second *jhāna noble silence*. Likewise a progressive shift in consciousness is experienced, as elements of the experiential world, otherwise upheld by curtailed faculties, disappear. In particular, fabrications stop in the second *jhāna*, and with them abstractions, presumptions, and narratives.

Other cognitive faculties, such as perception, remain. Perception (object recognition) is not discursive nor active: what is perceived just pops up into awareness all at once. For *Dhamma* investigation,

Whatever qualities there are in the ♦first♦ *jhāna* ... he ferrets them out one by one. Known to him they remain, known to him they subside... (MN 111)

This describes instances of perception appearing and vanishing. He then makes exactly the same statement but with regard to the ♦second♦, ♦third♦, and ♦fourth♦ *jhānas*. Effectively, perception, rapture, and pleasure, and subtle cognitive activity energized by rapture and by pleasure remain in the second *jhāna*. Moreover, without energy-guzzling thought and deliberation, the world assumes a crystal clarity.

Just as if there were a pool of water in a mountain glen—clear, limpid, and unsullied—where a man with good eyesight standing on the bank could see shells, gravel, and pebbles, and also shoals of fish swimming about, and resting, ... In the same way—with his mind thus composed, purified, and bright, unblemished, free from defects, pliant, malleable, steady, and attained to imperturbability—the monk directs, and inclines it to the knowledge of the ending of the mental corruptions. (MN 39 i 279)

With the loss of rapture in the third *jhāna*, the mind settles into a “pleasant abiding,” in which what remains of the range of factors under investigation just sit there, unmoving, as attention flits around within its range.

With the loss of pleasure and pain (which are *feelings*, *vedanā*) in the fourth *jhāna*, the world no longer matters. No feelings are there to attract attention, and no basis remains for explicit cognition. *Ostensibly*, investigation has stopped, leaving us in an almost a trance-like state. But curiously the Buddha asserts the presence of recollection in the descriptions of both the third and fourth *jhānas*, where we might otherwise expect that skilled engagement would be unsustainable. Its reference here seems to be an assurance that recollection-discernment, counter to expectations, is indeed still engaged, even if not observable in the deepest *jhānas*. How does that happen?

10.4.6. Complex tasks in higher *jhānas*. It is almost universally accepted in Theravada scholarship that we cannot continue to investigate something as intellectually demanding as *Dhamma* throughout the progressive stillness of the four *jhānas*.¹⁵ This conclusion challenges the coherence of the early texts, which repeatedly make the opposite claim,

There is no *jhāna* for one with no wisdom, no wisdom for one without *jhāna*. But one with both *jhāna*, and wisdom, he's on the verge of *nibbāna*. (Dhp 372)

Nonetheless, I am convinced that the the presence of skilled engagement in investigation in the deeper *jhānas* has a relatively simple explanation in terms of modern understandings of human cognition. It has to do with the role of internalization discussed earlier. Recall that internalization is—as a ubiquitous phenomenon in skill acquisition—an offloading of noisy explicit functions onto the silent implicit system cultivated through long repetition of a particular task or practice. The various faculties mentioned in the *jhāna* descriptions belong to the explicit system; they are observable. As internalization proceeds, and the implicit system assumes their duties, these faculties become decreasingly effective and increasingly distracting, and are accordingly curtailed. The means by which investigation continues in the implicit system—effortless, intuitive, virtually unconscious—are no longer observable. The slower, more cumbersome explicit faculties have dropped away to encourage more rapid internalization and more efficient processing of the practice task. Investigation continues, but silently in the implicit system.

Common evidence of the implicit system's continued capacity for silent engagement in a previously explicit cognitive task is the occasional eruption of an “aha” moment of insight that we all experience into awareness, seemingly out of nowhere. Typically this occurs as a resolution of an impasse previously encountered when the explicit system was in charge.¹⁶ Spontaneous insights are also well-known meditative experiences.

If one undertakes the practice of a new skill, one is highly reliant on the extrinsic system. If the explicit faculties are then curtailed prematurely, conceptual content needed to guide the practice is lost. However, if internalization of the new skill is advanced, then the extrinsic system becomes increasingly a burden to further mastery, unless its faculties are appropriately curtailed. Therefore the progress of mastery is generally optimized when degree of curtailment and current degree of reliance on the extrinsic system are balanced. The Buddha discusses desirability to balance these two factors using the terms *vipassanā* ‘analysis’ and *samatha* ‘settling.’

10.4.7. In summary. Right composure is the natural progression of the practices of right effort and right recollection into a refined state of tranquility and unification of mind. As Dhamma-dinnā put it:

Unification of mind is composure, the four *satipaṭṭhānas* are its themes, the four right efforts are its requisites, and any cultivation, development, and pursuit of these qualities are its development. (MN 44)

The four *satipaṭṭhānas* are *Dhamma* investigations centered on four alternative broad themes: body, feeling, mind, and *dharmas*. Since right composure follows on all the previous steps of the path, the mind is already disposed toward wisdom and virtue, toward viewing reality in terms of impermanence, suffering, and non-self, toward renunciation, kindness, and harmlessness, toward purification from unwholesome factors, toward appropriate attention, and toward right recollection. Right composure consolidates all of the path practices into crystal-clear states in which practice really starts to cook below the radar, to produce the delectable tastes of wisdom.

What is overlooked in arriving at the orthodox conclusion that *Dhamma* investigation cannot occur in the deeper *jhānas* is the effect of internalization, which can render the most labyrinthine task, or conceptual framework effortless. That it is overlooked is surprising, since we have *all* witnessed this very effect repeatedly in all the skills, big or small, in which we have become adept throughout our lives.¹⁷

But there is a difference between the common, everyday tasks of the worldling, and the tasks of *Dhamma* practice: In common, everyday tasks the worldling virtually always diverts these explicit faculties to other tasks rather than curtailing them. This leads to distraction, multitasking, and poor attentiveness. In *Dhamma* practice we retain our one-centeredness, thereby avoiding distraction and multitasking, and retaining attentiveness. This requires curtailment in order to subdue the energetic explicit faculties. Only

where there is an imperative not to be diverted from the internalized task (such as in hunting, or where dangerous mishaps are otherwise likely) does curtailment occur in everyday tasks.

10.5. Right knowledge

Right composure is the conclusion of the noble eightfold path. However, among the five faculties, or strengths, one faculty follows: wisdom. Among the *ten* folds to which the path is expanded in as discussed in 7.1, two steps follow:

- (9) right knowledge, and
- (10) right liberation.

The terms ‘wisdom’ (*paññā*), ‘knowledge’ (*ñāṇa*), as well as another phrase ‘knowledge and vision of things as they are’ (*yathā-bhūta-ñāṇa-dassana*) seem to mean about the same thing in this context, and they all follow upon composure.

When right composure does not exist, for one failing right composure, the proximate cause is destroyed for knowledge and vision of things as they really are. (AN 10.3)

Bhikkhus, develop composure. A monk with composure understands in accordance with reality. (SN 22.5)

The knowledges are for one with composure, not for one without composure. (AN 6.64)

I want to consider this factor of knowledge or wisdom in this section in order to round out our understanding of the function of right composure, particularly in association with *Dhamma* investigation, such as we find in the seven awakening factors where investigation and composure work together.

Developing wisdom is necessary for perfecting virtue. With limited wisdom we can still correct our conduct and dispositions, but we cannot correct the most recalcitrant ways we have getting ourselves in trouble as a result of misperceiving the world. For instance, most of us have a very deep-rooted view that we are a substantial and fixed separate self. This view is an impediment to perfecting virtue, inducing us to misperceive the world through our constant bias in favor of this needy self. The practice of ethical conduct can mitigate the greed and aversion that self manifests in its quest for personal

advantage. Although this will tend to loosen the iron grip of the self, it cannot completely wrest our thoughts away from the self

Through the development of wisdom we undermine our most recalcitrant views, including the view of self. Most fundamentally we come to know the conditional or fabricated nature of what we once took to be solid and real. This is knowledge and vision of things as they really are. Ultimately, the development of wisdom in turn underlies the goal of awakening, the final ending of all suffering, the deathless, *nibbāna*, that transcends the *kamma* committed by the fabricated self.

“When, Bāhiya, there is for you in the seen only the seen, in the heard, only the heard, in the sensed only the sensed, in the cognized only the cognized, then, Bāhiya, there is no 'you' in connection with that. When Bāhiya, there is no 'you' in connection with that, there is no 'you' there. When, Bāhiya, there is no 'you' there, then, Bāhiya, you are neither here nor there nor in between the two. This, just this, is the end of suffering.”
(Ud 1.10)

In the next chapter we will deepen our understanding of right view to investigate the conditional factors implicated in the arising of the deluded human condition and how these are broken up with the light of wisdom mediated by composure. In the final chapter we endeavor to explain the nature of the higher attainments, particularly complete awakening.

10.6. The practice of cultivating faculties

You know your practice is on a roll if you are fully, ardently, attentively, and skillfully engaged, and particularly if all of the faculties of the faculty group unite in the deeper levels of composure. Unfortunately, these conditions cannot always be achieved, not if the kids are barking at you, the dog needs a ride to its piano lesson, the TV is trying to sell you something that is whiter than white, your cell phone is ringing, you don't know how you are going to pay the mortgage, and you are trying to get dinner on the table.

For most of us, the proper functioning of the faculties is highly dependent on external circumstances. The optimal circumstances seem to be sitting cross-legged on a cushion, fully secluded (at least temporarily) from responsibilities, distractions, and intrusive sights, sounds, and smells. Unfortunately, life does not always provide this ideal context, and many primary practices, particularly ethical practices (such as discerning one's skillful, and unskillful motivations

throughout the day) occur primarily under quite different circumstances. Contemplative practices (such as *Dhamma* investigation, recollection of the triple gem, and *mettā* meditation) are generally most conducive to sitting on the cushion. However, mature practitioners are generally less dependent on optimal external circumstances, for instance, they are able to cue up in a noisy airport fully composed.

Fortunately, the three faculties in the path are useful far beyond *Dhamma* practice; just substitute recollection of *Dhamma* for recollection of the standards of whatever mundane skill in which you wish to engage. This is fortunate, for ardent, skilled engagement is not only highly enjoyable, but every opportunity to train these faculties is a boon for your Buddhist practice as well: when tuning an engine, when folding laundry, when washing dishes, when engaged in your favorite hobby.

Moreover, much of Buddhist practice incorporates non-Buddhist practices, such as fulfilling generosity and making merit by cooking a scrumptious meal for your family, for a group of vagabonds, or for a *saṅgha* of monastics. In this case, engagement in the cooking is the greater part of fulfilling an important ethical practice. To engage in a non-Buddhist skill, bring to mind the highest standards possible for performing and for developing that particular skill. Any task, say washing dishes, has its standards: water temperature, choice of scrubbing implement, non-neglect of the undersides of plates. If the inherent standards are insufficient, invent some additional standards. That effectively ritualizes the task. For instance, if you are chopping potatoes, make each cube of identical dimensions, and without fail clean up after this, or after any other task, so that no trace remains. Become excessively systematic. Ensuring that the task remains challenging will increase ardency and attentiveness, and reduce boredom and distraction. Also, avail yourself of instruction: learn what the highest standards, and procedures are, lay the groundwork for becoming an adept. You might not find a tutorial on washing dishes, but you certainly will on cooking, birdwatching, fly-fishing or wine-tasting.

We live in a particularly mindless culture in which attentive, skilled engagement is regarded as work, and best avoided in favor of ease, and comfort. For instance, different buzzers go off to remind you of things that you would otherwise have to be attentive to, such as fastening your seat belt. Doors open for you so that you do not even need to touch, much less be attentive to a physical doorknob. Many people are addicted to the scattered mind, are unable to focus attention, love to multi-task, and feel that life is empty if a lot of things are not going on at once. You do well to downgrade such elements of your lifestyle which tend to weaken effort, recollection, and composure. Try not to multitask. When you drive, just drive. When you text, just text. Don't

drive, eat, text, listen to the radio and daydream all at the same time.

As you engage in bodily tasks that you have thoroughly internalized (such as walking, putting on a shirt, getting out of a chair, or opening a door), discernment and one-centeredness are typically not necessary nor present. Your attention is free to wander aimlessly. A powerful practice is to take this opportunity to bring attention to the minute details of the task that otherwise go unnoticed, as if in fear of a misstep, or in suspense about what might result. This practice trains in attentiveness: ardency, discernment, and one-centeredness. In fact, the Buddha recommended this practice, and called it ‘recollection directed at the body’ (*kāyagatā sati*), even though there seems to be little to be recollected in the way of *Dhamma*, or standards, other than paying attention. Hunters must maintain such attentiveness for prolonged periods without lapse, lest they fail to notice when prey reveals itself.¹⁸

The management of composure in the context of skilled engagement is an advanced practice, for which a novice should seek meditation instruction, and (if possible) work with a qualified teacher. My task here has been to provide a conceptual overview of meditation, based on the earliest teachings, and to put it in its broader context, not to provide hands-on instruction. There are many excellent books, videos, and audios available that can get a novice started. There are, as mentioned a large number of meditation styles, many of which have been developed or adapted in later traditions. However, they all tend to be in the same ballpark as whichever are optimal in Buddhist practice. Facility in any one of these styles will generally still give you a good basis for moving into another method at a later date, if you so choose.

