



BEYOND
DESIRE &
PASSION

Beyond Desire & Passion

The Buddha's Training
for Freedom

Thānissaro Bhikkhu

(Geoffrey DeGraff)

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The second chapter contrasts Ven. Sāriputta’s answer with some of the other philosophies taught at the time, to show what his listeners would have found distinctive about his answer. The main point of difference is that, whereas other philosophies taught the powerlessness of human action, or *kamma*, to shape the present moment, the Buddha affirmed that power and made it the foundation both of *what* he taught and *how* he taught. The next three chapters then treat the Buddha’s teachings on kamma in detail. Chapter 3 explores the Buddha’s teachings on kamma as he would explain it in personal terms. Chapters 4 through 6 explore his explanations of kamma in impersonal terms, in the framework of his view of the general principle of causality, and in the way in which that principle works out in detail in a teaching called *dependent co-arising*. Dependent co-arising traces the network of causes by which action leads to suffering down to the factor of ignorance of the four noble truths. Chapter 6 includes an overview of the four truths.

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1. Ven. Sāriputta's Answer

There's a dialog in the discourses of the Pali Canon—our oldest extant record of the Dhamma, the Buddha's teachings—in which a group of monks are planning to go to a remote foreign part of India where the Dhamma is still unknown ([SN 22:2](#)). They take their leave of the Buddha, and he tells them to take leave also of Ven. Sāriputta, his foremost disciple in terms of wisdom and discernment.

When they go to Sāriputta, he comments that there are wise people in foreign lands who will ask them, “What does your teacher teach?” He then asks them how they'll respond in a way that doesn't misrepresent the teaching.

The monks reply that they would travel a long distance to hear how Sāriputta himself would answer that question.

He starts with an interesting point of departure. Instead of mentioning the teachings for which the Buddha has long become famous—such as emptiness, nirvāṇa, or the four noble truths—he says, “Our teacher teaches the subduing of desire and passion.”

He then predicts that the wise people in foreign lands may ask, “And your teacher teaches the subduing of desire and passion for what?”

In other words, unlike most people at present, who—on hearing that the Buddha teaches the subduing of desire and passion—would switch to another channel or a more welcoming app, the wise people of the past would be intrigued and want to learn more.

The purpose of this book is to explore the implications of this dialog: Why would Sāriputta begin his explanation of the Dhamma for intelligent newcomers with “the subduing of desire and passion”? What are the implications of beginning at that point, and what insights can be gained into the Dhamma by viewing it from that angle? And given that, in the context of Buddhist history, we in the West are people in a land even more

foreign than a remote part of India, how might we benefit by approaching the Dhamma from the angle Sāriputta recommended?

Sāriputta himself gives some guidance in this direction. After predicting that wise people will ask their follow-up question—“the subduing of desire and passion for what?”—he provides the answer: The Buddha teaches the subduing of desire and passion for five things: form, feeling, perception, thought-fabrications, and consciousness. When we look further in the Canon, we learn that these are the five activities, called the five aggregates, from which we construct our sense of self, of who we are. This gives an idea of how radical the Buddha’s teaching is: He’s asking us to abandon desire and passion for activities with which we identify and to which we’re ordinarily most attached.

But Sāriputta doesn’t expand on that point, at least not here. Instead, he predicts that the wise people in foreign lands will want to know why the Buddha would advocate subduing desire and passion for these activities: What danger is there in desire and passion for them? And what advantage is there in abandoning that desire and passion? The answer: If you haven’t abandoned passion for these five activities, then when they change for the worse, as they inevitably will, you’ll experience pain and sorrow. But if you *have* abandoned passion for them, you’ll experience no pain or sorrow when they change in that way.

This gives an indication of the Buddha’s motive for teaching: compassion. He wants people to learn how to avoid the suffering they’re already causing themselves and might cause in the future. So even though subduing desire and passion would go against the grain and require a great deal of training, the teaching actually offers hope: that by changing your attitudes, you have it within your power to avoid suffering.

That’s where Sāriputta’s imagined dialog with the wise people of foreign lands ends, but he goes on to tell the monks that the Buddha isn’t teaching just how to avoid suffering. He’s also teaching how to find long-term happiness. Sāriputta does this by reminding the monks that if developing unskillful mental qualities—such as greed, aversion, or delusion—led to mental peace in this lifetime and happiness in future lifetimes, the Buddha wouldn’t have advocated abandoning unskillful mental qualities.

But because they lead to mental turmoil now and to suffering in future lifetimes, he advocates abandoning them.

Conversely, if developing skillful mental qualities, such as renunciation, goodwill, and compassion, led to mental turmoil now or suffering in future lifetimes, he wouldn't have advocated developing skillful mental qualities. But because skillful mental qualities lead to mental peace now and happiness in future lifetimes, that's why he advocates developing them.

That's where the discourse ends. As with all the discourses in the Canon, it leaves a lot unsaid and unexplained. For instance, it doesn't define either "desire (*chanda*)" or "passion (*rāga*).” In fact, neither of these terms is defined anywhere in the Canon. Instead, they're used to define other terms in the Buddha's vocabulary, which suggests that they were so widely familiar that the Buddha and his disciples saw no need to explain them.

However, the discourse does establish some important points. At the same time, those points raise some questions that will have to be answered if listeners in foreign lands, such as ourselves, will be motivated to learn more about what the Buddha taught. As we explore the implications of the discourse in the course of this book, we'll uncover the answers to these questions.

- *The first point* is that the Dhamma's main focus is psychological. It views events in the mind as having primary importance over events in the world, both inside and out. As the Buddha says in the first verse of the Dhammapada—the most famous collection of his verses—the mind is the forerunner of all the things you experience.

Phenomena are preceded by the mind,
ruled by the mind,
made of the mind. — [*Dhp 1*](#)

If the mind were simply on the receiving end of physical events, or if its workings were totally determined by physical laws, its choice to desire or not desire something would make no difference: If events outside were in charge, they—and not you—would determine whether you suffered or not. But here the Buddha is saying that the choice to abandon desire and passion for form, feelings, etc., will be enough to put an end to suffering.

The question here is, in what way does the mind create suffering and how do its workings allow it to stop doing that?

- That connects to *the second point* raised by the discourse: The mind has the power of choice. The fact that the Buddha would teach the subduing of desire and passion means that he sees that it's something the mind can choose to do. Even though the mind may have felt desire and passion for such things as feelings and perceptions in the past, and suffered as a result, it doesn't have to continue doing so. Its present actions are not totally determined even by its own past actions. It's free to choose a new course of action at any time.

In fact, the nature of the mind is that it can change direction so quickly that, as the Buddha notes, there's no adequate analogy to illustrate how quickly it can do so ([AN 1:49](#)). This ability can be a source of trouble if its initial direction is skillful and it then starts going in the opposite direction. But when you've been causing suffering for yourself, the mind's ability to change direction quickly can also be the means by which you can stop doing that and take up the path to suffering's end.

Here the question is, how can the mind learn to change its ways and head in the right direction?

- That connects with *the third point*, which is that the Buddha, instead of teaching a world-view, is teaching a course of action. His basic message will be a *how-to* teaching: how to put an end to desire and passion. Now, desire and passion don't easily end on their own. There's a large part of the mind that resists trying to end them and it'll offer resistance in many ways. The mind will have to be trained to overcome that resistance in all its forms.

So the question here is, what kind of training does the Buddha propose? Also, given that his teaching will have to involve a training, how does that fact influence not only *what* he taught, but also *how* he taught it, *why* he taught, *who* he would teach, and what kind of people he would train them to be?

- *Fourth*, Sāriputta makes it clear that these *how-to* instructions are based on a value judgment: that actions should be judged according to

their results, and that actions leading to greater mental well-being now and in the long-term are better than those that leave you open to suffering. Sāriputta's reference to future lifetimes in this context is an indication not only of the power of the mind—consciousness doesn't need to depend on the body for its existence—but also of the mind's range of responsibility: how long-term the consequences of its actions can be.

Here the questions are, what sort of arguments does the Buddha propose on the topic of life after death? And how objective are the standards he uses for judging actions and their results?

- *The fifth point*, though, suggests a paradox: The Buddha teaches the ending of desire and passion, yet when asked why people should follow his teachings—instead of following the desires and passions they currently prefer—he promises desirable results: freedom from suffering, along with long-term happiness. This point falls in line with another verse from the Dhammapada:

If, by forsaking
a limited happiness,
you would see
an abundance of happiness,
the enlightened person
would forsake
the limited happiness
for the sake
of the abundant. — [*Dhp 290*](#)

Obviously, anyone who follows the Buddha's teachings on how to act would have to be motivated by a desire for long-term happiness. Is the Buddha, in encouraging this sort of desire, being inconsistent or is he thinking strategically? And if he's being strategic, what's the strategy?

So Sāriputta, in addition to making some basic points about the Buddha's teachings, is also raising some important questions that will have to be answered. In doing so, he seems to be directing the discussion along lines that he senses will be fruitful—because there were many other teachers in his time who were advocating philosophies based on questions that led in other directions entirely.

In fact, it's useful to start our inquiry by looking at some of those other teachings, to see what the audience in foreign lands would be comparing the Buddha's teachings to. When we do, we'll see that many of those teachings are similar to religions and philosophies still being taught today. By contrasting those teachings with the Buddha's, we can take what was—and is—distinctive about his teachings and throw it into sharper relief.

At the same time, we can begin to understand how an intelligent audience could hear a teaching introduced as “the subduing of desire and passion” and, instead of being repelled, actually find it promising.

2. An Affirmation of Power

The Buddha didn't teach in a vacuum. There were many other religious and philosophical schools spreading their teachings in his day. Some of them we know from non-Buddhist sources, such as the Vedas of the brahmins, the ancient Indian priestly caste, whose texts dated back thousands of years. Others we know from the Pali Canon itself, as its suttas—or discourses—depict the Buddha engaged in conversations with members of those schools, refuting their teachings and sometimes converting them to the Dhamma. In fact, the early Buddhists were so eager to set themselves apart from other contemporary schools of thought that the first two suttas in the collection of discourses are devoted to listing the teachings of other schools and comparing them to the Buddha's course of training, to indicate how his teachings were something radically new and different from its rivals. To show clearly what the Buddha's teaching was, they started by showing what it wasn't.

The other religions and philosophies of the time fall into two groups: the teachings of the orthodox brahmins as found in the Vedas, and the teachings of the *samaṇas*, or contemplatives, who rejected the Vedas' authority. Modern etymology derives the word *samaṇa* from “striver,” but as we'll see, not all *samaṇa* schools advocated a life of striving. Passages from the Pali Canon seem closer to the mark in deriving *samaṇa* from *sama*, which means to be “on pitch” or “in tune.” The *samaṇa* philosophers were trying to find a way of life and thought that was in tune, not with social conventions, but with the laws of nature as these could be deduced from scientific observation, personal experience, reason, meditation, or shamanic practices. The Buddha used the term *samaṇa* to describe himself and his monastic followers.

What's most striking about the alternative teachings of the time is how many of them teach powerlessness. Contrary to a popular misconception, it wasn't the case that everyone in the Buddha's time believed in the power of karma, or action. Most of the alternative teachings of the time actually

taught that karma was either unreal or powerless. The brahmins, for instance, taught that members of other castes were powerless to perform the rituals and sacraments needed to ensure well-being in this life and the next. Instead, those people had to depend on the brahmins to perform those rituals and sacraments for them.

As for the samāṇas, many of their schools taught powerlessness of a different sort, either:

- the powerlessness of the human mind to gain objective knowledge concerning which ways of acting are skillful and which are not; or
- the powerlessness of human action in general to have an effect on the course of the universe or on a person's own happiness.

The Buddha had a term for the schools that taught the powerlessness of the first sort—the inability of the mind to know which courses of action are skillful and which ones are not. He called them “eel-wrigglers.” As he saw it, a teacher's primary duty to his students was to give them grounds for determining which courses of action they should and shouldn't take. This means that the eel-wrigglers were shirking their responsibilities—or worse, because they implied that ideas of “should” or “shouldn't” had no objective grounding at all. The same point would apply at present to those who insist that objective truths about right and wrong behavior are impossible to know and so should be left as a mystery, leaving their listeners to confront these mysteries on their own without any guidance.

As for the samāṇa schools that taught the powerlessness of human action in general, they usually framed their teachings by starting with a particular view about how the world works. In some cases, they taught that the world was totally determined by physical laws, in which human action and moral considerations had no role to play. In these cases, they either denied that human action was real, or they claimed that it was real but had no effect on anything. Also, they claimed that moral standards had no basis in nature, so they were nothing more than fictions with no objective authority. In other cases, samāṇa teachers claimed that past actions had an effect on the present, but present actions couldn't make a difference as to whether or not you suffered right now. Some teachers taught that the world was shaped entirely by the will of a creator god, which human action was powerless to affect. You would simply have to accept the will of that god, whether it was benevolent or not.

On the other extreme, there were schools claiming that there was no such thing as cause and effect, that everything happened spontaneously, so people should follow their own spontaneous whims and grab pleasures while they can.

What all these samana schools had in common was that they started with a view of the world and ended up by saying that human action had no consequences and so had no power to shape events within the world. Ideas of good and evil were mere social conventions with no grounding in reality, so people could ignore them with impunity, taking the path of least resistance and enjoying whatever sensual pleasures they felt compelled to desire.

It's easy to see how some people might like being told they were powerless, on the grounds that this view would absolve them from any responsibility for their actions and free them to follow their inclinations. If you believed in the Vedas, you could hire brahmans to perform sacrifices and other rituals for you—assuming that you could afford them—while you lived your life as you pleased. If you didn't believe in the Vedas, you wouldn't have to waste money on rituals and could still do as you pleased. And there are people at present who delight in modern versions of teachings like this, on the grounds that there's no one to tell them what they have to do, and no one to hold them accountable for what they've done.

But it's also easy to see how intelligent people would be dissatisfied with teachings of this sort. If you abdicate responsibility, you're also abdicating both the power to avoid suffering and the joy that comes from being an agent who can make a difference in your own life and in the world around you. If, on the other hand, human beings have no power, then they themselves, along with their choices and efforts, have no importance at all. If you're powerless to know what's right and wrong, then you're left without guidance on how to run your life. If the world is determined by laws beyond your control, and those laws play out in a way that would make you suffer, there's no way you can avoid that suffering. If there are no causal laws at all, there's no way you can defend yourself against spontaneous sufferings suddenly attacking you out of nowhere. In all these cases, the Buddha would say, you're left bewildered and unprotected.

So, when Sāriputta—instead of introducing the Buddha’s teachings with a view of the world—starts with a course of action, claiming that that course of action would lead to long-term happiness, his intelligent listeners would immediately understand it as an assertion of the power of human action and a refutation of powerlessness. And because the action he starts with is a mental one, it’s an assertion of the power of the mind. He’s basically saying that you have within your mind the power not to suffer, and that the Buddha is offering reliable guidance on how to do that.

Also, because of the power of action and the relative freedom to make choices in how to act, it’s possible to offer training in how to develop the skills needed to avoid suffering. This means that the Buddha’s teaching is not just a picture of the world to contemplate and discuss. It’s a call and a guide to skillful action.

This is why intelligent listeners would find the Buddha’s teaching promising, and why they would want to learn more.

It’s also why, as we begin our exploration of the Dhamma from the perspective offered by Ven. Sāriputta’s point of entry, the first issue to explore is what the Buddha had to say about the nature and power of action. We’ll find that, because the act of teaching is a type of action, *what* he had to say on this topic also influenced *how* he chose to say it. This illustrates one of the principle points of his teaching: You learn by committing yourself to a course of action and then reflecting on the results ([AN 10:73](#)). The Buddha exemplified this lesson for his listeners by showing that he had committed himself to teaching effectively and had reflected well on the implications of what he taught.

3. Proactive People with Proactive Minds

One of the striking features of the early Buddhist dialogs is the extent to which the Buddha took a personal interest in his listeners. He responded to their questions in a way that showed respect for the fact that they were agents: individuals already acting on their desires for happiness, influencing events within them and around them. Although those desires, in his eyes, were often misguided, he saw that the basic desire for long-term happiness, if it was sincere, should be honored and encouraged. His role as a teacher was to teach his listeners better ways to satisfy that desire.

The second dialog in the discourse collection ([DN 2](#)) makes this point in a very pointed way. A king approaches the Buddha with a question: What are the visible fruits of the contemplative life? Before the Buddha answers, the king tells of how he had posed the same question to teachers of other schools, and all had responded, not by addressing the question, but by giving the king a canned version of their doctrines. As he commented, it was as if he had asked about a mango, and they had answered with a jackfruit.

The Buddha then gives a long and thorough answer to the king's question, so convincingly that the king declares himself a follower of the Buddha from that day forward, for life.

And it wasn't only with kings that the Buddha exercised such care and attention. The discourses tell of laborers, lepers, and outcastes to whom he gave the same level of attention with even better results, leading them to awakening.

It's important to underline the personal attention that the Buddha gave to his listeners and their sincere desires. Often there is so much emphasis on the impersonal nature of some of his teachings that it seems as if he didn't see people as really real, and that his mission was to persuade them

that they didn't exist. His criticisms of craving are often presented in a way that portrays him as an enemy of desire in all its forms.

Both of these interpretations miss an important point: The Buddha saw that people were suffering from confused desires and passions—in fact, they were *defined* by their desires and passions—and that their sufferings were real ([SN 23:2](#); [SN 56:27](#)). In response, he felt compassion for them. He realized that one of the best ways to solve the immediate problem of their confusion and sufferings was to teach them to regard events in their own minds in impersonal terms. That way, they could get enough distance from even their most cherished desires to see how confused and counterproductive they were. From that point of view, they could more easily abandon them and replace them with desires more conducive to genuine happiness.

So the Buddha never treated his listeners as ciphers or as passive recipients of his teachings. He saw them as people in action. Their sufferings were genuine and had them bewildered, and they were searching for someone to help them put an end both to their bewilderment and to their sufferings ([AN 6:63](#)). So he was dealing with people who were already proactively involved in a search, and he wanted to help them find what they were looking for.

When he explained the nature of the search for the end of suffering, using both personal and impersonal terms, he would always start with the proactive nature of the mind. This means that when Sāriputta opened his explanation of the Buddha's teachings with a mental action—the subduing of desire and passion—he wasn't engaging in a mere rhetorical ploy. He was going straight to the heart of the matter: The power of mental action is the central fact of the Buddha's teachings.

That's why the Dhammapada begins by establishing the principle that the state of mind with which you act determines whether you will meet with pleasure or pain. This is the Buddha's distinctive teaching of the principle of *karma*—*kamma* in the language of the Canon, *action* in English. Although he recognized three types of *kamma*—bodily, verbal, and mental—he identified intention, the mental act that aims at doing something, as the determining element in all three. Actions based on unskillful intentions—greed, aversion, or delusion—lead to unpleasant results. Now, this doesn't mean that they result in no pleasure at all. The

Buddha himself cites cases where people get rewarded for killing, stealing, or lying, etc. ([SN 42:13](#)). But, he would add, the greed, aversion, and delusion underlying these actions are, in and of themselves, unpleasant, and their long-term consequences are going to be painful.