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1. This group is more commonly known as the “composure group” (*samādhi-khandha*) or “development group” (*bhāvana-khandha*). However, “faculty” (*indriya*) describes the function of the individual members more precisely.
 2. Bodhi (2000, pp. 45-6).
 3. The English word ‘perception’ similarly refers to the silent process by which George is recognized, or to George himself, who is also known as a “percept.”
 4. Bodhi (2000, p. 45).
 5. Kalupahana (1992, 1995) and Sucitto (2009) offer thorough discussions of the role of *saṅkhāras* in early Buddhist psychology.
 6. See Cintita (2025, 6.2) for a more thorough discussion of internalization and the dual system model.
 7. The translation ‘mindfulness’ or *sati* was proposed by Rhys Davids in 1881 with reference to its role of keeping *Dhamma* in mind in the compound *sati-sampajañña*. However, the original intent of this translation was lost (about the middle of the 20th century) when ‘mindfulness’ came to mean something like non-

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- judgmental awareness, being present, or even seeing everything as if for the first time. Notice that this semantic change left the attentiveness in mindfulness, but dropped the core feature of *recollection*. For this reason ‘mindfulness’ is no longer an adequate translation of *sati*, as it is used in the early texts.
8. *Satipaṭṭhāna* (*Dhamma* investigation) is the primary contemplative wisdom practice. The Pali term means literally ‘recollection-attending to,’ suggestive of the particularly critical role of right recollection in the success of this practice. (See Cintita, 2025, 2.2.)
 9. Walsh (1996, p. 556).
 10. I should point out that there is currently a lot of disagreement about the nature of composure/*samādhī* within Theravada scholarship and practice. What I present is not only what seems to me to be the best, and oftentimes unambiguous reading of what the early texts say, but also what makes most functional sense in terms of integration with the other faculties, and what best aligns with what we know independently about processes of human cognition. See Cintita (2025, chs. 3, 6) for extensive discussion. Shaw (2008) offers an anthology of early texts on *samādhī*. Shankman (2008) delves into the current points of controversy.
 11. See Cintita (2025, 3.1) for many more examples of the spontaneous arising of composure.
 12. See Cintita (2025, 3.1) on the absence of techniques for inducing meditative states in the early texts.
 13. The naturalness of the spontaneous arising of composure under the influence of skilled engagement is independently suggested by research in positive psychology on “flow,” which exhibits similar qualities as composure. The arising of flow is found not only to arise from skilled engagement, but specifically when skills are challenged but not over-challenged. The identification of composure with flow has not been established, I suspect because right composure is much more cultivated, in the practice of *Dhamma*. See 9.5, and Cintita (2025, 6.1.1) on flow.
 14. See Cintita (2025, 3.1.3) for further discussion of the account given in this section.
 15. Shulman (2014, pp. 9-11) points out that modern scholars, as a result, are pretty much divided on whether intellectual investigation, or composure without such investigation produces wisdom. He lists the prominent scholarly representatives of each camp.
 16. See Cintita (2025, 3.4.2, 6.5.2) on such insights.
 17. See Cintita (2025, 3.2) for further discussion of the account given in this section.
 18. Recollection directed at the body seems roughly to align with what “mindfulness” came to mean in popular culture, in which recollection of *Dhamma* is largely absent.

11. Disentangling *saṃsāra*

*“A tangle within, a tangle without,
People are entangled in a tangle.
Gotama, I ask you this:
Who can untangle this tangle?”*
*“The wise one established in virtue,
Developing composure, and wisdom,
That ardent, and prudent monk,
It is he who disentangles this tangle.”* (SN 7.6)

In the practice of ethics, we embrace the wholesome and eschew the unwholesome, continuously progressing uphill in acquiring an ever purer mind and gradually nearing the peak of virtue. However, there are snags for those without the penetrating eye of wisdom. For the near-sighted mountain climber, this will happen when they find themselves either in a cave, or atop a foothill, with no discernible option that continues uphill in any direction. For us on the path, on the other hand, this will happen when we find ourselves entangled in our own fixed ways of thinking, perceiving, conceptualizing, and responding, that leave no discernible path forward. What is needed is a wider perspective of what is going on. The nearsighted mountain climber will need a map, and good spectacles to resume progress to the top. For us on the eightfold path, the wisdom teachings provide the map and *composure* provides the spectacles. The resulting *knowledge and vision* disentangles our *saṃsāric* condition.

This chapter outlines (in a necessarily cursory manner¹) how we get entangled, and, as a corollary, how we *dis*-entangle ourselves. It provides a deeper look at aspects of what we have already introduced briefly in 8.5. The subject matter is largely human *cognition*, having to do with how we apprehend, or understand the world, but among cognitive factors we include *affective* qualities of mind, such as craving and suffering, for these condition, and are conditioned by cognition proper. The focus here will be on what we described in 8.5 as the standard twelve-link chain of dependent coarising.

11.1. A tour of the links of dependent coarising.

The term ‘dependent coarising’ (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) suggests (certainly to my mind) a network of mutually (“co-”) conditioning, interdependent factors in an ever-changing flux. This is our world of experience. Unfortunately it is troubled, caught in a self-sustaining loop in which certain undesirable conditions are ever reinforced. This is *saṃsāra*. The Buddha conceives this metaphorically a tangled mass of string or reeds which has become knotted in places. Our job is to remove the knots. Think of a tangled wad of yarn that kittens have been batting around: if you attempt to untie one knot, you find yourself pulling on several proximate knots as well. What the kittens have been batting around represents no less than the state of the common person’s cognitive apparatus that brings them so much woe. The whole of the Dhamma is in this tangled mass,

Whoever sees dependent coarising sees the *Dhamma*; whoever sees the *Dhamma* sees dependent coarising. (MN 28 i 190-1)

The Buddha proposes a systematic expedient for loosening some of the naughtiest knots one by one by following a conditionally connected series, whereby loosening one knot in the series will enable one to loosen the next.. This systematized the process of disentanglement, but also made it look simpler than it really was. In one of Ven. Ānanda’s weaker moments, it also seems to have obscured the underlying problem,

“It’s amazing, lord, it’s astounding, how deep this dependent coarising is, and how deep its appearance, and yet to me it seems as clear as clear can be.”

“Don’t say that, Ānanda. Don’t say that. Deep is this dependent coarising, and deep its appearance. It’s because of not understanding, and not penetrating this *Dhamma* that this generation is like a tangled skein, a knotted ball of string, like matted rushes, and reeds, and does not go beyond transmigration, beyond the planes of deprivation, woe, and bad destinations.” (DN 15 ii 55)

Unfortunately, the orthodoxy of later traditions has generally only doubled down on Ānanda’s mistake. As Ñāṇananda (2015, sermon 20) describes the situation,²

“At present what is called *Paṭicca Samuppāda* is a formula to be by-heart and recited up and down. It has no other significance. But it is with this formula that the Buddha ... solved the entire *Saṃsāric* puzzle.”

Deep is this dependent coarising, and difficult to penetrate. But I will do my darndest to explain it, following Ven. Ñāṇananda.

The simple twelfold chain is, in fact, a single thread through a complex tangle of conditioning relations, but it becomes twisted and knotted with many other threads along the way from beginning to end, and even turns back on itself. But consider that probably the most effective way you might recover what kittens have wrought: First, you find a loose end, and then you follow it *linearly*, tediously separating the loose end knot by knot from the snarl. Following the chain provides (1) an entranceway into understanding the entangled nature of *saṃsāric* existence and (2) a resolution of that whole snarl through tracing back relations of conditionality.

The overarching theme of the twelve links are the mechanisms by which consciousness constructs the world and convinces us that it is real. In doing so, it presumes a dichotomy between self, and other, or between the world “out there,” and the world “in here.” Our needy and aversive dispositions respond to that world with craving and then appropriating the things of the world “out there” as “me” and “mine,” out of which a personal identity emerges. That personal identity suffers manyfold, and perpetuates itself through repeated rebirth.

This is, once again, what the basic twelve-linked chain looks like:³

ignorance → fabrications → consciousness →
 name and form → sixfold sphere → contact →
 feeling → craving → appropriation →
 becoming → birth → this mass of suffering

We've run into most of these factors before.

Ignorance is the failure to see the delusive nature of reality as it is.

Fabrications are dispositions, aka old *kamma*, that determine ways we conceptualize, imagine, or plan things. Fabrications are the building blocks of consciousness.

Consciousness builds the world as we experience it, and then convinces us

that it is real.

Name and form is the experientially constituted world, grown by consciousness under the direction of attention.

The *sixfold sphere* incorporates the role the senses (eyes, ears, etc.) in producing consciousness as probes into the sense fields (visual forms, auditory sensations, etc.) that produce new instances of consciousness.

Contact is the encounter of self and other enabled by consciousness.

Feeling is the immediate affective response to this encounter as mattering.

Craving is the desire for objects of contact.

Appropriation is the identification of objects as “me” and “mine.”

Becoming is the consolidation of a personal identity within the world of appropriations.

Birth is the projection of what we have become into a new life.

This mass of suffering is the experience of life after life, as *samsāra* perpetuates itself in this way.

The perspective of the twelve links does not comprehend all of human cognition, but is limited to that which brings about trouble and suffering to produce the human pathology. For instance, although dependent coarising teaches us a lot about the arising of greed, aversion, and delusion, it teaches us nothing about where kindness, compassion, and generosity come from, though these seem to displace the former as the chain is weakened through practice. In contrast with western psychoanalysis, the pathology it exposes has little to do with the actual *content* of experience, and much to do with the *architecture* of this network of entanglements. Craving, for instance, is just craving, regardless of whether it is rooted in childhood deprivation, in unrequited love, or in too much exposure to TV advertising.

Specifically, the perspective of the twelve links is the arising of the *corruptions* (*āsava*). The corruptions are three fundamental dispositions that keep us locked in *samsāra*:

- ignorance (*ajjivā*),
- sensuality (*rāga*), and
- becoming (*bhava*).

In one sutta (MN 9 i 54) concerned with dependent coarising, the three

corruptions as a whole show up in a variant of the chain as the initial link, namely before ignorance, indicating that all that follows originates due to the corruptions. In another sutta (SN 12.23), the standard chain continues from the mass of suffering through a series of links that describe the reversal of the chain that results from practice, giving us the many links of *supramundane dependent coarising*. Supramundane coarising then ends with the *destruction of the corruptions (āśava-khaya)*, a term that is synonymous with full awakening. In fact, we can readily see that the standard chain describes the arising of each of the corruptions in turn, by segmenting the twelvefold chain into three parts:

Ignorance is addressed in the first six factors: ignorance → fabrications → consciousness → name and form → sixfold sphere → contact. Most significantly, these links result in the fabricated duality of subject and object.

Sensuality is addressed in the next three factors: feeling → craving → appropriation. These are affective, or emotive factors that result in unskillful behavior.

Becoming is addressed in the remaining three factors: becoming → birth → *saṃsāra*. These have to do with the consolidation of personal identity and its projection into the future.

The purpose of the exposition of dependent coarising is to bring the faulty, convoluted factors of human cognition (and emotion) that construct our world of experience under examination, so that we might experience the world otherwise. Let's take up the links of the chain according to these three segments within the twelve links.

11.2. The manifestation of ignorance

The chain begins with a sequence of six cognitive factors that build up a particularly unwise conceptualization or understanding of the world. Again,

ignorance → fabrications → consciousness →
name and form → sixfold sphere → contact → ...

Consciousness plays the central role in this segment of the chain, and the roles of the other factors largely derive from their relation to consciousness, so let's begin there.

11.2.1. Consciousness. *Viññāṇa* is the Pali word for consciousness, a variant of *ñāṇa* (knowledge). With the prefix *vi-* it means literally “knowledge apart,” or “discriminative knowledge.” It is also the last of the five aggregates. As an aggregate, it is not a single fixed thing, but a momentary “awareness” event. An instance of consciousness generally arises drawn by attention. Its most striking quality is its ability to *designate* something outside of itself, that is, to be conscious *of* something: a tree, an awkward social situation, the process of driving a car. We commonly think of consciousness as *receptive*, that is as simply reflecting something that is already giving outside of itself. However, the Buddha teaches that consciousness is *creative*. Indeed, he compares consciousness to a magic show,⁴ that creates an illusory world through props and sleight of hand.

A more modern example makes this point perhaps more directly. A television is a physical object with a flat screen and a speaker. When it is turned on, pixels of changing colors dance around on the screen and the speaker vibrates audibly. Consciousness tells us this, but it does not stop there: We are suddenly transported into another time and place in which John Wayne is a gunslinger whose inner goodness is brought out by a young Quaker woman, who cares for him as he recovers from a gunshot wound. John Wayne is more than a shape on the screen: he is three dimensional, with emotions, and plans, and is even now standing there behind his horse where we cannot see him. We cry and we laugh in empathy with the characters present in this time and place.

Consciousness has conjured up a whole alternative world simply as an interpretation of visible flickering pixels and audible vibrations, and it has then transported us there, where we might even forget occasionally that we are at the same time sitting in front of a television munching popcorn. It has convinced us (but not irrevocably in this context) that it is all real. It doesn't matter that this alternative world does not *really* exist; it has become part of our experience, and we are conscious of things in that world, just as we can be conscious of the popcorn in our fingers. Consciousness, like a magician, is a master of illusion.