On the other hand, actions based on skillful intentions—devoid of greed, aversion, and delusion—lead to pleasant results. Here again, skillful actions might lead to pain in the short-term—think of people who are punished for telling the truth—but the fact that you’re acting on skillful intentions is, in and of itself, a pleasant source of self-esteem, and the long-term consequences will be good.

Note, though, that this doesn’t mean that good intentions necessarily lead to good results. After all, well-meaning intentions can often be based on delusion, which explains the famous observation that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. But that road is never paved with skillful ones. Skillful intentions are both good and devoid of delusion.

Intentional actions play such a large role in shaping our experience that all six of our senses—the five physical senses plus the mind’s ability to sense ideas—are the result of old kamma ([SN 35:145](#)). However, old kamma doesn’t entirely shape our experience of the present moment. If it did, the Buddha noted, there would be no room for choice in the present moment. We’d be powerless to restrain ourselves from doing unskillful things if old kamma pushed us in that direction. The idea that something should or shouldn’t be done would be meaningless. People would simply do what they were predetermined to do ([AN 3:62](#)). But as the Buddha affirmed, the mind can create new kamma by choosing to act skillfully or unskillfully right now, regardless of what’s coming in through the senses, which is why ideas of “should” and “should not” have meaning. It’s also why it’s possible to follow a path of practice that can lead to the end of suffering.

So the mind as a recipient of sense data is subject to past kamma, but the mind as agent, deciding what to do with each moment, isn’t necessarily so. It’s free to make skillful choices, to act on those choices, and for those choices to make a difference.

It’s in this way that the Buddha avoids the powerlessness of the two extremes of total determinism and total chaos. His view of causality allows for causal relationships and for freedom within those relationships to

understand and master causality to direct events to where you want them to go. The Buddha never explains where this freedom comes from, but he does encourage us to take advantage of it for the sake of our long-term welfare and happiness.

4. Intimate Causality

After this encouragement, the Buddha would then move the discussion of the power of action from personal to impersonal terms—looking at actions and events in and of themselves, without paying attention to who was doing them or where they were happening. When he did this, his explanations followed the same general outlines as his more personal discussions of actions: The present moment is shaped to some extent by past actions, and to some extent by present actions that have at least the potential to be freely chosen.

The difference was that in some cases he framed his more impersonal explanations in terms of general principles, and in others he went in the other direction, going more into the details.

The general principles establish the overall framework for how causality works in such a way that it's possible, on the one hand, for actions to have long-term consequences and, on the other, for actions in the present moment to be free from past influences. Only in such a causal system can problems arising from causes be solved by attacking the causes here and now.

The more detailed explanations show precisely how desire and passion play a role in giving rise to suffering, and how they can be used to put an end to it. In fact, one of these explanations—called dependent co-arising—will provide the framework for the remainder of this book. As we explore it, we'll see:

- the places in the causal system where intentional action plays a role in giving rise to suffering;
- the places where desire and passion also play a role, both as conditions for the ignorance that's key to the creation of suffering, and as its results; and
- the ways in which the knowledge that overcomes ignorance allows for intentional actions to fall in line with the triple training that leads to

the end of suffering.

Exploring both of the Buddha's main impersonal teachings—the general causal principle and its detailed application—allows us to understand the *what* and *why* of his teachings. Exploring the ways in which these teachings shape the training that puts an end to suffering helps to explain not only what he taught his listeners to do, but also *who* he chose to teach and *how* he trained them.

The most important of the Buddha's general formulations of his impersonal explanations of action is a causal principle called *this/that conditionality*. This principle gets its name from the fact that all the causal factors it describes are events and actions immediately present to your awareness: “this right here,” “that right there.” Instead of pointing to causal factors behind the scenes, it says, in effect, that all you need to know about the causes of suffering for the sake of putting an end to it are things that you can point to in your direct experience as “this” or “that.”

Keep this fact in mind. When the Buddha describes things in impersonal terms, he's not talking about faraway abstractions. He's focusing on events and actions that can be intimately known—so intimately that they're often overlooked. He's telling you to look closely at what's happening and what you're doing in your immediate experience. As we'll see, these actions and events are even more intimate than the sense of you and your world that you build out of them.

The Buddha describes this/that conditionality with four statements that sound very simple on the surface.

“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*](#)

At first glance, these statements seem to say nothing more than that there are causes that lead to effects, and that every effect coming from a cause that can pass away will also have to pass away. But when you look at the statements more carefully, taking the connected statements in pairs,

you see that there are actually two slightly different principles interacting. This is what makes this/that conditionality complex.

The first pair is this: “When this is, that is.... When this isn’t, that isn’t.” This pair describes causality in the present moment. The result appears at the same time that the cause appears. When the cause disappears, the result immediately disappears as well.

The second pair describes causality over time: “From the arising of this, comes the arising of that.... From the cessation of this, comes the cessation of that.” The cause may appear and disappear in one time period, but the effect can come and go either right away or much later.

An example of the first kind of causality would be putting your finger in a flame. You don’t have to wait until your next lifetime to get the result. It burns right away. When you pull it out of the flame, it stops burning. Similarly, if you spit into the wind, it’s going to come right back at you and then stop.

An example of the second type of causality: You put your finger into a fire and then pull it out, but even though it’s out of the fire, it still has the marks of a burn that will take time to heal but ultimately will go away. Another example would be planting a tree seed in a forest. You won’t get a mature tree right away. It’ll take time, long after you stopped the action of planting the seed. And the tree may live for a very long time. But then, because the seed is impermanent, the tree will eventually have to die.

The fact that these two principles are always acting together means that at any one moment in time, you will experience a combination of three things:

- 1) the results of various actions that happened in the past, some in the far distant past, others more recently;
- 2) your present actions;
- 3) some of the results of those present actions.

From the point of view of kamma, this means that your experience is shaped to some extent by past actions, but not totally. It’s also shaped by present actions. In fact, as we’ll see in the next chapter, without present actions, there can be no experience of the results of past actions.

At all.

The principle of the mind's proactive nature extends that far.

Now,

(1) because the mind that acts can also be aware of its actions and any immediate results of its actions, and

(2) because all the causes and effects you need to know are immediately present to your awareness, then

the fact that some causes lead to immediate results allows for some very quick feedback loops in the process. In other words, you see the immediate results of your actions and, if they're good, you decide to continue with those actions. If they're bad, you can stop what you're doing. If you put your finger in a fire then, unless your senses are impaired, you'll feel the pain and immediately pull your finger away. Or if, while meditating, you sense that the way you choose to breathe is making you uncomfortable, you can change mid-breath.

However, there are many reasons why we might respond inappropriately to the results of our own actions, making mistakes in interpreting what's causing what.

—We might be insensitive to what we're doing, or we might not make the connection between an immediate cause and its immediate effect.

—At the same time, the results of actions, in terms of sights, sounds, etc., don't come with labels indicating which actions they come from, whether present, past, or far-distant past. In fact, because kamma seeds don't all sprout at the same rate, it's often the case in any given moment that we're experiencing the results of present actions and past actions that come from many different times and places. This means that many different feedback loops between action, result, awareness, and new actions might all be happening at the same time. This is how this/that conditionality can get complex and confusing. As a result, we might misread a moment of suffering in the present, thinking that it's coming from something we did in the past, when actually it's a result of something we're doing right now—or vice versa. In either case, we can easily respond inappropriately.

—Another reason for not seeing the connections between our actions and their results is that our views might prevent us from doing so. We

might believe either that no past actions can affect our present experience, or that no present actions can have an effect right now. An example in the Canon is of a group of sectarians who believe that all pleasures and pains come from past actions. They practice severe austerities and, because of their beliefs, think that the pain they're feeling comes from burning off old unskillful kamma, when actually it comes from the austerities themselves ([MN 101](#)).

—And as I noted earlier, some unskillful actions can lead to pleasant sights, sounds, etc., right now, to the point where we desensitize ourselves to the fact that the actions in and of themselves come from uncomfortable mind-states.

So even though this/that conditionality focuses on intimate parts of our experience, the fact that we can be ignorant of our most intimate relations—with events in our own minds—means that we can often abuse those relationships. Every action we make is for the sake of happiness, but many of those actions often end up causing suffering for ourselves and for those around us.

5. Fueled by Intention

The Buddha's main impersonal teaching takes the general principle of this/that conditionality and works it out in detail, in terms of specific events. It's called *dependent co-arising*. This is his explanation of how actions and events in your immediate experience arise together with the causes, also in your immediate experience, upon which they depend. In its most basic form, this teaching lists a sequence of causal factors, starting with events in the mind and ending with suffering. It's an explanation of how suffering involves, step by step, many specific mental actions working together.

The Canon contains several different versions of the sequence of causes. The differences among these versions can be explained by the fact that even though the general outlines of how suffering happens are the same for everyone, the specifics vary for each person and for particular instances of suffering. The differences also come from the complexity of this/that conditionality itself, with its potential for many different feedback loops.

One important feature that all the lists have in common is that they play out on many levels and in many time frames: across many lifetimes or from moment-to-moment in the mind. In line with this/that conditionality, an instance of suffering you experience right now can be the result of something you did either right now or lifetimes ago—or a combination of the two. The sequence of events can occur in the flash of an eye or over eons.

Each of the lists is long, but as the Canon points out, it's not necessary to know an entire list. In practice, all you have to do is to bring knowledge to a particular causal connection—knowledge of what it is, how it's caused, how it ceases, and the path of practice leading to its cessation. That severs that particular connection, which in turn brings the entire causal sequence leading to suffering to an end ([MN 9](#); [Sn 3:12](#)).

So first we'll focus on the factors dealing directly with kamma and its results.

One of the distinctive features of every formulation of dependent co-arising is the large number of factors occurring prior to input at the six senses. Even before you see a sight or hear a sound, activities in the mind that occur in ignorance can already prime you to suffer, even if the sight or sound is pleasant. The standard description ([SN 12:2](#)) places these prior factors in this order:

ignorance,
fabrications (acts of constructing intentions),
consciousness at the six senses,
name-and-form (mental acts and physical properties), and
the six sense media.

For our purposes here, we don't need to understand the entire list. We can focus just on the factors dealing with kamma past and present.

Start with *the six sense media*. These, as we've noted, should be seen as the results of old kamma. Then, as you work back through the list from there, you find two factors that deal explicitly with intention in the present moment—your present-moment kamma: *name-and-form* on the one hand, and *fabrications* on the other. Because the six sense media come after fabrication and name-and-form in the list of factors, this means that you experience your new kamma in the present even before you experience the results of your old kamma.

Examples of this fact are very common: You approach a situation with ideas of what you want to get out of it even before you've encountered it. Or your palette of preconceived notions—political, religious, social—colors what you'll see even before you see it.

What's radical about the Buddha's teaching here is in saying that your experience of old kamma, the six senses, is *totally* dependent on present kamma.

Therein lies hope. If your new kamma is done in ignorance, it'll prime you to suffer from the results of old kamma, no matter how good your old kamma was. But if it's done with knowledge, it can prime you in the other direction, toward suffering's end, regardless of how bad your old kamma might have been. If there is no present-moment kamma at all, there's no

grounding for any experience of the six senses. That frees the mind to experience a dimension apart from the six senses. As we'll see, that's not a location, but it's how suffering ceases.

Another distinctive feature of how present-moment intention is treated in dependent co-arising is that it always appears in factors that are composed of clusters of physical and mental events. This means that many physical and mental events can have an immediate effect on your intentions, and vice versa. This opens the possibility for very fast feedback loops of cause and effect in the mind.

Consider first how intention appears in the factor of **name-and-form**, or mental and physical events, as one of the sub-factors of “name.” There it's clustered with:

feeling,
perception,
attention, and
contact.

- Feeling, here, means feeling-tones of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain.
- Perceptions are mental labels—images or individual words—that identify what something is, what it means, or what it's worth. An example of all three aspects of perception would be when you come to a red light at an intersection: You perceive the light as “red,” you perceive that it means “stop,” and you perceive it as “worth obeying.”
- Attention is the act of focusing on what you regard as important or interesting, and ignoring what you regard as not. As the Buddha explains the act of attention, he notes that it's often a matter of focusing on the questions you want to see answered and ignoring the ones whose answers don't interest you ([MN 2](#)).
- Contact in this context means contact among events in the mind—as when a perception or feeling influences an intention, or when you pay attention to one perception rather than to another.

It's because of contact among these mental events that feedback loops in the mind can happen very quickly. For instance, you can give rise to an unskillful intention, it produces a mental feeling of pain, you generate a perception as to why the feeling has occurred, and you intend to do

something about it. This allows you to correct for your unskillful actions if you're paying proper attention.

An example would be when you feel anger and give rise to a split-second intention to say something hurtful to someone you love. That intention causes a twinge of pain. You pay attention to what you're doing, and immediately perceive that the pain is connected to the intention, so now you formulate a new intention to abandon the original one. This is how you can self-correct.

However, the process also has plenty of room for compounding an unskillful action, as when you aren't paying attention to what you're doing or you perceive the cause of the pain as something other than the original intention. For instance, you can easily blame your mental pain on the person you're angry at, and this fortifies the intention to do harm. This is how the mind spirals out of control.

The possibility for error explains why our desires can often be deluded, but the possibility for giving rise to new, more accurate perceptions and acts of attention explains why we can correct our ways. As we'll see, it's precisely this possibility that the Buddha exploits when he teaches people to bring knowledge to the acts of their minds.

Now consider the second location in which intention occurs prior to sensory contact, even earlier in the sequence, prior to the factor of name-and-form. That's the factor of **fabrication**, which is placed at the beginning of the causal sequence right after ignorance. "Fabrication" is sometimes treated as a synonym for intention ([SN 22:56](#)); sometimes it's explained as assembling mental and physical phenomena for the sake of a purpose ([SN 22:79](#)). The Pali term for fabrication—*saṅkhāra*—literally means "putting together." It's the creative, purposeful function of the mind.

The Canon classifies many types of fabrications, but in the context of dependent co-arising, the focus is on three: bodily, verbal, and mental.

These three fabrications occur on two levels of scale: macro and micro. On the macro level, in the world at large, the word *fabrications* denotes any intentional bodily, verbal, or mental actions that lead to good or bad levels of rebirth ([AN 4:237](#)). On the micro level, in your experience of the body and mind as you feel them from within in the present, *bodily*

fabrication denotes the in-and-out breath; *verbal fabrication* denotes the way you talk to yourself. This the Canon divides into two processes: directed thought, where you choose a topic to talk about, and evaluation, where you examine the topic, ask questions about it, or make comments on it. Finally, *mental fabrication* denotes feelings and perceptions, which we've already encountered under "name," above ([MN 44](#)).

The macro level of fabrication comes from the micro level. Without the in-and-out breath, you couldn't engage in any bodily action. Without talking to yourself, you couldn't break into speech. And without feelings and perceptions, you couldn't engage in other mental activities. This, as we'll see, is why meditation focused on these micro-level fabrications in the present moment can have an impact not only now but also far into the future. You're focusing directly on kamma right as it begins. That puts you in a good place, as you meditate, to send it in the right direction from the very start.

Also note that even though feeling and perception appear both under "fabrication" and "name," they play different roles in relation to intention in the two contexts. Under name, feeling and perception are mental events that can have an influence on intention and can be influenced by it. Under fabrications, though, the fact that feeling and perception are listed as fabrications means that they inherently contain an intentional element right within them. Not only *can* intention influence them, its influence is part and parcel of how they come to be. Without intention, you wouldn't experience feeling and perception at all.

This point, in fact, applies to all five of the objects that Sāriputta, in his imagined dialog with people in foreign lands, listed as the objects of desire and passion: form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness. Not only do we feel desire and passion for these aggregates, but our desire and passion for fabricating them also plays an important role in bringing them into being in the present moment ([SN 22:79](#)). It actualizes the potentials for these things coming in from old kamma. The present moment is a construction site, fueled by intention. Because it's perpetually under construction, it's not a place where you can find unending peace. And as long as the intentions responsible for constructing things in the present are influenced by ignorance, those constructions will collapse on us, either right away or over time, making us suffer.

Or you can make a comparison to cooking: Your past kamma provides the raw food that your present intentions put into a form that you can actually feed on. If your present-moment skills are meager—if you know only how to put your food into a fire, for instance—you can make yourself a miserable meal even if the ingredients in your pantry today are good. But if you have a wide variety of skills—if you bring knowledge and skill to your present-moment fabrications and acts of intention—you can make a good meal even out of ingredients that are bad.

As we'll see, the Buddha focuses a lot of attention on developing precisely these skills.

6. Ignorance

Given the importance that Ven. Sāriputta placed on the central role of desire and passion in the Buddha's teachings, it's odd that the standard description of dependent co-arising doesn't mention the words "desire" or "passion" at all. This seems even odder in light of a fact that the Buddha noted in another context: All phenomena are rooted in desire. The only thing *not* rooted in desire is unbinding, (*nibbāna*—better known by its Sanskrit name, *nirvāṇa*), which isn't really a thing. It's the final end of all phenomena ([AN 10:58](#)). Everything else, good or bad, skillful or unskillful, is rooted in desire.

The question is, how can this principle be squared with dependent co-arising? The answer is that if we poke around in the discussions surrounding the standard description of dependent co-arising and its alternative versions, we find that even though desire and passion are not explicitly mentioned anywhere in the list, implicitly they're everywhere.

We can start by noting the role they play in giving rise to the ignorance that lies at the start of the standard description of dependent co-arising. This ignorance is a specific kind of ignorance: ignorance of the four noble truths. These are the truths of:

suffering,
its origination or cause,
its cessation through the cessation of its cause, and
the path of practice leading to its cessation.

A full understanding of these truths would entail a full understanding of all the Buddha's teachings. And not only that: It would entail mastering a wide range of skills related to those truths. So, even though the following description of these truths is a little long, remember that it's only an introductory sketch.

The four noble truths can briefly be defined as follows:

1) **Suffering** (the Pali word here, *dukkha*, can also be translated as “stress” or “pain”): The Buddha lists many instances of suffering that are familiar to everyone—the suffering of birth, aging, and death; sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, despair; being with things and people you don’t love, being separated from things and people you do love; not getting what you want.

Then the discussion gets less familiar as the Buddha points to what all these forms of suffering have in common: the five clinging-aggregates. These are called aggregates because, on their own, they’re random heaps or masses of phenomena. They’re called clinging-aggregates, not because the aggregates cling, but because they’re the objects of clinging.

The aggregates are the five things mentioned by Sāriputta as the objects of desire and passion:

- form, i.e., the form of the body and of other physical things in general;
- feeling;
- perception;
- fabrications, which in this case means the act of fabricating thoughts and all of the other aggregates out of potentials coming from past kamma; and
- consciousness at the six senses.

The act of clinging to these aggregates can come in any of four types:

- sensuality, a passion for planning and fantasizing about pleasures of the five senses;
- views about the nature of the world;
- habits and practices, an insistence that things should be done a certain way, regardless of whether that way is really effective; and
- doctrines of the self: views about who you are. These doctrines are built out of your sense of how your identity is related to the five aggregates: either as identical with them, as possessing them, as existing within them, or as containing them within yourself ([SN 22:1](#)). For example, you might identify as your body, or as the owner of the body who somehow lives inside it. Or you might

identify with your individual consciousness, or as a cosmic consciousness enveloping all the other aggregates and everything else.