The activities going on in the television effectively *refers to* something going on elsewhere, in this case in an entirely fictitious nineteenth century world, through the mediation of instances of consciousness. Many kinds of things similarly refer to something outside of themselves. A book refers: a novel can refer to a fictitious world almost as well as a television can. A framed picture can refer to a happy family. Words and language, of course, refer all over the place. This book refers to aspects of *Dhamma*. But consciousness is what makes this reference possible by constructing its own referent. It's magic.

11.2.2. Fabrications A magician presents activities on stage in such a manner that each spectator is conscious of a reality that just cannot be. The magician has his scantily clad assistant lie in a box, saws the box in half, and the assistant emerges unscathed. How can that be? The answer is that the spectator has interpreted what he sees on stage according to certain expectations about what the various objects on stage are, and how they function, but the magician has fabricated props, and sleights of hand that defy those expectations, through false bottoms, mirrors, black curtains, and so on, not apparent to the spectator. It is said that the Pali word *saṅkhāra* (fabrication) was used in the Buddha's day also to describe a magician's, or an actor's props. It also describes the spectators' expectations, or dispositions to apprehend in certain ways.

Fabrications are ways we conceptualize, imagine, or plan things. They are also one of the five aggregates we have already met, and the seat of both new, and old *kamma*, for they are choices conditioned and habituated by earlier choices. They are also the immediate conditioning factor for consciousness in the chain of dependent coarising. The Pali word is also commonly translated as “formations,” “intentional formations,” “dispositions,” or “activities,” but literally means “put together.” For instance, we are aware of two eyes and a mouth, and we cognize a face. We are aware of a particular sequence of sounds, and we cognize a chickadee. We feel hungry, see an apple tree, and conceive a plan to walk over to the tree, pick an apple, and eat it. Fabrications range from our apprehension of simple things going on around us, through intended behaviors, plans, and engineering feats.

Fabrications are subject to habituation, to wit as learned habit patterns, dispositions, or inclinations that can also be unlearned. For instance, a bird watcher becomes very adept at cognizing a particular species of bird from simple movements and color patterns. A particular kind of anger response is triggered in a particular individual in a predictable way when particular conditions are present. Through Buddhist practice, unskillful habitual habit patterns, such as anger, are unlearned, as skillful dispositions are learned.

Fabrications provide the conceptual building blocks of human cognition. Consciousness is made of them. But when assembled by consciousness, fabrications tend to overreach, to produce delusive or unreliable results that we tend to take seriously, and that thereby cause problems for us. Let's return to the Buddha's analogy of the magic show,⁵

Now suppose that a magician, or magician's apprentice were to display a magic trick at a major intersection, and a man with good eyesight were to see it, observe it, and appropriately examine it. To him—seeing it, observing it, and appropriately

examining it—it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in a magic trick? In the same way, a monk sees, observes, and appropriately examines any consciousness that is past, future, or present; inner, or outer; blatant, or subtle; common, or sublime; far, or near. To him — seeing it, observing it, and appropriately examining it — it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in consciousness?” (SN 22.95)

Now, when we look out the window and see the bird chasing our cat, we tend to think we are experiencing things directly as they really are in the world “out there.” This is not true: consciousness has fabricated what we see as a *referent* of light and patterns on our retina. This is not to say that there is not a degree of correspondence between what we are conscious of, and what is actually happening in some objective reality, but the Buddha was primarily interested in the presumptive nature of consciousness, since that is what gets us into trouble and leads to the human pathology. With discernment we might witness ourselves fabricating what we otherwise think is real, just as we might witness the magician's tricks if we sneak backstage to observe the show from the right place.

One way that consciousness is consistently and annoyingly presumptive is that it attributes way too much permanence to things. It fails to cognize the flux of nature that keeps all things so contingent that we can hardly regard them as things at all. It also fails to recognize the unsatisfactory nature of these things, and erroneously identifies many things with the self. In short, it regularly fails to acknowledge the *three signs* mentioned in 8.3: impermanence, suffering, and non-self. It also attributes beauty to things far too liberally. In short, what it conceptualizes does not keep pace with the world as it is. And this is on a good day, for it is also prone to gross misperception, as in the case of a mirage, or of a magic show.

Fabrications are unleashed by ignorance in the standard chain. *Ignorance* is like darkness, it is the absence of insight into the delusive nature of fabrications. Much of our practice aims to dispel ignorance by shining the light of wisdom here and there to reveal what is actually happening in the subsequent links of dependent coarising.

11.2.3. Name and form. As we have seen, consciousness is quite busy. Its operation follows the same repeated pattern: First, attention draws an instance of consciousness to descend on some place in the experiential world. Then, newly fabricated details burgeon forth at that place, and then that instance of

consciousness ends. That is how we get from shapes and colors on a TV screen to John Wayne, and from John Wayne to a wild-west adventure. *Name and form* (*nāma-rūpa*) are the experiential world itself, an ever evolving product of instances of consciousness descending here and there.

Names and forms are two kinds of experience.⁶ Forms are raw appearances, the most fundamental sense-based part of experience, like the shapes and colors on a TV screen, or on the retina. They are described in terms of *impingement contact* (*paṭigha-samphassa*), “as if” the mind is being struck from some external source (perhaps it is). It is also described in terms of earth, water, air, and fire, the basic elements (*dhātu*) of physicality in the Buddha’s day, and of the derivatives thereof. In modern terms we might describe the visual field in terms of pixels, or the audible field as sound waves.

Names are conceptualized, or structured experiences, in short, what can be named. They are of five types:

- feeling,
- perception,
- volition,
- attention, and
- contact.

Just as forms enter through impingement contact, names are described as entering through *designation contact* (*adhivacana-samphassa*), through an act of designation, or naming. Like consciousness, the name factors seem mental in nature, but also refer to something outside of themselves (such as John Wayne’s horse). It will be noticed that three factors of name and form are found among the five aggregates (*khanda*) discussed in 8.2, and fabrications and consciousness are the other two. The links “fabrications → consciousness → name and form” are therefore an elaboration of the five aggregates, supplementing these with three additional factors, and an account of how these factors interact, as “a tangle within, a tangle without.”

Name and form is commonly translated as ‘body and mind,’ or as ‘physicality, and mentality.’ However, we need to be careful: In a sense both name and form belong entirely to mind, since both are experiences. But that which is named—for instance, a cat, a toaster, beauty—is most typically also something physical in the constructed world, more complex than raw forms. Furthermore, the Buddha points out that *impingement contact* and *designation contact* are *co-operative* processes, specifically that there is no way to comprehend form independently of name, and name has no basis without form. For instance, if impingement contact is to discern colors and shapes in a forest, it is only through perceptions (therefore name) that appearances like “green,” or “round” arise, or that trees, the rustling of leaves, rabbits hopping, and

bluebirds flittering appear.

The Buddha also attests to the critical importance of name and form in resolving the human condition:

Where name and form as well as sense and designation are completely cut off, it is there that the tangle gets snapped. (SN 7.6)

Consciousness is in constant interplay with name and form. In fact we learn in the *Mahānidāna Sutta* (DN 15 ii 63-4, also SN 12.67) that, although consciousness conditions name and form in the standard chain, they are in fact mutually conditioning:

consciousness ↔ name and form.

Consciousness requires name and form in order to find a footing, a place of descent to which attention draws it. Name and form requires consciousness in order to grow, which it does at the place to which consciousness descends. The two circle around each other, each constraining and inciting the other. The Buddha offers the analogy of painting a picture. A brush stroke descends at some point on the existing unfinished picture to apply some color of paint (chosen among the aggregates in the analogy), thereby adding further details to the picture, and at the same time providing additional places to which future brush strokes can descend.⁷ Consciousness convinces us that it is simply reflecting mirror-like what is “out there” in the world, and would be out there anyway in the absence of consciousness. Actually, consciousness paints that outer world, one brushstroke at a time.

The interplay of consciousness and name and form is sometimes described as a cycle, or a vortex (*vaṭṭa*) that underlies the entirety of *samsāric* life. The Buddha makes the following quite remarkable and sweeping statement:

In so far only, Ānanda, can one be born, or grow old, or die, or pass away, or reappear, in so far only is there any pathway for verbal expression, in so far only is there any pathway for terminology, in so far only is there any pathway for designation, in so far only is the range of wisdom, in so far only is the round kept going for there to be a designation as the *this-ness*, that is to say: name and form together with consciousness.
(DN 15 ii 63-4)

It is between name and form, and consciousness that concepts take shape, that the world arises, that we arise as the *this-ness*, and that our *samsāric*, soap-operatic lives are lived. The remaining links of dependent coarising play out

within this vortex, as products of the interplay of consciousness and name and form.

11.2.4. Subject, and object. Forms are easily recognized as standing behind the various physical senses: eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body, as elemental manifestations, and the most direct evidence of an outer world “out there.” However, consciousness reaches far beyond that, in attributing much of name wholesale to that outer world. The rich *experience* of colors, sounds, tastes, and smells are attributed to the outer things of that world. The appealing experience of tasting vanilla, for instance, will never be evident in any scientific study of the vanillin molecule, yet we point to a dessert “out there,” and say, “*That* is yummy.” The inner experience of gloom becomes an intrinsic property of a nocturnal landscape, or of the weather “out there.” Our intentional dispositions about how we might use an object become a quality of a tree stump, making it into a chair. When attention repeatedly directs consciousness to land on some object, that object becomes a dominant and richly detailed thing “out there,” while whatever attention has overlooked becomes at best something sparse, or nonexistent “out there.” We are reminded of the presumptive nature of projecting subjective aesthetics to outer objects when we hear (yet ignore) the folk wisdom, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”

Consciousness fabricates an *outer world* “out there,” and an inner world “in here,” then allocates the content of name and form somewhat arbitrarily between them, with a conviction that the outer world exists independently. The illusion is completed through the next two factors of the chain of dependent coarising: the sixfold sphere, and contact. The sixfold sphere (*saḷāyatana*) constitutes the experience of looking out from the vantage point of the world “in here,” through the *sense doors* (*dvāra*) to directly apprehend the world “out there.” I look out through the eye door to see my cat cowering and hiding from an angry bird “out there,” and I listen through the ear door to hear the bird squawking “out there.” We imagine we are experiencing an outer world with a purely receptive consciousness, even while consciousness is in fact fabricating that world from the bottom up to fulfill the function of the eye. In fact, the eye is best viewed as having an intermediate role in the interplay between consciousness and name and form, whereby the current state visual field (form) conditions the referent of an instance of consciousness.

Contact (*phassa*) is the experience of the self encountering something in the world “out there.” Contact, fabricated in this way, is a critical step in the development of the human dilemma in that it establishes a relationship between self and other. To underscore the delusive nature that the Buddha

attributed to this, the *Brahmjāla Sutta* (DN 1) rejects sixty-two widely accepted but erroneous speculative philosophical viewpoints of non-Buddhist schools, and rejects each one with the simple argument, “that too is dependent on contact.” On the basis of contact, the following likewise unfold: impression, greed, aversion, appropriation, obsession, scheming, speculation, views, self-identity, and the perpetuation of *samsāric* existence.

11.3. The arising of sensuality

Contact puts us in relation to the things of the outside world, and this has huge consequences for human well-being. Nāṇananda says, “Where there is a fence, there is offense, and defense.”⁸ The world “out there,” becomes a source of assets to exploit, and dangers to repel. The world “in here” lives in a quest for personal advantage, lusting for the assets, and fearful of the dangers, with limited control over what is taken as an independent reality “out there.” A flood of consequences ensues.

The next segment of the standard chain follows contact and consists of three escalating emotive responses to, or degrees of obsession with the objects of contact:

... *contact* → feeling → craving → appropriation → ...

11.3.1. Taking an interest. With *feeling* (*vedanā*) something matters to us. It accompanies contact as an affective quality, a declaration of itself as positive (pleasurable), as negative (painful), or interesting in some other way (typically as a curiosity). *Vedanā* literally means ‘making known,’ and so characterizes most of our non-peripheral experience. Feeling is one of the five aggregates we have already met. Experience tells us that pleasure, and suffering come in a variety of intensities, from mild pleasure, or agitation to bliss, or agony. Once something has made itself known in feeling, a lot of cognitive activity is set in motion. It becomes an attractor for attention, and thereby consciousness, from which percepts and thinking bloom, and from which thinking often runs wild.

11.3.2. Craving. *Craving* (*taṇhā*) builds upon a feeling and adds to it a forward-looking concern for the future attainment, or retention of pleasurable objects, or for the future avoiding, or riddance of unpleasurable objects. Craving is of three kinds:

- craving for sense pleasures,
- craving for becoming, and
- craving for becoming other. (See SN 56.11)

Sense pleasures include gaining gratification, and avoiding harm, and also acquiring the means to gain the more immediate forms of sensual pleasure, such as wealth, power, and fame. Craving for becoming, or becoming otherwise has to do with our desire to gain, and preserve, or to rid ourselves of personal identity, which provides fuel to the link of becoming, to be discussed momentarily.

A lot of drama happens around each instance of craving. Craving is a condition for suffering (*dukkha*), ever shadowed by suffering, as the four noble truths tell us. This connects craving to a particularly thorny knot in the network of dependent coarising, not mentioned in the twelve links, but central among the four noble truths.

craving → suffering.