The aggregates, on their own, can be either pleasant or painful ([SN 22:60](#)). The act of clinging to any of the aggregates in any of the above four ways is what constitutes suffering.

By discussing suffering in this way, the Buddha is casting his net wide: He's making it clear that he means to cover all forms of mental suffering, so that when he teaches the cessation of suffering, he's teaching the total solution to mental suffering of every type.

2) The cause of suffering: any act of craving that leads to becoming. Becoming is the act of taking on an identity in a world of experience centered on a desired object. An example would be thinking about an ice cream cone: The ice cream appears in your imagination and is located in certain surroundings, also in your imagination, such as a refrigerator or an ice cream shop. You then decide that you want it, and then mentally enter into the world of those surroundings as you decide how to obtain the ice cream, taking on the role of the agent who will do what's needed to get it. Aspects of the outside world or your general identity as a human being that are relevant to the issue of obtaining the ice cream are part of the world and your identity in that particular becoming. Aspects that are not relevant to the issue of obtaining ice cream—such as the weather in another part of the world or your tastes in music—are not.

These worlds, and the identities in them, can exist on any of three levels: the level of sensuality, the level of form (as in states of concentration focused on the form of the body as felt from within), or the level of formlessness (as in states of concentration focused on formless phenomena, such as space, nothingness, or consciousness) ([AN 3:77](#)). Becomings can happen on the macro or micro level: macro on the level of the physical world, micro on the level of worlds in the mind. Your identity as a human being in this human world would count as a macro-level becoming. More fleeting identities and worlds in your imagination would count as micro-level becomings.

Macro-level becomings come from micro-level ones. A micro-level becoming at the moment of death, for instance, can lead to rebirth in a

world on the macro level—another indication of the mind’s power to shape experience.

There are three types of craving that lead to becoming:

- craving for sensuality;
- craving for becoming itself; and
- craving for non-becoming, i.e., the desire for a state of becoming that has already come into being to be destroyed.

This last instance may seem counterintuitive, but the Buddha regarded it as one of his most important insights that, in taking on the desire that either you or the world you inhabit be destroyed, you’re also taking on a new identity ([MN 49](#)).

3) The cessation of suffering is the abandoning, through dispassion, of all these three types of craving.

4) The path to the cessation of suffering is the noble eightfold path—right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. These eight factors come under what’s called the triple training of:

- heightened virtue (right speech, right action, right livelihood, all of which come under the virtue group in the noble eightfold path);
- heightened mind (right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration, all of which come under the concentration group);
- and
- heightened discernment (right view, right resolve, all of which come under the discernment group).

You’ll notice that the factors of the path listed under the triple training follow an order different from the order they follow in the noble eightfold path. That’s because the two lists are ordered on different principles. The noble eightfold path lists the path factors in the order in which you undertake them: First you listen to the Dhamma and try to understand it, pondering it to see that it makes sense. That’s the beginning of right view. Then you develop a desire to practice it, which is the beginning of right

resolve. These two factors then guide your practice of the remaining factors that develop virtue and concentration.

The triple training, on the other hand, lists the factors in the order in which they're mastered: first virtue, then concentration, then discernment. Training in virtue makes you more sensitive to your intentions and more honest in judging them, which helps in the development of honest concentration, able to see through the deceptions that can easily arise in a quiet mind. The practice of concentration, as you enter into four levels of absorption (*jhāna*) in a single preoccupation, gives you hands-on experience in dealing with the desires and passions of the mind as you try to bring them to stillness. This trains your discernment to see these desires and passions more clearly and to judge their results more accurately, to the point where you can develop dispassion for them and bring the mind to release.

These factors constitute the *how-to* training for the subduing of desire and passion—although here it's important to notice three things:

a) All of the factors are mutually reinforcing. It's not the case that you have to master one factor before you can attempt the second one, or that you can master one part of the triple training without help from the others. For instance, the Canon says that at the point in the practice where you've completed your mastery of virtue, you also have a partial mastery of concentration and discernment as well ([AN 3:87](#)). A simile from [DN 4](#) states that it's like washing your hands. Your left hand washes your right; your right hand washes your left. In the same way, virtue washes discernment—which, in the context of the simile, means discernment together with concentration—while discernment washes your virtue.

b) The descriptions of all four truths in the discernment factor of right view are part of the how-to. The Buddha doesn't make a distinction between theory and practice. How you view the problem of suffering is an important part of how you can put an end to it.

c) If you compare the factors of the path with the four forms of clinging, you'll notice that the path actually makes use of three of the four. This means that as you follow the path, you'll feed off of those factors instead of feeding off the unskillful types of clinging that simply left you in suffering.

- In holding to right view, you hold to a skillful form of view.

- In holding to the factors of virtue and concentration, you hold to skillful habits and practices;
- In holding to right effort, you motivate yourself by developing a skillful sense of self playing three roles: as a responsible agent, capable of following the path ([AN 4:159](#)); as the person who will benefit from following the path ([AN 3:40](#)); and as the inner commentator who can reflect intelligently on how well your practice is going, so that it can offer helpful comments on how to improve your skills ([AN 6:20](#)).

The only form of clinging not used by the path is clinging to sensuality. However, the path does provide a skillful alternative source of pleasurable mental food to compensate for renouncing sensuality: the pleasures of right concentration.

Ultimately, of course, these forms of clinging will have to be abandoned once they've fulfilled their duties, so that your release from suffering will be complete. As we will see later, clinging is identical with passion and desire, which means that to follow the path, you have to develop desire and passion for skillful views, skillful habits and practices, and skillful senses of self. This means further that the way the Buddha has you use clinging in the course of the training is simply one of many instances of how he recommends using desire and passion strategically along the path. The factors of the path are designed in such a way as to aim your desires and passions in a skillful direction, but they also contain implicit directions for how to let them go when they've completed their work.

It's for this reason that the Buddha compared the path to a raft that you build out of twigs and branches on this side of the river, and that you hold on to as you swim to freedom the other side ([MN 22](#); [SN 35:197](#)). Once you're there, you don't need to carry it around on your head. You let it go with a sense of appreciation for it, and then you're free to go on your way as you see fit.

These four truths are called noble because they inform the search for a noble goal: the dimension that's free of aging, illness, death, sorrow, and defilement ([MN 26](#)). The Canon also lists two other reasons for why they're noble:

1) They are "real, not unreal, with no alteration" ([SN 56:27](#)). In other words, they're always true.

2) They are taught by the noble one, the Buddha ([SN 56:28](#)).

As we stated above, the ignorance that drives dependent co-arising to lead to suffering is ignorance of these four noble truths. One of the ways of being ignorant of these truths is that you simply haven't been informed of them. Another way is knowing about them but without having mastered them as skills. You don't apply them to your experience, and as a result you haven't completed the duties appropriate to them:

to comprehend suffering,
to abandon its cause,
to realize its cessation, and
to develop the path to its cessation ([SN 56:11](#)).

Before you can complete these duties, of course, you need some guidance in how to take them on. *That will be the purpose of the remainder of this book: to explain these duties and, in particular, to show the role of desires and passions in the context of mastering those duties, both as targets to be subdued and as tools to be used in their subduing.* As we noted in Chapter 4, dependent co-arising provides the main framework for the body of this book. From this point on, we'll be focusing on how to take advantage of the main shift in the sequence of causes in dependent co-arising—from ignorance to knowledge of the four noble truths—to turn the sequence away from causing suffering and to redirect it toward suffering's end.

7. The Causes of Ignorance

As the Buddha notes in [AN 10:61](#), it's impossible to trace back into the past to find a point in time when ignorance began. But it is possible to look into the present moment to see what mental qualities sustain it. There we discover how desire and passion play their beginning role in the processes leading to suffering.

The Canon contains two lists of factors that sustain ignorance.

The first list is composed of what are called the five hindrances:

sensual desire,
ill will,
sloth & drowsiness,
restlessness & anxiety, and
doubt.

Of these hindrances, sensual desire and ill will are the strongest, and also the two most clearly related to desire and passion. Sensual desire is a passion for sensual plans and fantasies. Ill will is the desire to see someone suffer, either yourself or somebody else.

When the mind is obstructed by these two hindrances, it can't see clearly what's in its own best interest and what's not. For this reason, these hindrances can keep you from wanting to know that you're actually causing yourself to suffer by engaging in them, as you're more focused on other goals. Even if you know the four noble truths and their duties, you don't really pay attention to them because you don't believe them, your defilements tell you that you're incapable of understanding them, or you don't care what the truths say. You have other agendas.

A similar principle applies to the second list of factors that sustain ignorance. These are the three effluents. The Pali word for "effluent" here—*āsava*—literally means, "flowing out." Idiomatically, it's also applied to wine: Fruit wine is fruit-*āsava*. So the implications of the term are that

these effluents are qualities that flow out of the mind and keep it intoxicated. The three effluents are:

sensuality,
becoming, and
ignorance.

Here again ignorance can be caused by misinformation or misunderstanding: You don't know, for example, what causes suffering or you have wrong ideas about how it's caused. Or ignorance can be willed: You simply don't want to know what the Buddha says about suffering and its causes because you have other desires, for sensuality or becoming, that get in the way.

These effluents lie deeper in the mind than the hindrances. The preliminary levels of awakening can eliminate the hindrances, but only full awakening can eradicate the effluents. The hindrances are simply obstacles to concentration. The effluents are the motor forces that sustain all the steps in the sequence of dependent co-arising through repeated rebirths in spite of the suffering it causes, all because of the desire and passion to have the pleasures of sensuality or the desire simply to be a being in a world where passions can be followed and pleasures found.

The Canon notes that these effluents that sustain ignorance are, in turn, sustained *by* ignorance: darkness leading to darkness—not knowing and not wanting to know, feeding on each other in repeated feedback loops. It's only when you sense that you've suffered enough that you look for a light in the darkness. This may be why, when people who were receptive to the Buddha's message when they first heard it, compared his teaching to the act of bringing a lamp into the dark, so that those with eyes could see the objects that otherwise had been obscured.

So the first spot in dependent co-arising where desire and passion play a role is prior to ignorance. In this sense, they underlie the whole process leading to suffering. This is why the Buddha equates the subduing of desire and passion with the unfettered freedom of release.

8. Craving & Clinging

The second spot in the sequence of dependent co-arising where desire and passion play a major role comes *after* sensory contact. The factors following on contact, in sequence, are:

feeling,
craving,
clinging,
becoming,
birth,
aging and death.

You may recall that in the four noble truths, the Buddha identifies craving as the cause of suffering, and the clinging-aggregates as suffering itself. This means that all the factors in dependent co-arising from ignorance through craving fall under the second noble truth, the origination of suffering, whereas the first noble truth, suffering, begins with clinging and goes all the way through death.

This suggests a sharp line between craving and clinging, as two separate noble truths with two separate duties appropriate to them, abandoning and comprehending, respectively. In actuality, though, the line isn't as sharply defined as it might appear.

There's a dialog where the Buddha defines the cause of suffering as desire and passion ([SN 42:11](#)). There are also discourses where he says to abandon desire and passion with regard to anything that's inconstant, stressful, or not-self, such as the five aggregates ([SN 22:139](#); [SN 22:142](#); [SN 22:145](#)). Now, abandoning is the duty with regard to craving. So these passages, taken together, say in effect that desire and passion are equivalent to craving. But there are also discourses where the Buddha equates desire and passion with clinging ([SN 22:121](#); [SN 35:110](#)). This raises the question: If that's the case, what's then the difference between craving and clinging?

The first step in answering this question is to note that the Pali word for craving, *taṇhā*, also means thirst. The Pali word for clinging, *upādāna*, also means sustenance and the act of taking sustenance from something, as when a tree takes sustenance from the soil, or a fire takes sustenance from its fuel. In other words, craving is associated with hunger, and clinging with the act of feeding.

The second step in answering the question is to note that the Buddha didn't define suffering as clinging. He defined it as clinging-aggregates, or the act of clinging to the aggregates.

Now, when you're looking for something to eat but haven't yet found it yet, you're hungry. That's the hunger of craving. When you start eating food, your hunger is still there even though you've located your food, latched on to it, and started taking it in. That hunger is what keeps you eating until you're full. In the same way, there's still craving present in the act of clinging to the aggregates. That's where the desire and passion are.

This observation is in line with a statement that the Buddha makes elsewhere in the Canon, in [SN 22:139](#), [SN 22:142](#), and [SN 22:145](#), where he asks what you should abandon when you see that the aggregates are inconstant, stressful, and not-self. The answer is that you should abandon, not the aggregates themselves, but any desire and passion for them. Because the duty with regard to the second noble truth, of craving, is to abandon it, he's pointing to the fact that you have to comprehend the clinging-aggregates as constituting suffering, but the aggregates themselves are not to be abandoned. Only the craving and clinging—the desire and passion for them—should be dropped.

This is why, when Sāriputta notes in [MN 28](#), that “Any subduing of desire and passion, any abandoning of desire and passion for these five clinging-aggregates is the cessation of stress,” he's not in conflict with his own statement in [MN 141](#) where he follows the Buddha's more standard formulation in saying that the cessation of stress is the abandoning of the three types of craving. In both cases, you're subduing and abandoning desire and passion—what Sāriputta identified in [SN 22:2](#) as the essential message of what the Buddha taught.

So, given that both craving and clinging are identical with desire and passion, the factors of craving and clinging are the second spot in dependent co-arising where desire and passion play a role.

This means that, in the standard description of dependent co-arising, desire and passion play a role both before sensory contact and feeling—as factors sustaining ignorance—and after, as factors following on feeling and leading up to becoming.

9. Desire & Passion Engendering Conflict

A third spot where desire and passion play a role in dependent co-arising is found in one of the non-standard lists of conditions, in [DN 15](#). There, as the discussion goes backward through the sequence, starting from aging-and-death, it arrives at the connection between craving and feeling, and then inserts a brief detour into the ways in which craving leads to conflict in society. Given that the discussion starts with craving, it's basically an expansion of the role of desire and passion in craving and clinging, adding a social dimension to the issue.

This is one of the few descriptions of dependent co-arising in which desire and passion are explicitly mentioned. The passage is this:

“Now, craving is dependent on feeling,
seeking is dependent on craving,
acquisition is dependent on seeking,
ascertainment is dependent on acquisition,
desire & passion are dependent on ascertainment,
attachment is dependent on *desire & passion*,
possessiveness is dependent on attachment,
stinginess is dependent on possessiveness,
defensiveness is dependent on stinginess,
and because of defensiveness, dependent on defensiveness, various
evil, unskillful phenomena come into play: the taking up of sticks &
knives; conflicts, quarrels, & disputes; accusations, divisive speech,
& lies.” – [DN 15](#)

To illustrate this sequence, consider again the act of feeding: You start by being hungry for food, so you search for it. You acquire something and then ascertain that it actually is food. At that point, you feel desire and passion for it—you start clinging to it and eating it. You get attached to it

and feel possessive of it—think of stray dogs growling at anyone who gets near them while they’re wolfing down their food. You refuse to share it, you get defensive when others demand a share, and you end up fighting them off if they try to take it by force.

In this passage, the fact that desire and passion come between ascertaining—checking to see what you’ve found—and attachment to what you’ve found, suggest that desire and passion here are equivalent to clinging. You’ve found your food, you know that it’s food, and you start eating it. The satisfaction you get from eating is why you’re attached.

This passage is basically offering an analysis, in impersonal terms, of one of the main drawbacks that the Buddha saw in sensuality: It leads inevitably to conflict, both on a personal level and between nations ([MN 13](#)). Given that beings are defined by their attachments ([SN 23:2](#)), and that the one thing all beings have in common is that they’re sustained by food ([Khp 4](#)), this analysis points to one of the radical issues we have to face in putting an end to suffering: As long as we take on the identity as a being located in a particular world—as long as we keep on giving rise to the processes that lead to becoming—we’re going to keep getting involved in conflict with other beings in that world. The only way out of that conflict will be to stop identifying ourselves as beings. If you think that identifying yourself as a being is the only way to find happiness, the idea of stopping that identification is a scary thought.

10. Implications

The issue gets even more unsettling when you step back to reflect on the dual role of desire and passion in relationship to the aggregates, both after and prior to the factors of fabrication, consciousness, and name-and-form, the main section of dependent co-arising where all the aggregates are found.

Looking at desire and passion in their role as craving and clinging, we can see that the craving and clinging focus on aggregates already in existence. We come along, thirsting for them, finding them, deciding that we want them, and then feeding on them. To subdue desire and passion here would mean that we learn how not to feel hunger and thirst for them even as they still exist.

Even this much, of course, goes against the grain. We often associate feeding with pleasure, yet here the Buddha is saying that feeding is suffering because we feel a lack and are trying to arrive at a state of fullness. This places us in an unstable state of dependency. What's more, given the inconstant nature of the aggregates, the aggregates we take as food can never provide a fullness that lasts. Whatever satisfaction they give us is only fleeting. The sense of lack will always be there. We always need to keep looking for more food and protecting our food sources from others who want to take that food for themselves. Even when we succeed, we have to keep feeding over and over again.

But there's more. We have to keep bringing more and more aggregates into existence so that we can feed on them. This points to desire and passion in a second role: that of giving rise to the whole process of dependent co-arising, including the fabrication of the aggregates to begin with. This means that we don't simply play the role of hunters and gatherers, searching for aggregates already in existence. We're farmers and producers, growing and manufacturing our food. Our desires and passions are what give rise to the aggregates to begin with.

The Canon illustrates this point with another analogy: building houses. It likens the process of going from one birth to another to going from one house to another, with each house standing for each person's identity as a being ([DN 2](#)). However, it also states that our desire and passion are what build the houses to which we go ([Dhp 153–154](#)). In fact, the desire and passion of craving are what create locations. Wherever there's desire and passion for creating more aggregates, that's where each person's identity as a being will settle as long as those aggregates are still being produced.

This means that if we abandon desire and passion for the aggregates, we stop producing them ([SN 22:25](#)). Further, it means that, in subduing desire and passion for the aggregates, we're not just learning to live peacefully in our houses. We're putting an end to the process of building houses and creating the raw materials from which they're built. We've found a freedom so secure—that's one of the Buddha's names for unbinding, the Secure ([SN 43](#))—that we have no need for the makeshift protection of houses ever again.

To return to the feeding analogy, we're not just learning to be at peace with our old food sources. We're so free from hunger that we can stop producing the food supply from which we create our sense of ourselves and of the world around us. We're dismantling our sense of who and where we are.

These facts show that two common interpretations of the Buddha's teachings are actually misinterpretations. The first is that the subduing of desire and passion means simply accepting the way things are—that if we can stop desiring for things to be different from what they are, we can live peacefully in the world. But simple acceptance doesn't put an end to hunger. It merely represses it, and repressed hunger refuses to stay repressed for long. It finds other sources of food and ways to feed, even if it has to sneak off and eat garbage. Given that the Buddha promises long-term happiness from subduing desire and passion, he also has to promise a way that satisfies the hunger for happiness so thoroughly that the mind is never hungry again. This will require more than acceptance.