At the same time, craving is the locus of unwholesome *kamma*, since it is rooted in the fires of greed, aversion, and delusion, greed for objects of gratification, aversion to objects of threat, and delusion in that it is dependent on the fabrication of an illusory “out there.” Craving impels us to unwholesome intentional bodily or verbal action, which challenges our prospect of living a virtuous life. Consciousness also has an even stronger tendency than in the case of feeling, to descend upon, and grow the object of craving.

11.3.3. Appropriation. Much of what we crave, we appropriate as “me” and “mine.” Zen master Shohaku Okumura once noted that as we teach young children various concepts and values, we never have any trouble teaching them the concept “mine.” It comes naturally. *Appropriation* (*upādāna*) is the personal identification with many of the objects of the world. Whereas feeling and craving are experiences that arise moment by moment, appropriation is cumulative, like name and form, a potency built up by many instances of craving over time. We appropriate things in the sense that things become part of our personal identity, that they become “me” or “mine.” Appropriation also has a broader scope than craving, consisting of four types:

- appropriation of that which provides sensual pleasure,
- appropriation of norms and observances, and
- appropriation of views. (See MN 11 i 66)

Views are particularly noteworthy here as they seem to develop in order to justify and personalize the other forms of appropriation. Broadly speaking, they are the stories we tell about ourselves. Primary among views is self-existence view (*sakkāyadiṭṭhi*), which we have encountered before. It can be appreciated how this arises from the subject-object dichotomy, reinforced by

the subject's craving for objects. Additional existential views such as the alternatives of eternalism, and annihilationalism may follow on this view. Included here may also be very specific views not mentioned in the early discourses. For instance, those who have appropriated personal wealth may develop strong opinions about property rights and taxation. Since appropriation arises from, and further personalizes cravings, appropriation will provide an additional condition for the recurrence of craving, a kind of hotbed of craving, and therefore of suffering.

Appropriations individuate us, they mark our behaviors, and give us a sense of me and mine that is uniquely ours. Our appropriations begin to inform who we are.

If one is preoccupied with ◀form▶ that is what one is measured by. Whatever one is measured by, that is how one is classified.
(SN 22.36)

This same passage with form is then repeated for each of the other aggregates: ◀feeling▶, ◀perception▶, ◀fabrications▶, and ◀consciousness▶, together constituting our experiential world. This passage might be paraphrased as “If one is preoccupied with *objects* ...,” since objects tend to be what preoccupies us. However, we are reminded here of the foolishness of appropriation, given that objects are fabrications of awareness events, and therefore insubstantial.

11.3.4. Growing the world. Feeling, craving, and appropriation turn our conceptual misperceptions into the soap opera of life. They also provide fuel for additional misapprehensions. The *Honey-ball Sutta* describes a chain of conditionality that originates in “contact → feeling,” then branches off:

Contact → feeling → perception → thought →
proliferation → perceptions-and-notions.

Recall that each link in the standard chain has many conditions, and conditions many other factors in the broader network of contingencies. Proliferation (*papañca*) is the point, familiar to most of us, at which the mind runs wild. The relevant passage ends with,

With that about which one has proliferated as the source, perceptions, and notions born of proliferation beset a man with respect to past, future, and present ◀forms▶ cognizable through the ◀eye▶. (MN 18 i 112-3)

The exact same passage with { ◀forms▶, ◀eye▶ } is then repeated, but with { ◀sounds▶, ◀ear▶ }, { ◀odors▶, ◀nose▶ }, and so on. For instance, we contact

through name and form the movement of a yellow object. After it evokes a feeling, we perceive Fluffy the cat. One thought about Fluffy leads to another, and pretty soon we are wondering if Fluffy is hungry, has fleas, has caught the mouse we saw yesterday. Then we go on to think about mice, rodents, rabbits, gardening, and so on. Soon we have a very busy mind indeed. Most readers will find that proliferation is one of the easier factors to verify experientially.

All the while, we should keep in mind that consciousness is continually descending anew, as it is drawn to points of interest, that is, to objects that give rise to feelings, to objects of craving, and particularly to appropriated objects, both to what is desired, or relished, and to what is despised. When it descends somewhere it brings with it a proliferation of fabrications that grow the experiential world (name and form) from that place. When consciousness spends most of its time with what is craved, a world of craving is what grows, a world in which almost every-thing is an opportunity for, or a threat to, one's personal advantage, a world in which we are relentlessly in one moment enticed, and in the next repelled. This basis by which the world grows is described metaphorically as follows.

Consciousness is the seed, *kamma* the soil, and craving the moisture. (AN 3.76)

Kamma here is *old kamma*, the fabrications, or dispositions on which consciousness depends. What grows reflects our personal cravings and appropriations, a world created in our own image. This represents a further, and particularly pernicious, distortion as we fabricate a world “out there,” in which what is uninteresting, or not of personal relevance, is simply absent, or just barely existent. This has grave ethical consequences. For instance, international leaders and captains of industry often, and notoriously make momentous political, military or business decisions that take virtually no notice of the adverse impact they might have on millions of people, or on entire ecosystems. In their experiential worlds, in which more personal concerns occupy their minds, those people, or ecosystems are simply not there. This is how denizens of the human realm become monsters, and might well be one of the reasons the Buddha considered delusion much more dangerous than either greed or aversion.

11.4. The process of becoming

We have seen that our appropriations measure us, they define who we are, they define our personal footprints, and they delineate what is me and mine.

They keep us embroiled in our own special kind of suffering, and they give rise to becoming, rebirth, and the continuation of *samsāra*.

... *appropriation* → becoming → birth → this mass of suffering.

Becoming (bhava), often translated as “existence,” is the consummation of the sense of self, the consummation of this-ness. A conceptual space for the self is initially provided through the bifurcation of subject and object. This provides the basis for contact, feeling, craving, and appropriation. In appropriation, the world “out there,” far from existing apart from the self, has been fashioned to reflect the specific needs, and concerns of the self. We are hungry for personal identity, for becoming something larger than life, for growing as large a personal footprint as possible out of what we have appropriated as “me” and “mine.” Recall that alongside craving for sensual pleasure, we also crave becoming, and sometimes crave becoming otherwise. Becoming brings the fires of suffering to a head, for it is based in greed, aversion, and delusion, and the greater our personal footprint, the more we need to fear losing.

The Buddha introduces a clever version of the fire metaphor for the suffering of becoming. The Buddha commonly uses the phrase ‘aggregates of appropriation’ (*upādānakkhandha*) to mark the actual insubstantiality (decomposition into awareness events) of what we appropriate as substantial. The Pali word *upādāna* also means fuel, in which case *upādānakkhandha* also means “heaps of fuel,” or “piles of firewood,” a condition for fire. The implication is that the *aggregates of appropriation* give rise to the flames of becoming. Just as it is desirable to extinguish a dangerous fire, it is desirable to extinguish the flames of becoming; in fact that would constitute awakening, and the end of birth and the round of *samsāra*. The word for extinguishing in either case is *nibbāna* (‘nirvana’).

A fire has vitality; it sustains itself, and spreads wherever it can. *Birth* is the projection of becoming into a new life after this one. This is one step in dependent co-arising we cannot explore directly in daily, or meditative experience (or at best we have to wait to see what happens). Hot on the heels of birth are *old age, death, suffering*, and the prospect of continued *samsāra* as the self takes on a new life under conditions reflective of this life.

The standard twelve-link chain of dependent co-arising lists the most pernicious primary factors of human experience, and the causal relations among them. It reveals the delusive quality of human cognition, and how these qualities give rise, step by step, to the demon of self that possesses our bodies, thoughts, and actions, and projects itself outward to shape the world “out there” accordingly, and to fill it with suffering. This process persists in an

almost hopelessly entangled snarl of *saṃsāric* existence. The twelve links describe the arising of a self-centered pathology, common to virtually all of humanity.

11.5. The practice of disentangling mind

The purpose of understanding the standard chain is that it exposes the points at which the pathology of the human condition can be broken down, for if one link is broken, then the subsequent links cannot arise, since each link represents a necessary condition for the links that follow. Awakening is the breakdown of the whole chain, and thereby a total reworking of the age-old cognitive architecture of the human mind.

The key to untangling the tangle is to progressively loosen each of the knots and snarls of dependent coarising a little at a time. As one becomes looser, you will gain some more room for working on those nearby. Given enough time the tangle will slowly unravel. If at least some of the snarls loosen, you will begin to gain some freedom, and to suffer less; life will become less of a problem. The Buddha employed a similar simile to describe this situation:

Just as when an ocean-going ship, rigged with masts, and stays, after six months on the water, is left on shore for the winter: Its stays, weathered by the heat, and wind, moistened by the clouds of the rainy season, easily wither, and rot away. In the same way, when a monk dwells devoting himself to development, his fetters easily wither and rot away. (SN 22.101)

Loosening the links is accomplished by that great cure-all, the noble eightfold path. Wisdom is practiced by coming to understand the teachings of the Buddha concerning the various factors mentioned here. If you are intent on awakening, you should engage these teachings in practice. The practice of virtue tends to struggle against self-centered craving in particular. We have seen that craving leads to appropriation and to becoming. It also provides a footing for consciousness, and is associated with the further growth of the fabricated world “out there” and with obsession with the things of that world. Virtually all links weaken with the weakening of craving, but the mast and rigging may be slow to come down.

A primary means for developing a profound understanding of the twelve links of dependent coarising is the meditative practice of *Dhamma* investigation (*satipaṭṭhāna*). Skillfully engaged, this practice enlists the help of composure to provide clarity and intuitive insight to produce knowledge and vision of

things as they are. It is through these that you will come to see the illusive way in which you conjure up your world. When you see the illusion clearly, dispassion will arise as your fixed conceptualizations will become less compelling. These conceptualizations will fall away, like well-worn toys, or the enacted fantasies of childhood.

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1. See Cintita (2021) for a longer and more detailed treatment of the content of this chapter.
 2. Dependent coarising had me scratching my head for many years, until I came across the insightful writings of the Sinhalese monk Venerable Ñāṇananda (2008, 2015). Finally, someone understood. The understanding I offer in this chapter is largely based on his insights.
 3. There are variants in this sequence in the suttas. For instance, *Mahānidāna Sutta* (DN 15) lacks the first two and the fifth factors.
 4. SN 22.95.
 5. Ñāṇananda (2009) provides a detailed discussion of this passage.
 6. The description that follows can be found in SN 12.2.
 7. SN 22.100. This analogy is also discussed in Cintita (2021, 3.4).
 8. Ñāṇananda (2008, sermon 15).

12. Awakening

*Those whose minds have reached full excellence,
In the awakening factors,
Who, having renounced acquisitiveness,
Rejoice in not appropriating.
Rid of corruptions, glowing with wisdom,
They have attained nibbāna in this very life. (Dhp 89)*

The *Buddhadhamma* is a teaching of salvation. It supports a practice that leads to a final goal which resolves the human dilemma at a personal level. Salvation is variously described as *liberation* (*vimutti*, or breaking free from the human condition), as *awakening* (*bodhi*, a term that can also be translated as ‘discovery’—“so *that* is how things are!”), and as *nibbāna* (Sanskrit, *nirvāna*, ‘extinguishing’). It is also viewed as the the culmination of progressive practice, or the end of training. As I discuss these various perspectives, we do well to anticipate answers to several questions: What are the benefits, or functions of awakening? Is there a natural drive that compels us toward awakening? Does awakening bring a sense of fulfillment, or meaning in our lives?

The stock formula that describes the realization of awakening for many new *arahants* throughout the early texts is as follows:

Dwelling alone, secluded, heedful, ardent, and resolute, he ...
reached, and remained in the supreme goal of the holy life for
which clansmen rightly go forth from home into homelessness,
knowing, and realizing it for himself in the here and now. He
knew: “Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done.
There is nothing further for the sake of this world.”
(AN 6.55, etc.)

Awakening is commonly regarded as ineffable, a mystical state that cannot be described with words, to be approached only through analogy, or through poetry, like describing sight to the blind. Nonetheless, there are a number of

systematic perspectives on awakening provided in the early teachings that help us to gain some conceptual understanding of what awakening is, and also to track our progress toward awakening.

12.1. The cosmology of attainment

The Buddha provided us with a precise, integrated functional system of thought, grounded in ethics, and psychology, accessible through study and practice, highly practical in terms of its beneficial results. Early Buddhist discourse often takes a cosmological perspective that supplements markedly the more psychological account represented so far. Notably, psychological and cosmological accounts correspond in certain ways.

Buddhist cosmology seems to be based strongly on *Védic* and *Upaniṣadic* cosmology, to have some unique features of its own, but not to have been systematically developed in the early texts as it would become in the later Buddhist traditions. Its basis is in multiple *realms of existence* distributed over many world systems. We are accordingly reborn almost endlessly over and over again into one realm or another, a process called *saṃsāra* ('wandering on').

The *lower realms* are unfortunate realms of woe. They include at least:

- the animal realm,
- the hungry ghost realm, and
- a number of hell realms.

The *higher realms* are happier places, though even they do not exclude suffering. They include:

- the human realm and
- multiple heavenly (*deva*) realms.

Beings have been reborn over and over again in one realm or another since beginningless time, and will generally continue to do so indefinitely into the future, at least in the absence of awakening. Buddhist texts regularly describe practice attainments in terms of this cosmological model, and this seems indeed to have begun with the Buddha: meritorious acts tend to produce rebirths in higher realms, demeritorious acts tend to produce rebirths in lower realms. The most striking point in the Buddhist cosmology is that final liberation entails the complete escape from *saṃsāra*, for an *arahant* will never again know rebirth. There are also lesser *stages of awakening* that approach the end of *saṃsāra* to differing degrees. A stream-enterer, a once returner, or a

non-returner is nearing the very end of the *samsāric* round of rebirths, and is incapable, in any case, of ever being reborn in any future life in a lower realm.

A *stream-enterer* will be reborn at most seven times altogether, either in the human, or in a deity realm.

A *once-returner* will return no more than once more to the human realm.

A *non-returner* will return never again to the human realm, but will attain awakening in a *deva* realm.

An *arahant* will never be reborn.

An aspect of this cosmology that we have already encountered is visitation between realms, a valuable contributor to the more exciting story lines of many ancient texts. Alongside commonplace visitation between the human and animal realms, visitation is common in the ancient texts also between the deity and human realms. Although deities (*devas*) clearly inhabit heavenly realms, the Buddha never endorses a role for them as objects of worship among his disciples. Rather, deities play a rhetorical role in exalting the higher status of awakening. Visiting deities, even the highest in the Indian pantheon, venerate the Buddha, and even the monastics.

The most common visitor is the infamous Māra, actually a kind of fallen deity whose attitude toward the *Saṅgha* and awakening is perverse. He is always ready, *in cognito*, to tempt, discourage, seduce, and disarm Buddhist practitioners, to bring them away from what is wholesome, and from what leads to *nibbāna*. He is remarkably persistent, especially given that his rate of success seems to be frustratingly low in the early texts. One reason for his poor performance seems to be his tendency unknowingly to pick on monks and nuns who are already awakened, and who recognize him immediately for who he is.

It is often pointed out that Buddhist cosmology commonly parallels Buddhist psychology, resulting in alternative explanations for the same things. This has been called the *principle of the equivalence of cosmology and psychology*.¹ Some scholars have argued that mythic elements of religions in general often stand for an underlying psychology, or for cultural or social embeddedness that is difficult to observe or name directly. Social relations are generally symbolic in any case. The Buddha was an early pioneer in psychological exposition, with some limited credit to the earlier *Upaniṣads*. However, he would have spoken in a context in which mythical accounts had considerable currency.

As examples of this equivalence of cosmology and psychology, we should

observe that each of the realms of existence corresponds to a dominant experiential state within the scope of human psychology. Through the accrual of *kammic* benefits or deficits, a saint might create a heaven right here in this human realm, while a scoundrel might create a hell. The clever reader can work out what an animal realm would feel like, or a hungry ghost realm. Similarly, different levels of composure provide glimpses into different levels of deity realms in the early texts. The four *jhānas* tend to produce rebirths in Brahmā realms, while the formless (*arūpa*) attainments produce rebirths in formless heavenly realms, where beings are said to have no bodies, only minds.

My intent is not to demythologize the cosmological models in favor of psychology. Cosmologies seem to have served well over the centuries in providing a meaningful, and beneficial conceptual framework for practice. Nonetheless, the early texts sometimes demythologize some elements themselves. For instance, the presence of Māra is found among the cognitive mechanisms at work in the sense spheres:

Where the ◀eye▶ exists, Samiddhi, where ◀visible forms▶, ◀eye▶ consciousness, and phenomena cognizable by the ◀eye▶ exist, there Māra, or the manifestation of Māra exists.
(SN 35.65)

... and so on for ◀eye▶, etc. An intriguing intersection between the psychological, and the cosmological is found in rebirth. Rebirth is the eleventh link of dependent coarising, which is directly preceded by the link of becoming: “becoming → birth.” What we have become propels us into the next life, so that we begin the next life as what we have become in the last. For instance, if we experience a figurative, psychological hell in this life, this might well project us into a cosmological hell realm in the next life, which we will share with others of similar disposition. As a point of curiosity, notice that becoming is a delusion in the first place, fabricated by the great magician of consciousness out of the delusive presumption of the self. In short, “that too is dependent on contact.” Recall, from 11.2, that dependence on contact suffices as a basis for rejecting each of the sixty-two erroneous philosophical views. This seems to imply that birth itself, dependent on becoming and therefore on contact, is no more than a conceptual mistake that most of us, but not the *arahant*, makes. This is fuel for philosophical debate beyond my purview.

Nonetheless, my intent is, once again, not to establish the cosmological view as true, or false.² Recall that in my discussion of working assumptions in 6.4, I argued that whether a (working) assumption is true or false is not the question

that need be asked, but rather whether an assumption benefits practice. I daresay that the cosmological perspective with respect to attainments, particularly higher attainments, seems to be more useful (easier to grasp) than the psychological perspective. This is particularly true in the early stages of practice, when simple ways to frame, understand, and motivate the practice are needed. Yet the psychological perspective will be necessary toward the end of practice.

For instance, the prospect of a cosmological hell realm is likely a greater inducement in the initial stages of practice to avoid demeritorious deeds, and to purify mind of unwholesome factors. Likewise, reflection on the monotony of existence, of reliving the same kinds of experiences over and over, is more likely conducive to dispassion. It would be difficult to reproduce such compelling statements as the following in purely psychological terms:

Which is greater, the tears you have shed while transmigrating, and wandering this long, long time—crying, and weeping from being joined with what is displeasing, being separated from what is pleasing—or the water in the four great oceans? ... This is the greater: the tears you have shed... (SN 15.3)

The Buddha similarly talked about the mountains of bones we have left behind, and the vast quantity of blood we have spilled. The cosmological perspective invites further myth, and myth can be outrageous when it wants to be. But the way we relive the same kinds of experiences endlessly over and over is outrageous in any case. Filling the great oceans with tears expresses an otherwise almost inexpressible truth, perhaps with a lot of poetic license.

From the psychological perspective, the self-perpetuating nature of *samsāra* is reflected in continuous becoming as a psychological process. The word *samsāra* also carries over figuratively to this present life as the feeling of entanglement, or stuck-ness most people feel day by day. They often call this stuck-ness “the rat race,” or demand “Stop the world, I want to get off.” I always like to say, “*Samsāra* is soap-operatic existence.”

12.2. Awakening as the culmination of practice

Buddhism is a practice tradition through which we progressively acquire the skills of virtue, wisdom, and the faculties (corresponding to the three groups of the noble eightfold path). Those engaged with making progress on the path are accordingly are said to be ‘in training’ (*sekha*). It thereby makes sense that the perfection of these skills, and faculties correlates with awakening, making the

awakened one a *Dhammic* virtuoso. Indeed, the *arahant* is said to be ‘not (no longer) in training’ (*asekha*), “Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for the sake of this world.”

Most of the various practices are framed in terms of eliminating, or reducing the influence of unskillful factors, rather than in terms of gaining skillful factors, and indeed awakening is often defined in terms of the absence of what is unskillful. *Nibbāna* is variously called the stilling of all fabrications, the relinquishing of all appropriations, the destruction of craving, and dispassion. Awakening is also called the end of suffering, the end of the three fires of greed, aversion, and delusion, and the end of *kamma*. We have seen that the word *nibbāna* means extinguishing, or blowing out, like a fire, and have tied that in with the metaphor of appropriation as fuel that gives rise to the fire of becoming. The twelvefold chain of dependent coarising is all about factors that we need to get rid of in order to complete our practice.

A common way to track the progressive attainments culminating in complete awakening is in terms of eliminating the ten *fetters* (*samyojana*):

There are these ten fetters. Which ten? Five lower fetters, and five higher fetters. Which are the five lower fetters?

- (1) self-existence view,
- (2) doubt,
- (3) perversion of norms and observances,
- (4) sensual desire, and
- (5) ill will.

These are the five lower fetters. And which are the five higher fetters?

- (6) desire for material existence,
- (7) desire for immaterial existence,
- (8) conceit,
- (9) restlessness, and
- (10) ignorance.

These are the five higher fetters, and these are the ten fetters.
(AN 10.13)

The four levels of awakening are described in terms of the progressive elimination, or weakening of fetters as follows:

- stream-entry: (1), (2), (3)
- Once-returning: (1), (2), (3); weakening of (4), (5)
- Non-returning: (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

- Full awakening: (1), (2), (3), (4), (5), (6), (7), (8), (9), (10)

These ten factors are described as follows:

(1) Self-existence view. We saw in 7.3 that the stream-enterer has eliminated the first three fetters. The most significant of these is self-existence view. The full sense of self is constructed in dependent coarising at various levels, is rather pernicious, and is completely lost only with the loss of the eighth fetter, conceit. The elimination of self-existence view is a first step in weakening the sense of self, at least at the conceptual level, by recognizing its constructedness, and its contingency, and by seeing that life's processes continue perfectly well without encapsulating them in a self. For at least a moment, fabrications must fail to convince us, so that we see in that moment the artificiality of what consciousness otherwise magically conjures up as a self. Although the self continues to be a vexing problem, we thereby gain some initial insight into the nature of the problem that will prove invaluable in disentangling mind. This is the *vision of Dhamma* discussed in 7.0 and 7.3, seeing the conditionality of existence, and thereby glimpsing the unconditioned.

(2) Doubt. Overcoming this fetter ensues from acquiring complete trust in the Buddha, the *Dhamma*, and the *Saṅgha*., which is the consummation of refuge. This can happen as a natural consequence of acquiring the vision of *Dhamma*, through which we can see that the path leads, indeed, to *nibbāna*.

(3) Perversion of norms and observances. Modern teachers often interpret this as a disapproval of “rites, and rituals,” which are, in fact, at least as common in early Buddhism as they are in modern sports events and birthday parties. Norms and observances are far more general, encompassing perhaps all of *Dhamma* practice: observing precepts, pursuing a regular meditation practice, and so on. The disapproval applies to the *perversion* of these practices. One way in which practices become perverse is through attributing special efficacy, or magic to them, which is common in brahminical ritual practices, purported to effectuate various benefits for clients. Others are through pride in attainments, through striving to “do it perfectly,” and through obsession with the personal fruits to be gained.

(4) Sensual passion, and (5) ill will. These are said to be weakened for the once-returner and eliminated for the non-returner, the latter of whom is now ever so close to *nibbāna*. The complete loss of craving represents the radical restructuring of the person's motivations in daily life. Life will simply cease to be a significant problem, or a struggle. The senses continue to function, even physical pain can still be discerned, but nothing will necessitate an offensive, or defensive posture.

As a single mass of rock isn't moved by the wind, even so all forms, flavors, sounds, aromas, contacts, ideas desirable and not, have no effect on one who is such. (AN 6.55)

I always like to say,

Neither scantily clad lass, nor debonair hunk,
 Neither chocolate cheese cake à la mode, nor catchy tune,
 Will ever again make the heart beat faster with lust.
 Neither plunge into nest of snapping vipers,
 Bite of bear, nor lunge of lion,
 Neither ghoul, nor remorseless torture,
 Need raise a hair in fear.
 Neither fender bender, nor rude waiter,
 Neither computer crash with total loss of data,
 Nor out o' cash with total loss of face,
 Need curl the lip, nor wrinkle the brow in ire.

6) Desire for material, (7) desire for immaterial existence. Eliminating the final five fetters is the achievement of the *arahant*. If we are non-returners, then, having given up passions of the senses, we still hang on to existence (*bhava*), to being somebody, to having a self-existence. This is the topic of these two fetters, which distinguish themselves cosmologically, or psychologically: The first seeks existence as a form, that is, as visible, or material, in the human, or in one of the lower deity realms. The second seeks a lighter formless existence, that is, immaterial, in one of the higher deity realms. At this point we give up both options for existence. We have already recognized with the loss of the first fetter that such existence is not really substantial. Now we go one step further, and actually give up our appropriation of whomever we continue to imagine we have become, or whomever we aspire to become. Nonetheless, the self still hangs on by a thread.

(8) Conceit. This fetter is tied up with the sense of self still running on fumes. Often the elimination of this is equated with awakening itself, and its order among the fetters suggests it is very close to being right. A group of monks in one of the discourses suspects that an ill monk, Khemaka, might already be an *arahant*, and they ask him whether he regards any of the five aggregates of appropriation—form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness—as “this is mine, this am I, and this is my self,” as a test. Khemaka asserts that he does not, but that he nonetheless is not an *arahant*. He explains,

“Just as, friends, there is smell in a blue, or red, or white lotus, whoever says that the smell comes from the petal, or from the color, or from the filament, is he speaking rightly?”

“No friend”

“Then how can one explain it rightly?”

“One has to say that it is the smell of the flower. That is all one can say about it.”

“Even so, friend, I do not see any of the aggregates as myself. However there is in me a subtle conceit as I am.” (SN 22.89)

Nonetheless, once Khemaka would lose the smell of conceit he would, it seems, still have two fetters to go.