The second misinterpretation is that the Buddha is teaching a path back to our original nature. Given that our sense of ourselves—what we are, along with what the world is around us—is fabricated from desire and passion along with ignorance, and given that the Buddha states that

ignorance has no discernable beginning point ([SN 22:99](#)), the knowledge that subdues desire and passion will totally undo what we've been all along.

Which means that there's no good reason to want to go back there, and we won't be able to go back there anyhow—ideally, because we don't need to. So again, when the Buddha promises a long-term happiness from subduing desire and passion, he'll have to promise something so total that you won't even care to ask the question of who is enjoying that happiness or where.

This is the happiness that the Buddha promises through the realization of the third noble truth. That's "through," rather than "in" the realization, because the act of realizing the third noble truth involves a series of mental actions through which the happiness of unbinding is attained. Unbinding itself, however, is beyond actions of any sort. Once it's been fully realized, there's no need to do anything more to bring mental suffering to an end, because it's been ended for good. Although the realization of unbinding is an action, the ultimate happiness of unbinding is free from any need to act.

11. The Place of Dispassion

Given that desire and passion play such a major and complex role in causing suffering, it should come as no surprise (1) that dispassion plays a prominent role in the Buddha's discussions of the truth of the cessation of suffering, and (2) that he explains the role of dispassion in ending suffering in a wide variety of ways.

Two similes are useful to keep in mind when we look at the Buddha's discussion of dispassion in these contexts. We've already encountered them both: the simile of feeding and the simile of building houses.

In terms of the feeding simile, the cause of suffering is the hunger that makes us want to feed. Suffering itself is the act of feeding on the food of the aggregates.

So one of the ways in which the Buddha describes the actions leading to the end of suffering tells of how meditators can contemplate the aggregates in ways that lead to a sense of disenchantment for them. In the Buddha's time, the Pali word for disenchantment—*nibbidā*—was used in everyday contexts to describe the feeling you have when you've had enough of a certain food and don't want any more. Some translators have translated *nibbidā* as "revulsion," but that's too aversive. *Nibbidā* is more a simple sense that you've had all you want of that food, and the idea of eating any more has no appeal. The main difference, of course, between disenchantment in its everyday sense and disenchantment in the sense the Buddha gives it in his discussions of the end of suffering, is that everyday *nibbidā* can wear away when you get hungry once more. The *nibbidā* leading to unbinding, however, is so thoroughgoing that you'll never want to feed on the aggregates ever again.

In the descriptions following the food analogy, disenchantment with the aggregates is then followed by dispassion, which is then followed by release and the realization that the mind is released ([SN 22:59](#)). It's interesting to note here that, whereas disenchantment is said to have an

object—you're disenchanted with the aggregates—dispassion isn't. In other words, it's not limited to the aggregates.

You may remember that the Buddha taught people to abandon, not the aggregates, but the desire and passion for them. Other discussions in the Canon make the point that dispassion has to be all-around—not only for the aggregates but also for the acts of desire and passion, and for dispassion itself—to lead to full awakening ([AN 9:36](#); [Sn 4:4](#)). If the mind at this point tries to feed on dispassion, for example, its awakening is only partial. This is why there are levels of awakening. In the first three levels, even though there is an experience of dispassion, the deathless, and unbinding ([MN 1](#); [MN 48](#)), there is still passion for these two things. Only at the fourth and total level of awakening is dispassion so total that it applies to the deathless and to dispassion itself. For suffering to cease, you have to reach a point where you're no longer driven by hunger of even the most refined sort.

As for the simile of house-building, two striking passages show how dispassion puts an end to the places that craving creates and where desire and passion take up residence. The first is a pair of verses that, according to tradition, the Buddha exclaimed shortly after his awakening:

Through the round of many births I roamed
without reward,
without rest,
seeking the house-builder.
Painful is birth again
 & again.

House-builder, you're seen!
You will not build a house again.
All your rafters broken,
the ridge pole dismantled,
immersed in dismantling, the mind
has attained to the end of craving. — [Dhp 153–154](#)

The “dismantling” here is the process of examining the aggregates out of which two related things—a state of becoming and an identity as a

being in that state—are created. When you see that the raw materials provided by aggregates are unworthy of passion, you feel no craving, either to create more of them or to create any sense of yourself or your world from them. You don’t simply stop living in houses. You dismantle them and, in so doing, bring them to an end.

The second passage lends a humorous touch to the house-building analogy by reducing house-building to a childish game:

“Just as when boys or girls are playing with little sand castles [lit: dirt houses]: As long as they are not free from passion, desire, love, thirst, fever, & craving for those little sand castles, that’s how long they have fun with those sand castles, enjoy them, treasure them, feel possessive of them. But when they become free from passion, desire, love, thirst, fever, & craving for those little sand castles, then they smash them, scatter them, demolish them with their hands or feet, and make them unfit for play.

“In the same way, Rādhā, you too should smash, scatter, & demolish form, and make it unfit for play. Practice for the ending of craving for form.

“[Similarly with the other aggregates.]” – [SN 23:2](#)

As with “dismantling” in the previous passage, “demolishing” in this passage means ending desire and passion for the aggregates by examining them to see how ephemeral and stressful they are. When you feel no craving for them, you don’t simply stop playing with them. You bring them to an end.

These images lie behind another standard way in which the Canon depicts the actions constituting the third noble truth: dispassion is followed by cessation. Because passion was what fueled the fabrication of becomings and identities, and even the aggregates from which they were constructed, thoroughgoing dispassion is enough to bring them all to an end.

Ven. Sāriputta: “If a monk practices for the sake of disenchantment, dispassion, & cessation with regard to aging & death... birth... becoming... clinging/sustenance... craving... feeling... contact... the six sense media... name & form... consciousness... fabrications... ignorance, he deserves to be called a monk who practices the

Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. If—through disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, and lack of clinging/sustenance with regard to aging & death... ignorance—he is released, then he deserves to be called a monk who has attained unbinding in the here-&-now.” — [SN 12:67](#)

12. Aspects of Dispassion

In describing the end of suffering, the Buddha not only includes dispassion in the list of events leading up to the realization of unbinding. He also, in one passage, uses the word “dispassion” to cover the whole range of those events. In this way, he shows that the act of developing dispassion carries with it many implications, both in the mind and in the world of the senses dependent on the mind’s activities. This, of course, is in line with the principle we noted above: that the mind is the forerunner of all experience. Changes from within the mind will have to have an impact not only within you, but also on your experience of the world at large.

Here’s the passage:

“Among whatever phenomena there may be, fabricated or unfabricated, dispassion—the subduing of intoxication, the elimination of thirst, the uprooting of attachment, the breaking of the round, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, the realization of unbinding—is considered supreme.” — [AN 4:34](#)

We can take this passage apart word by word, focusing on the crucial terms.

First, *phenomena (dhamma)*: This term denotes any object of the mind. Because the consciousness of nibbāna itself has no object, it’s said to be the end of phenomena ([AN 10:58](#)), which is why this list of terms coming under dispassion goes only as far as the realization of unbinding, and doesn’t include unbinding itself.

Unfabricated: The above passage in [AN 4:34](#) is followed by a statement that the supreme fabricated dhamma is the noble eightfold path. This implies that dispassion, the highest of all dhammas, whether fabricated or not, is both unfabricated and the highest of all possible objects of awareness. This presents a paradox. Ordinarily, all objects of awareness are conditioned by the factors of dependent co-arising, starting with intention

and fabrication fueled by desire and ignorance. When these factors cease—in terms of kamma, this would mean that there is no present-moment intention—experience at the six senses has to cease as well. This would suggest that dispassion should not be both unfabricated and a dhamma at the same time. The way out of this paradox is to note that the “object” of awareness resulting from dispassion is the act of watching all the processes of dependent co-arising collapse as there are no longer any underlying conditions to support them.

Here it’s important to note that this collapse can’t come about by simply intending for fabrications to stop, because that intention would count as another form of fabrication, and so it would keep the process of dependent co-arising going. Instead, the mind has to be totally devoid of intention in the present moment for fabrications to cease.

The Canon illustrates the paradoxical nature of this event—in which the mind has no intention either to fabricate or to not fabricate—with a simile. A deva once asked the Buddha how he crossed the stream—the image implying that he got over to awakening on the other side—and he responded that he crossed the stream neither by pushing forward nor by staying in place ([SN 1:1](#)). Now, within space and time, staying in place and going someplace else are our only options at any given moment. The Buddha crossed over by not choosing either. In a similar way, dispassion doesn’t choose either to fabricate or not to fabricate. That’s how the unfabricated is experienced.

The sobering of intoxication: The Canon lists three types of intoxication that foster unskillful actions and qualities of the mind: intoxication with youth, with health, and with life ([AN 3:39](#); [AN 5:57](#)). When you’re intoxicated with these things, you feel that aging, illness, and death are far away, so there’s no need to prepare for them anytime soon. You tend to act as you like without fear of the consequences. This heedlessness is what makes it easy to act in harmful and thoughtless ways. The fact that dispassion subdues these sorts of intoxication means that realizing the cessation of suffering has an ethical dimension: It removes the heedlessness that would create the conditions for unskillful behavior. This is why even the lowest level of awakening—the first glimpse of the deathless—is said to perfect your training in virtue ([AN 3:87](#)). There’s no

room in the Buddha's teaching for the idea that awakening puts you above ethical norms.

The Pali word for intoxication, *mada*, can also mean infatuation, as when you're infatuated with pride or childish games. In this sense, the subduing of intoxication would mean not only sobering up, but also growing up. You outgrow your childish pursuits and become an adult.