(9) Restlessness. Fidgeting—indeed a problem for the beginning meditator but long abandoned by one about to attain awakening—is clearly not meant here, but rather, what is meant is the subtle feeling that there is something better over there, or just waiting in the future. This is an insidious addiction to the promise of other, better circumstances, very difficult to shake off. Ajahn Chah once said, “A monk has no future.”³ This describes a person who has completely abandoned restlessness, and is perfectly, and absolutely at all times content in the here and now with nothing better to look forward to, ever. For such a one, it is never greener on the other side of the fence.

(10) Ignorance. Once the last vestiges of ignorance go, everything goes, the entire chain of dependent coarising collapses, the snarl is disentangled. We no longer believe fabrications, we no longer believe in the world that consciousness has been painting for us. We no longer believe in whatever is conditioned, nor in a self, nor in life and death. The darkness has lifted. We are able to shine the light of wisdom in all the dark corners of the mind, dwelling in the unconditioned, in the deathless, in *nibbāna*.

“Bhikkhus, there are these four radiances ... the radiance of the moon, the radiance of the sun, the radiance of fire, the radiance of wisdom. Bhikkhus, among these four, the radiance of wisdom is indeed the most excellent.” (AN 4.142)

If we compare the fetters with the factors of dependent coarising, we notice that almost all of the fetters center around the fuel and flame of appropriation, and becoming, which are the conditions for rebirth in the chain.

12.3. What happens to consciousness?

We know that for the *arahant*, ignorance has ceased. In terms of the chain of dependent coarising, it follows that fabrications have ceased, which we've seen reflected in the cessation of *kamma* in 9.5. Since fabrications have ceased, then consciousness has ceased. All of this happens when one is coming very close to awakening.

Where do earth, water, fire, and air find no footing? Where are long and short, small and great, fair and foul, where are name and form wholly destroyed?

... Where consciousness is signless [without reference], boundless, all-luminous. That's where earth, water, fire and air find no footing. There both long and short, small and great, fair and foul, there name and form are wholly destroyed. With the cessation of consciousness, this all is destroyed. (DN 11 i 223)

Is this actually what happens? No consciousness?

There might be an enterprising reader out there who, until reading this, had been entertaining a plan to travel abroad to seek out, phrase book in hand, one of those rare *arahants* living in seclusion deep in the forest among the tigers, and pythons, hoping to bask in the radiance of their wisdom, and to receive final instructions on topics on which the present book remains murky. Now, however, that enterprising reader might already be reconsidering that this *arahant*, with the cessation of perception, of conceptualization, of thought, and of consciousness, might be incapable of functioning in any conventional way, beyond perhaps sitting under a tree and drooling into their alms bowl. Certainly they would be incapable of the delusive fabrications needed to discern this enterprising reader as more than the arising of a mirage, or a bubble out of the emptiness all around, and would lack, in any case, the wherewithal to assemble the fabrications necessary for conducting a conversation, much less for imparting a single sentence of *Dhammic* wisdom. Does an *arahant* really have no consciousness?

Not exactly, but I think I have an idea of what they do have. Recall that descriptions of dependent coarising focus single-mindedly on the disadvantages of all of the implicated factors, and therefore on the total eradication of the factors as an advantageous goal. However, this is a bit misleading as to what actually happens when the goal is achieved. *Arahants* have overcome ignorance, which is to say that fabrications no longer have persuasive power. Although they no longer believe in "I," nor in "you," nor in "that other guy," they do remember what all these concepts used to represent.

Houses have not vanished altogether, rather they have become like children's sandcastles, pretend, and are described in what is now like an adult's use of children's language to talk with children.

Let's take another analogy: As we know from 11.2, if we watch television, or go to see a movie, we worldlings, and trainees might easily be transported into a fictional John Wayne world, or into some other reality. We comprehend that world with its twists and turns of plot, but we are not completely convinced by it, because we know it is fiction. Nonetheless, we might laugh, cry, be frightened witless, be immersed in that world, that is until the credits roll by, at which time none of it has really mattered. We can think of this alternative world as built of ghost fabrications, since in our more rational moments we see through them and may even appreciate how the director, actors, and operator have cleverly created the conditions that give rise to them.

The fictional world is quite different from the "real world" in this respect: We can enter a theater, cry through a tear-jerker, or be scared witless, come out of the theater, and, returning to reality, say, "I thoroughly *enjoyed* that movie!" We knew the whole time it was not real, that the cravings and appropriations that arose were simply ghost cravings, and appropriations. On the other hand, our attitude is quite different toward the outer world that we still presume is really real, in which we do *not* enjoy the horrifying tear-jerker in which most of us actually live.

Here is what I think is going on for the *arahant*: The world we take to be real is as unreal to the *arahant* as the movie world is to us, and it is experienced by the *arahant* through ghost fabrications, ghost feelings, ghost cravings, and ghost appropriations that the *arahant* remembers as *once* being real in their own experience, but which they no longer take as real. They now see right through them. This capability is called "*nibbāna with residual fuel*" (or, recalling the ambiguity from 11.4, "with remaining appropriations," *sa-upādisesā nibbāna*). This has been likened to a fire that has been extinguished, but in which the embers are still warm (a ghost fire). The *arahant* can enact being a normal human in the world, the way children can enact being superheros or space commandos. Without this they could not communicate with worldlings nor be effective in performing good in the world. They are *awake*, and recognize that the rest of us are still aslumber in a dream world.

They experience this world with joy no matter how it unfolds, yet also with kindness and compassion toward the suffering of the ghost beings that live there. In fact they appear quite active on behalf of others, appear decisive, responding immediately, and fluidly to the needs of others, because the slightest hint of a (non-ghost) self that might stand in the way is absent. Even

if they sometimes conceptualize a self they do not believe in it. Their activities are likewise beyond *kamma*.

What, bhikkhus, is the *nibbāna*-element with residue left? Here a bhikkhu is an *arahant*, one whose corruptions are destroyed, the holy life fulfilled, who has done what had to be done, laid down the burden, attained the goal, destroyed the fetters of being, completely released through final knowledge. However, his five sense faculties remain unimpaired, by which he still experiences what is agreeable, and disagreeable, and feels pleasure, and pain. It is the extinction of appropriation, aversion, and delusion in him that is called the *nibbāna*-element with residue left. (Iti 2.17)

The *arahant* can also withdraw from this world at will, and enter into what is called the *fruit of arahantship composure* (*arahatta-phala-samādhi*), a state in which fabrications, and therefore the sense spheres, cease. The Buddha recounted an incident in which he was resting in this particular composure.⁴ Re-engaging afterwards with the conventional world he saw a great crowd gathered in a nearby field, and was informed that just a few moments ago it was raining in torrents with streaks of lightning, and peals of thunder. Two farmers, and four bulls had been struck dead. The Buddha, though percipient, and awake, had completely failed to witness this commotion.

A diety, Rohitassa, visited he Buddha one day. Rohitassa had in former life the paranormal ability to travel to distant places very quickly. He asked the Buddha whether one can travel to the end of the world in order to overcome *saṃsāra*. To this the Buddha replied,

“I tell you, friend, that it is not possible by traveling to know, or see, or reach a far end of the world, where one does not take birth, age, die, pass away, or reappear. But at the same time, I tell you that there is no making an end of suffering without reaching the end of the world. Yet it is just within this fathom-long body, with its perception, and intellect, that I declare that there is the origination of the world, the cessation of the world, and the path of practice leading to the cessation of the world.”
(AN 4.450)

Since no traces of the residual fuel survive death, the physical death of the *arahant* is described as *nibbāna without residual fuel* (*anupādisesā nibbāna*), or *parinibbāna* (Sanskrit, *parinirvāna*, higher *nibbāna*).

12.5. The practice toward awakening

The Buddha described his teachings as against the stream. They make little sense to the common worldling until they are directly encountered and experienced. Renouncing sensual pleasures? In favor of ... what, exactly? This is no less true of *nibbāna*, which, on first description, must seem hardly more appealing than bungee jumping or swallowing goldfish. Ending existence, and rebirth? In favor of ... what, exactly? The world is nothing like what we start out supposing it to be; at each step we proceed anew with trust that the Buddha knew what he was talking about, only in retrospect seeing that he indeed did. We cannot experience *nibbāna* fully until we reach *nibbāna* ourselves.

In a favorite story from the *suttas*, Ven. Bhaddiya Kaligodha was often heard by other monks to exclaim, “What bliss, what bliss!” Since he had, as a layman, been a king, they did not assume that he was enjoying the delights of the renunciate life, but rather that he was reminiscing about his previous cushy life. Upon word of this, the Buddha summoned Ven. Bhaddiya, and discovered that the monks were underestimating his stage of insight. This was Ven. Bhaddiya’s account,

“Before, when I was a householder, maintaining the bliss of kingship, I had guards posted within and without the royal apartments, within and without the city, within and without the countryside. But even though I was thus guarded, thus protected, I dwelled in fear—agitated, distrustful, and afraid. But now, on going alone to a forest, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty dwelling, I dwell without fear, unagitated, confident, and unafraid—unconcerned, unruffled, my wants satisfied, with my mind like a wild deer. This is the meaning I have in mind that I repeatedly exclaim, ‘What bliss! What bliss!’” (Ud 2.10)

What Ven. Bhaddiya had left behind was not so different from the lives many of us live, with an asset-laden personal footprint protected by high-tech security system, and with a financial advisor. We generally don’t like, or understand, initially, the idea of giving up sensual pleasures, nor fame, and gain. But consider how much we gave up spontaneously in the process of growing up: toys, and games, and certain interpersonal concerns that one year seemed so important, but the next year had so little appeal. All of the sentiments of *samsaric* existence are one by one similarly shed in the process of completing, at long last, the process of growing up. The toys and games, and interpersonal concerns are themselves, in the end, without appeal. Notice also that even our greatest pleasures, or those things that we have longed for the longest, if indulged in to excess, become stale, then tedious, then irritating.

There are those among us, the foolishly glamorous, who are known for their sensual indulgences, and are idolized by the masses. But few of them lead happy lives. Instead, they frequently turn to drug or alcohol addiction, which in turn turns to despair, often even to suicide. Worldly pleasures are not what we take them to be at first; they break their promises.

It is only with a great deal of trust, courage, and resolve that we enter the stream. But the path inclines toward *nibbāna*, and as we practice the path diligently we will make progress, albeit gradually, in that direction.

There are these gross impurities in gold: dirty sand, gravel, and grit. The dirt-washer, or his apprentice, having placed it in a vat, washes it again and again until he has washed them away.

When he is rid of them, there remain the moderate impurities in the gold: coarse sand, and fine grit. He washes the gold again and again until he has washed them away.

When he is rid of them, there remain the fine impurities in the gold: fine sand, and black dust. The dirt-washer, or his apprentice washes the gold again and again until he has washed them away.

When he is rid of them, there remains just the gold dust. The goldsmith, or his apprentice, having placed it in a crucible, blows on it again and again to blow away the dross. The gold, as long as it has not been blown on again and again to the point where the impurities are blown away, as long as it is not refined, and free from dross, is not pliant, malleable, or luminous. It is brittle, and not ready to be worked.

But there comes a time when the goldsmith, or his apprentice has blown on the gold again and again until the dross is blown away. The gold, having been blown on again and again to the point where the impurities are blown away, is then refined, free from dross, pliant, malleable, and luminous. It is not brittle, and is ready to be worked. Then whatever sort of ornament he has in mind — whether a belt, an earring, a necklace, or a gold chain — the gold would serve his purpose.

In the same way, there are these gross impurities in a monk intent on heightened mind: misconduct in body, speech, and mind. These the monk—aware, and able by nature—abandons, destroys, dispels, wipes out of existence. When he is rid of them, there remain in him the moderate impurities: thoughts of

sensuality, ill will, and harmfulness. These he abandons, destroys, dispels, wipes out of existence. When he is rid of them there remain in him the fine impurities: thoughts of his caste, thoughts of his home district, thoughts related to not wanting to be despised. These he abandons, destroys, dispels, wipes out of existence.

When he is rid of them, there remain only thoughts of the *Dhamma*. His composure is neither calm nor refined, it has not yet attained tranquility, or unity, and is kept in place by the fabrication of forceful restraint. But there comes a time when his mind grows steady inwardly, settles down, grows unified, and concentrated. His composure is calm, and refined, has attained tranquility, and unity, and is no longer kept in place by the fabrication of forceful restraint. And then whichever of the higher knowledges he turns his mind to know and realize, he can witness them for himself whenever there is an opening. (AN 3.100)

The Buddhist practitioner enters a stream that leads to far greater, rewarding, and reliable pleasures. This begins, and for the most part is sustained, quite remarkably, with the satisfaction in giving, in harmlessness, in bringing benefit to the world. It continues as the mind becomes purified of craving, and as suffering recedes. Building on a foundation of refuge and virtue, it is found in the utter stillness of composure, and increasingly in the gaps that open up in not having to worry about this or that. This bliss seems to arise naturally just by making room for it. Oddly, the greatest happiness does not seem to be a feeling (*vedanā*) at all:

By completely transcending the base of neither perception nor non-perception, the bhikkhu enters in, and dwells in the cessation of perception, and feeling. This is that other kind of happiness more excellent, and sublime than the previous kind of happiness. (SN 36.19)

It seems that the absence of suffering makes room for this sublime happiness; nothing more needs to be done. Those who have attained *nibbāna* consistently report an abiding feeling of bliss. It is the bliss of tranquility, the bliss that arrives as suffering departs, the bliss of settling in with things as they are, and of not seeing them as personal problems, the bliss of renunciation, of no personal stake, that abides by its own accord, that will not, and cannot depart.

Final awakening comes with the disentanglement of our conditionality, to

realize, and abide in the unconditioned, and unfettered, needing nothing, no longer existing in the conventional way as a separate self.

One who is dependent has wavering. One who is independent has no wavering. There being no wavering, there is calm. There being calm, there is no desire, or inclination. There being no desire, or inclination, there is no coming, or going. There being no coming, or going, there is no passing away, or arising. There being no passing away, or arising, there is neither a here nor a there nor a between-the-two. This, just this, is the end of suffering. (Ud 8.4)

What needed to be done has been done. This is the gradual realization that this world is not what we thought, and never was. With practice, the world as we knew it fades away.

There is, monks, an unborn, an unbecome, an unmade, an unconditioned. If, monks, there were no unborn, no unbecome, no unmade, no unconditioned, then no escape would be discerned from what is born, become, made, conditioned. But because there is an unborn, an unbecome, an unmade, an unconditioned, therefore an escape is discerned from what is born, become, made, conditioned. (Iti 43)

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1. Gethin (1998).
 2. In fact, those interested in this issue might consider Stevenson's (2000) compelling academic research on children's apparent memories of past lives, or of Anālayo's (2018) investigation of the Sri Lankan boy Dhammaruwan's spontaneous recitation of Pali texts.
 3. Passano & Amaro (2009, p. 117). The authors were both students of Ajahn Chah.
 4. Although the text does not specifically refer to this state, Ñāṇānanda (2015, p. 569) makes the case that this incident, from DN 16, is indeed a case of *arahatta-phala-samādhi*.

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Lexicon of main concepts

Below are terms from the Pali terminology of the EBT, as well as modern terms found useful in explaining *Dhammic* concepts. References are found to chapters or sections in which definitions and discussion can be found. Included are preferred Pali-English translations. Pointers are made to thematically related terms to provide a fuller context for study. The following notational conventions been adopted:

{...,...} is a list, for instance, three signs = {impermanence, suffering, non-self}.

∈ means ‘is an element of,’ for instance, suffering ∈ three signs.

⊂ means ‘is a sub-list of,’ for instance, wisdom group ⊂ noble eightfold path.

≈ indicates either rough or uncertain equivalence of terms, for instance, energy ≈ effort.

§ precedes chapter and section numbers, for instance, § 5.6.

Bold section or chapter references are primary loci for discussion of the respective term.

‘Otherwise’ is used to designate translations preferred by other authors.

‘Path’ is often used as an abbreviation of ‘noble eightfold path.’

Action, right, *sammā kammanta*, ∈ Path, ∈ ethics group, § 7.1, 7.2, **9.2**.

Admirable friend, *kalyāṇa-mitta*, § 2.6, 6.5.

Aggregates, five, *pañca-khandha*, {form, feeling, perception, fabrications, consciousness}, § **8.2**, 11.2, 11.3.

Aggregates of appropriation, *upādānak-khandha*, see (five) aggregates, § 8.2, 11.4.

Akusala, ‘unskillful,’ ‘unwholesome’ (*kamma*).

Anicca, ‘impermanence.’

Appropriate attention, *yoniso manasikāra*, § 2.5, 7.3.

Appropriation, *upādāna*, otherwise ‘clinging’ or ‘attachment,’ ∈ dependent coarising, § 11.1, 11.3.3, 11.4.

Ariya, ‘noble (one).’

Ariya-saṅgha, ‘noble Saṅgha.’

Āsava, ‘corruption.’

Attentive recollection, *upaṭṭhitā sati*, ≈ recollection-discernment, see recollection, § 10.4.

Attentiveness, *upaṭṭhāna*, literally ‘attending-to,’ see discernment, concentration, curtailment, § 10.3.

Attitude, *saṅkappa*; **right attitude**, {renunciation, kindness, harmlessness}, ∈ Path, ∈ wisdom group; § 7.1, 7.2, 8.7.

Aversion, *dosa*, ∈ unskillful roots, § 4.2, 9.2, 9.4.

Avijjā, ‘ignorance.’

Awakening, *bodhi*, otherwise ‘enlightenment,’ ≈ ‘liberation,’ ≈ *nibbāna*, ≈ ‘destruction of corruptions,’ § ch. 12.

Awakening factors, **seven**, *bojjhaṅga*, {recollection, *Dhamma* investigation, energy, rapture, tranquility, composure, equanimity}, § 8.3, 10.4.

Bahulīkata, ‘cultivation,’ literally ‘done a lot,’ see development and cultivation.

Becoming, *bhava*, ∈ dependent coarising, ∈ corruptions, § 11.1, 11.4.

Bhava, ‘becoming.’

Bhāvanā, ‘development,’ see development and cultivation.

Bhāvanā-bahulīkata, ‘development and cultivation.’

Bhikkhu, ‘monk’; **bhikkhu-saṅgha**, see *saṅgha*.

Birth, *jāti*, ∈ dependent coarising, see rebirth.

Bodhi, ‘awakening.’

Bodhisatta, generally untranslated, ‘Buddha-to-be,’ § 1.1.

Bojjhaṅga, ‘awakening factor.’

Brahmavihāras, typically untranslated, also ‘divine abodes,’ {kindness,

compassion, non-envy, equanimity}, § 4.6.

Composure, *samādhi*, otherwise ‘concentration,’ ‘absorption,’ ‘trance,’ see concentration, curtailment, *jhāna*; **right composure**, ∈ Path, ∈ faculty group; § 7.1, 7.2, **10.4**.

Concentration, see one-centeredness, composure, hindrances; § 10.4.

Condition, *paccaya*, *samudaya*, *paṭicca*, also ‘contingency,’ ‘origin,’ ‘conditional relation,’ ‘dependency’; **Conditionality**, *idappaccayatā*, see four truths formula, § 1.3, 7.0, **8.3**.

Consciousness, *viññāṇa*, ∈ five aggregates, ∈ dependent coarising, see fabrications, name and form, § 11.1, **11.2.1**, 11.2.4., 12.3.

Cosmology, § 12.1.

Contact, *phassa*, ∈ dependent coarising, see objective world, presumption, § 11.1, **11.2.4**.

Contemplation, *anussati*, *anupassanā*, § 4.3.

Corruptions, *āsava*, {ignorance, sensuality, becoming}, see dependent coarising, awakening, § 11.1, 8.1.

Craving, *taiḥā*, ∈ dependent coarising, see four noble truths, § **11.1**, **11.3**.

Curtailment, see composure, *jhānas*, dual process theory, § **10.4.5**.

Dāna, ‘giving,’ ‘generosity,’ § **ch. 2**.

Delusion, *moha*, ∈ roots of the unskillful, see ignorance, § 4.2, 9.2, 9.4.

Demerit, *pāpa*, see fruits (of *kamma*), § 2.3, 3.3.

Dependent coarising, *paṭicca-samuppāda*, {ignorance, fabrications, consciousness, name and form, sixfold sphere, contact, feeling, craving, appropriation, becoming, birth, suffering of *saṃsāra*}, § **8.6**, **ch. 11**.

Development and cultivation, *bhavanā-bahulīkata*, see skill acquisition, § 10.1.

Dhamma, typically untranslated, ‘teachings,’ ‘doctrine,’ ∈ triple gem.

dhamma (lower case), ‘Dhamma teaching,’ ‘factor of experience,’ ‘phenomenon,’ ‘observable,’ § 8.2.

Dhamma-cakkhu, ‘vision of Dhamma.’

Dhamma investigation, *dhamma-vicaya*, ≈ *satipaṭṭhāna*, ∈ awakening factors, ∈ contemplations, see view (right), § 8.1, **8.8**, 10.3, 11.5.

Dhamma-pañipatti, ‘Dhamma practice.’

Dhamma practice, *Dhamma-paṭipatti*, § 7.1, 10.1, **10.3**.

Dhamma-vicaya, ‘Dhamma investigation.’

Dhamma-Vinaya, typically untranslated, ‘doctrine and discipline,’ § 1.4.

Discerning, *sampajāna*, **discernment**, *sampajañña*. ∈ recollection-discernment, § 10.3.

Discourse, *sutta*, § 1.5.

Discursive thinking, *vitakka-vicāra*, = ‘thought and deliberation,’ ∈ jhāna factors, see curtailment, § 10.4.3.

Dispersion, *virāga*, § 4.5.

Dispositions, *saṅkhāra*, also variously ‘old *kamma*,’ ‘fabrications,’ ‘corruptions,’ *anusaya* (literally ‘sleep-along’), ‘rut’ (in *kammic* landscape), see internalization, § 3.3, 4.3, **10.1**.

Diṭṭhi, ‘view,’ *sammā diṭṭhi*, ‘right view.’

Dosa, ‘aversion.’

Dual process theory, see explicit cognition, implicit cognition, internalization, skill acquisition, curtailment, § **10.1**.

EBT, also ‘early Buddhist texts.’

Effort, *vāyāma*; **right effort**, ∈ Path, ∈ faculty group; § 7.1, 7.2, **10.2**.

Ekagga, ‘one-centered.’

Empty, *suñña*; **emptiness**, *suññatā*; see insubstantiality, § 8.4.

End of *kamma*, *kammakkhaya*, see internalization, skill acquisition, § **9.5**.

Energy, *virīya*, ≈ effort, ∈ (five) faculties, ∈ awakening factors, § 10.2.

Ethics, *sīla*, also ‘virtue,’ § ch. 2, ch. 3, ch. 4, ch. 5, **ch. 9**, 11.3.

Ethics-group, *sīlak-khandha*, {right speech, right action, right livelihood}, ⊂ Path, § 7.2, **ch. 9**.

Explicit system, see dual process theory, § **10.1**.

Fabrication, *saṅkhāra*, ∈ dependent coarising, ∈ aggregates (five), see disposition, *kamma*, old *kamma*, § 8.2, 11.1, **11.2.2**, 12.3.

Faculties, five, {faith, energy, recollection, composure, wisdom}, § **ch. 10**.

Faculty, *indriya*, contrast: primary task, see sense faculty, § 7.2, **ch. 10**.

Faculty group, *samādhik-khandha*, otherwise ‘concentration group,’ ‘development group,’ ‘*samādhi* group,’ {right effort, right recollection, right composure}, ⊂ Path, § 7.2, **ch. 10**.

Faith, *saddhā*, see refuge, working assumption, § 6.1, **6.4**, 7.3.

Feeling, *vedanā*, 'otherwise 'sensation,' 'hedonic tone,' literally 'making known,' ∈ five aggregates, ∈ dependent coarising, § 11.3, 8.2.

Fetters, **ten**, *saṃyojana*, {self-identity view, doubt, perversion of norms and observances, sensual desire, ill will, desire for material existence, desire for immaterial existence, conceit, restlessness, ignorance}, see stream entry, awakening, § 7.3, 12.2.

Form, *rūpa*, {visual sensations, sounds, tastes, odors, bodily sensations, mental experiences} or simply 'visual sensations,' ∈ aggregates, ∈ name and form, § 8.2. 11.2.

Four noble truths, see noble eightfold path, § 1.3, **8.5**.

Four truths formula, see dependent coarising, § 8.6.

Fruit (of *kamma*), *phala*, = 'result,' = 'old kamma,' see dispositions, § 2.3, 3.3, , 3.4, 4.3.

Generosity, *dāna*, § **ch. 2**.

Gradual instruction, *anupubbikathā*, § **2.1**, 7.0.

Greed, *lobha*, ∈ unskillful roots, § 4.2, 9.2, 9.4.

Guarding of senses, *indriyānaṃ gutti*, ≈ 'sense restraint,' see renunciation, § 4.5, 7.0.

Harmlessness, *ahimsā*, § **ch. 3.0**, **8.7**.

Harmony, see ethics, society, respect, responsibility, § **ch. 5**.

Heavens, *sagga*, see fruit (of *kamma*), cosmology, rebirth, § 2.1, 3.4, 12.1.

Hindrances, *nīvaraṇa*, {lust, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restless and remorse, doubt}, § 10.2.

Householder Vinaya, *Sigalovada Sutta*, § 5.3, 5.4.

Idappaccayatā, 'conditionality.'

Ignorance, *avijjā*, ≈ 'delusion,' ∈ dependent coarising, ∈ corruptions, antonym: wisdom, § **11.1**, 11.2, 11.3, 12.2.

Impermanence, *anicca*, ∈ three signs, § 7.0, 8.4.

Implicit system, see skill acquisition, dispositions, dual process theory, contrast: explicit system, § **10.1**.

Indriya, 'faculty,' often specifically 'sense (faculty)'; *indriyānaṃ gutti*, 'guarding of senses'; *indriya-saṃvara*, 'sense restraint.'

Insight, *paññā*, also ‘aha experience’; ‘have an insight,’ *sammappaññāya passati*; see vision of *Dhamma*, knowledge and vision, presumption, objective world, view, § 7.3, 10.4.6, 11.5.

Insubstantiality, see conditionality, three signs, emptiness, view, § 8.4.

Intention, *cetanā*, ≈ ‘volition,’ see *kamma*, § 2.2, 9.4.

Internalization, see explicit system, implicit system, dual practice theory, development and cultivation, skill acquisition, § 10.1, 10.4.

Jhāna, generally untranslated, see composure, *jhāna* factors, § 1.2, 10.4.3.

***Jhāna* factors**, *jhānaṅga*, § 10.4.3.

Kalyāṇa-mitta, ‘admirable friend.’

Kamma, generally untranslated, also ‘act,’ ‘action,’ ‘deed,’ ‘volitional action,’ ‘volition,’ ‘intention,’ {bodily *kamma*, verbal *kamma*, mental *kamma*}, {skillful *kamma*, unskillful *kamma*}, see fruit, result, § 1.2, 2.2, 3.3, 3.4, 4.3, 9.4, 9.5.

Kammakkhaya, ‘end of *kamma*.’

Kammic landscape (my term), § 9.4, 9.6, 10.1.

Kindness, *mettā*, ∈ *brahmavihāras*, ∈ attitude (right), antonym: ‘ill-will,’ § 4.6.

Knowledge, *ñāṇa*; **right knowledge**, § 7.1, 8.0, 10.5.

Knowledge and vision, *ñāṇa-dassana*, **Knowledge and vision of things as they are**, *yathā-bhūta-ñāṇa-dassana*, § 11.0, 10.5.

Kusala, ‘wholesome,’ ‘skillful.’

Liberation, *vimutti*, § 12.0.

Livelihood, right, *sammā ājīva*, ∈ Path, ∈ ethics group, § 7.1, 7.2, 9.3.

Lobha, ‘greed.’

Lokiya, ‘mundane,’ ‘worldly.’

Lokuttara, ‘supramundane,’ ‘spiritual.’

Lust, *rāga*, § 4.4.

Magga, ‘path.’

Maññati, ‘presume,’ otherwise ‘imagine,’ ‘conceive,’ ***maññita***, ‘presumption.’

Meditation (modern term), see composure, contemplation, § 10.4.0.

Merit, *puñña*, antonym: demerit, see fruits (of *kamma*), § 2.3, 3.3.

Mettā, 'kindness.'

Moha, 'delusion.'

Mundane, *lokiya*, contrast: supramundane, § 8.1, 9.4; **mundane right view**, § 8.1, 9.4.

Nama, 'name.'

Nāma-rūpa, 'name and form.'

Name, '*nama*,' {feeling, perception, volition, contact, attention}, ∈ name and form, see name and form.

Name and form, *nāma-rūpa*, ∈ dependent coarising, see name, form, § 11.2.3.

Ñāṇa, 'knowledge.'

Ñāṇa-dassana, 'knowledge and vision (of things as they are).'

Nibbāna, untranslated (Sanskrit *nirvāna*), literally 'extinguishing' (as a fire), § 1.0, 11.4, 12.0; **saupādisesā nibbāna**, '*nibbāna* with residual fuel/ appropriation,' **anupādisesā nibbāna**, '*nibbāna* without residual fuel/appropriation,' '*parinibbāna*,' § 12.3.

Nikkhamana, 'renunciation.'

Nimitta, 'theme.'

Nīvaraṇa, 'hindrances.'

Noble (one), *ariya*, see stream entry, § 7.3.

Noble eightfold path, *ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga*, also abbreviated here as 'Path,' {right view, right attitude, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right recollection, right composure}, ∈ four noble truths, see wisdom group, ethics group, faculty group, stream entry, § 7.1.

Noble Saṅgha, *ariya-saṅgha*, see stream entry, § 6.5.

Non-self, *anatta*, ∈ three signs, see insubstantiality, § 8.4, 8.8.

Objective world, also "out there",' see contact, presumption, world, § 8.2, 11.2.4.

Observable, *dhamma*, see world, presumption, § 6.4.2, 8.2.

Old kamma, *purāṇa kamma*, see dispositions, fruit (of *kamma*), § 9.4, 11.3.

One-centered, *ekagga*, also 'centered,' § 10.4.4.

Origination, *samudaya*, see condition.

Paccaya, 'condition.'

Paññā, 'wisdom.'

Paññāk-khandha, 'wisdom group.'

Pāpa, 'demerit.'

Papañca, 'proliferation.'

Pariyatti, study (of *Dhamma*).

Path, *magga*, also used here to refer to the noble eightfold path.

Paṭicca-samuppāda, 'dependent coarising.'

Paṭipatti, 'practice,' *Dhamma-paṭipatti*, 'practice of *Dhamma*.'

Perception, *saññā*, ∈ aggregates, ∈ name, § 8.3, 10.4.

Perversion of norms and observances, *silāb-bata-parāmāso*, ∈ fetters, § 7.3.

Phala, 'fruit' (of *kamma*).

Pīti, 'rapture.'

Practice, *paṭipatti*, § 2.2.

Precept, *sikkhā-pada*, *sīla* (generally plural), § 3.1, 3.2, 3.5.

Presumption, *maññita*; **presume**, *maññati*; § 8.4.

Primary practice (or task), see faculty, contrast: faculty, § 10.0.

Proliferation, *papañca*, § 11.3.

Puñña, 'merit.'

Puñña-khetta, 'field of merit.'

Purāṇa kamma, 'old *kamma*.'

Purity, *visuddhi*, § ch. 4.

Puthujjana, 'worldling.'

Rāga, 'sensual passion.'

Rapture, *pīti*, ∈ awakening factors, ∈ *jhāna* factors, § 10.4.5.

Rebirth, *punabhava*, ≈ 'birth,' § 3.4, 9.4, 11.4, 12.1.

Recollection, *sati*, see recollection-discernment, attentive recollection; **right recollection**, ∈ Path, ∈ faculty group; § 7.1, 7.2, 10.3.

Recollection-discernment, *sati-sampajāñña*, ≈ attentive recollection, ≈ 'skillful engagement,' § 10.3.

Refuge, *sarana*, § ch. 6.

Renunciation, *nikkhamana*, § 4.1, 4.5, 8.7.

Respect, *gāraṇa*, also ‘deference,’ ‘veneration,’ § 5.3.

Responsibility, see householder *Vinaya*, § 5.4.

Result (of *kamma*), *vipāka*, = ‘fruit,’ § 3.3, 4.3.

Right, *sammā*, ≈ ‘wholesome,’ ≈ ‘skillful,’ antonym: *micchā*, see individual factors of noble eightfold path.

Rūpa, ‘form.’

Saddhā, ‘faith,’ ‘trust.’

Sakkāya-diṭṭhi, ‘self-existence view.’

Saḷ-āyatana, ‘sixfold sphere,’ ‘sense spheres.’

Samādhi, ‘composure,’ often untranslated, otherwise ‘concentration,’ ‘absorption.’

Samādhik-khandha, ‘faculty group.’

Samādhi-nimitta, ‘theme of composure.’

Samatha, generally untranslated, literally ‘settling,’ ≈ ‘composure’ in association with *vipassanā*, § 10.4.6.

Sampajāna, ‘discerning,’ **sampajañña**, ‘discernment.’

Saṃsāra, untranslated, ‘round of birth and death,’ § 1.2.

Samudaya, ‘origination,’ ‘condition,’ ‘contingency.’

Samyojana, ‘fetter.’

Saṅgha, generally untranslated, ‘monastic community,’ contrast: noble *saṅgha*, § 1.4, 5.5, 6.5.

Saṅkappa, ‘attitude.’

Saṅkhāra, ‘fabrication,’ otherwise ‘(volitional) formation.’

Saññā, ‘perception.’

Saraṇa, ‘refuge.’

Sāsana, generally untranslated, ‘dispensation,’ § 1.5, 5.6.

Sati, ‘recollection,’ otherwise ‘mindfulness.’

Satipaṭṭhāna, often untranslated, literally ‘recollection-attending-to,’ ≈ ‘Dhamma investigation,’ otherwise ‘foundations of mindfulness,’ § 8.8.

Sati-sampajañña, ‘recollection-discernment,’ ‘skillful engagement.’

Sekha, sekka, ‘trainee.’

Self-identity view, *sakkāya-ditṭhi*, ∈ fetters, § 7.3, 11.3, 12.2.

Sense, sense faculty, *indriya*, see sixfold sphere, sense restraint, guarding the senses.

Sense restraint, *indriya-saṃvara*, ≈ ‘guarding the senses,’ see renunciation, § 4.5.

Sense spheres, *saḷāyatana*, also ‘sixfold sphere.’ § 8.2, 11.2.4

Sigalovada Sutta, “The householder *Vinaya*,” § 5.3, 5.4.

sikkhā-pada, ‘precept,’ literally ‘training step.’

Sīla, ‘behavior,’ ‘ethics,’ ‘virtue,’ (plural, *sīlāni*) ‘precepts.’

Sīlab-bata-parāmāso, ‘perversion of norms and observances,’ otherwise badly translated as ‘attachment to rites and rituals.’

Sīlak-khandha, ‘ethics group.’

Sixfold sphere, *saḷ-āyatana*, also ‘sense spheres,’ ∈ dependent coarsing, § 8.2, 11.1, 11.2.

Skill acquisition (modern term), ≈ ‘development and cultivation,’ see dual process theory, § 7.1, 10.1.

Skilled engagement (modern term), ≈ ‘attentive recollection,’ see skill acquisition, § 10.1, 10.3, 10.4.2.

Skillful (*kamma*), = ‘wholesome,’ see skillful roots, purity, § 3.3, 4.1.

Skillful roots, *kusalamūla*, {renunciation, kindness, *wisdom*}, antonym: unskillful roots, see fruits (of *kamma*), § 4.2.

Society, see harmony, *saṅgha*, 2.4, 5.5.

Speech, *vācā*, **right speech**, ∈ Path, ∈ ethics group, § 2.2, 7.1, 7.2, 5.1, 9.1.

Stream entry, *sotapatti*, **stream enterer**, *sotapanna*, ‘stream’ (*sota*) = ‘noble eightfold path,’ § 1.3, 2.1, 6.5, 7.0, 7.3, 12.1.

Supramundane, *lokuttara*, also ‘spiritual,’ antonym: mundane, § 1.1, 4.5, 8.1; **supramundane right view**, § 8.1, 9.4.

Theme, *nimitta*, § 8.8.

Thought and deliberation, *vitakka-vicāra*, also ‘discursive thinking,’ ∈ *jhāna* factors, § 10.4.

Three signs, *tilakkhaṇa*, {impermanence, suffering, non-self}, § 8.4.

Ti-lakkhaṇa, ‘three signs.’

Ti-rataṇa, ‘triple gem.’

Trainee, *sekha*, § 7.3, 12.2.

Triple gem, *ti-rataṇa*, {Buddha, *Dhamma*, *Saṅgha*}, see refuge, § 6.0, 6.2.

Unskillful (*kamma*), *akusala*, = ‘unwholesome,’ see unskillful roots, § 3.3, 4.1, 4.2.

Unskillful roots, *akusalamūla*, {greed, aversion, delusion}, antonym: ‘skillful roots,’ see fruits (of *kamma*), § 4.2.

Unwholesome (*kamma*), *akusala*, also ‘unskillful.’

Upādāna, ‘appropriation,’ otherwise ‘attachment,’ ‘clinging.’

Upaṭṭhitā sati, ‘attentive recollection.’

Vācā, ‘speech.’

Vāyāma, ‘effort.’

Vedanā, ‘feeling.’

View, *diṭṭhi*, see working assumption, insubstantiality, § 8.4; **right view**, ∈ Path, ∈ wisdom group, see mundane right view, supramundane right view, § 7.1, 7.2, 8.1-6.

Vimutti, ‘liberation.’

Vinaya, generally untranslated, otherwise ‘discipline,’ § 1.0, 1.4, 2.4, 5.5, 6.5.

Viññāṇa, ‘consciousness.’

Vipāka, ‘result’ (of *kamma*), = *phāsa* ‘fruit.’

Vipassanā, generally untranslated, literally ‘analysis,’ ≈ ‘*Dhamma* investigation,’ occurs in association with *samatha*, § 10.4.6.

Viriya, ‘energy.’

Virtue, *visuddhi*, *sīla*, ≈ purity, § 7.1.

Vision of *Dhamma*, *dhamma-cakkhu*, also ‘*Dhamma* eye,’ § 1.3, 7.0, 8.3.

Vitakka-vicāra, ‘thought and deliberation,’ ‘discursive thinking,’ ∈ *jhāna* factors, § 10.4.

Volition, *sañcetanā*, see intention.

Wholesome, *kusala*, = ‘skillful.’

Wisdom, *paññā*, see knowledge and vision, § 7.1, 8.0.

Wisdom group, *paññāk-khandha*, {right view, right intention}, ⊂ Path, § 7.2, ch. 8.

Working assumption, also ‘take seriously but hold loosely,’ see faith, § 6.4.4, 8.4, 12.1.

World, *loka*, contrast: ‘objective world,’ see insubstantiality, § 8.2.

Worldling, *puthujjana*, § 7.3.

Worldly, *lokiya*, also ‘mudane,’ antonym: ‘supramundane,’ § 1.1.

Yathā-bhūta-ñāṇa-dassana, ‘knowledge and vision of things as they are.’

Yoniso manasikāra, ‘appropriate attention.’

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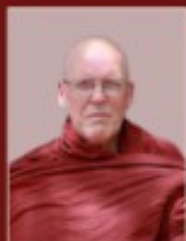
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