The subduing of thirst: Although this phrase uses another word for thirst—*pipāsa*—it means the same thing as the ending of craving/thirst: *taṇhā*.

The uprooting of attachment: The word for attachment here, *ālaya*, can also mean “home.” This relates, of course, to the house-building analogy. The mind no longer feels the need to build any more homes in the form of future lives, because its “dwelling” is unfabricated and so cannot change. At the same time, the word *ālaya* also carries connotations of nostalgia, in which case it means you feel no nostalgia for any of your “homes” of the past.

The breaking of the round: This refers to the round of rebirth. Dispassion puts an end to becoming—the process of taking on an identity in a world of experience—and because this internal process is the prerequisite for taking birth in any outside world, it puts an end to the wandering-on from birth to birth, as stated above in [Dhp 153–154](#). Full awakening doesn't necessarily bring with it knowledge of your previous lives, but the act of stepping out of space and time brings with it the knowledge that the round of birth and rebirth has been going on for a long, long time.

The destruction of craving: This doesn't mean the simple ending of an individual act of craving. It means the end of all cravings.

Dispassion: The Pali word for dispassion, *virāga*, can also mean the fading of a color. But because there's no darkness in the deathless dimension ([Ud 1:10](#)), the “fading” here is not fading into darkness. It's more like the fading of colors when a picture is overexposed: They fade into pure light.

Cessation: When there's no passion for fabrications in the present moment, there's nothing to keep them going, so they cease. However, awakening doesn't erase your past kamma. This means that if there's still past kamma that has to be worked out, the awakened person returns to

experience the six senses, but his/her relationship to those senses is now different. The Canon says repeatedly that awakened people experience the senses, the aggregates, and even the objects of meditation “disjoined” from them ([MN 140](#); [SN 47:4](#)). In simple terms, because they’re no longer trying to feed off them, they don’t take them in. That’s how they’re disjoined.

The realization of unbinding: In ordinary Pali usage, the term, “unbinding,” (*nibbāna*) was used to describe the extinguishing of a fire. To understand the implications of this image, though, we have to understand how the Buddha described the physics of how fire worked.

Individual fires, he said, were caused by provoking the fire property, which existed, to a greater or lesser degree, in a calm latent state in all things. When you provoked it—say, by using a fire-starter—it would grab hold and cling to the fuel that would sustain it. (Here, for *fuel*, the Buddha used the word *upādāna*, the same word for clinging/feeding that he used in the definition of suffering in the first noble truth.) As long as the fire burned, it was trapped in a state of heat and agitation. When it went out, it let go of its fuel, grew calm, and was released.

The Buddha used the term “unbinding” for the goal both to indicate that it was a state of freedom and calm, and also to suggest how to get there. Just as fuel doesn’t cling to the fire, it’s not the case that the aggregates cling to you. You’re the one clinging to them. You gain freedom by letting them go, just as a fire goes out and is released when it lets go of its fuel.

The main difference between the *nibbāna* of the fire and the *nibbāna* experienced by the mind is that the fire property can be provoked repeatedly and so give rise to other fires. The full release of the mind, though, is said to be unprovoked ([MN 29](#)). Because this release is uncaused, there’s no reason for it to end. At the same time, nothing can provoke the mind into clinging to anything ever again.

The Buddha also uses the metaphor of an extinguished fire to make the point that the person who has gained release can’t be described. Just as a fire, when it goes out, can’t be described as going east, west, north, or south, in the same way, a person fully released can’t be described as existing, not existing, both, or neither ([MN 72](#); [SN 44:1](#)). That’s because people are measured and defined as beings in terms of their attachments

([SN 22:36](#)). When they have no more attachments, they can't be defined, and so can't be properly described.

This means that when you no longer define yourself as a being through desire and passion, you're not bringing about annihilation. Instead, you're no longer limited by your desires and passions. The simile here is of the ocean: Just as no one can truly measure the amount of water in the ocean because it's so vast, no one can measure the person who's fully awakened ([MN 72](#); [SN 44:1](#); [AN 3:116](#)).

13. Possible, Desirable, Objectively True

Although, strictly speaking, unbinding can't properly be described, the Buddha still had to talk about it in order to convince his listeners that it was a possible goal, desirable and objectively true. In other words, he had to get them to want to follow the path going there. Otherwise, they wouldn't be motivated to subdue their other desires and passions in order to attain it.

Now, in speaking about unbinding, the Buddha couldn't offer proof for what he was saying. Proof for his claims would come only when his listeners followed his instructions and found for themselves that, yes, the path of training he taught did lead to total freedom from suffering ([MN 27](#)).

In the meantime, the Buddha's task was simply to be reasonable in his explanations and inspiring in the force of his personal example.

Here we'll talk about his explanations.

To make the point that unbinding was *possible*—that a fabricated path could lead to an unfabricated experience—the Buddha relied on his explanation of causality. If everything you experienced in the present moment were totally determined by a creator god or by your past actions, you wouldn't be free to practice a path that would lead to the end of suffering. If everything happened without cause, there would be no way to follow a pattern of cause and effect to arrive at any goal at all.

However, given the principles of this/thata conditionality, there is a pattern to causes and effects that can be mastered, while there's also freedom within that pattern to direct those causes toward goals of your choosing, and in particular, to a goal that goes beyond the pattern.

Now, those causes can't produce the unfabricated—whatever they produced would have to be fabricated—but they can lead to the threshold where intentions cancel one another out and all fabricated things fall away. This is why the Buddha used the image of the path to describe the

practices that lead to unbinding. A path doesn't cause its goal, but following it can take you to the goal. In the same way, the path of the triple training doesn't cause unbinding, but following it can take you there.

Two of the characteristics that the Buddha noted about the mind explain how it can take advantage of the potential for the qualified freedom available within this/that conditionality here and now.

One of them we've already noted: The mind can change direction more quickly than anything else imaginable. This tendency can cause trouble if you're already on the path, but if you've fallen off the path—or haven't even gotten onto it yet—you can take advantage of the mind's ability to change quickly to get yourself on.

The second point the Buddha notes is that the mind is luminous, and because it's luminous, it can be developed ([AN 1:53](#)). Some people have interpreted this statement as meaning that the mind is already pure by nature, but the context of the statement shows that it means something else. The important word in the context is “developed.” If the mind were already pure, it wouldn't need to be developed. So, taken in context, the statement means that the mind can observe its actions and their results, and that, because of this ability, it can see when it's causing suffering and when it's not. It can then take advantage of that knowledge and of its own changeability to develop skillful qualities and act in new ways that no longer lead to suffering. In fact, the most fundamental approach the Buddha recommends for training yourself—commitment and reflection ([AN 10:73](#))—depends on the mind's ability to choose a direction, to stick with it, and to reflect on that commitment and its results to see, step by step, what changes in course need to be made.

Even though these observations about causality and the mind don't provide definite proof that unbinding is possible, they do leave that possibility open. That's all that any statement can do. The actual proof comes from following the path to unbinding until you've arrived.

Here the Buddha provided an analogy. A skilled elephant hunter goes into a forest to find a bull elephant. He sees large elephant footprints, but because he's skilled, he doesn't jump to the conclusion that they're the footprints of the bull elephant he wants. Why? Because there are dwarf female elephants with big feet. The footprints might be theirs. But the

footprints look promising, so he follows them. He comes across slash marks high in the trees, but because he's skilled, he doesn't jump to the conclusion that they're the marks of the elephant he wants. Why? Because there are tall female elephants with tusks. The slash marks might be theirs. But the marks look promising, so he continues following them until he actually sees a large bull elephant in a clearing or at the foot of a tree. That's when he knows that he's found the elephant he wants.

In the same way, you can hear the Dhamma and even practice the Dhamma, through the various levels of meditation and supernormal knowledges that can come from concentration, but those attainments count only as footprints and slash marks. Only when you've seen the deathless at the first stage of awakening do you know the Buddha was right. And only when you've gained the freedom of full awakening do you fully arrive at the goal you've been looking for ([MN 27](#)).

To make the point that the truth of unbinding—along with all the realizations that follow on realizing unbinding—is *objective*, the Buddha noted that it's not experienced through the six senses ([MN 49](#)). As we've learned from dependent co-arising, all things known through the six senses are conditioned by fabrications and intentions, and in particular by past actions, given that the six senses themselves are to be viewed as the results of past actions. This means that ordinary sensory knowledge is colored by desire and passion. It can't provide a grounding for any knowledge that's fully objective. Even when the Buddha told some of his listeners to judge a teaching by the results that come when putting it into practice, he didn't say that they could arrive at fully objective conclusions until they had had their first glimpse of awakening. Only a knowledge totally free from past conditioning, such as the Buddha's full awakening, could qualify as objectively true.

This is why the Buddha called unbinding the highest noble truth ([MN 140](#)). It's also why he used a special verb to describe knowledge of unbinding: A person who's had a direct experience of unbinding doesn't simply know it (*jānāti*). He or she *directly* knows it (*abhi jānāti*) without having to depend on any intermediaries or conditioning factors.

As for pointing out how *desirable* unbinding was, the Buddha primarily made use of similes. One of his most graphic similes described a hypothetical deal by which you would have to undergo extreme pain and

torture but would be guaranteed a realization of the four noble truths—one of his expressions for gaining your first glimpse of the deathless. As he said, if such a deal were possible and it were offered to you, you’d be well advised to take it.

“Monks, suppose there was a man whose life span was 100 years, who would live to 100. Someone would say to him, ‘Look here, fellow. They will stab you at dawn with 100 spears, at noon with 100 spears, & again in the late afternoon with 100 spears. You, thus stabbed day after day with 300 spears, will have a lifespan of 100 years, will live to be 100, and at the end of 100 years you will realize the four noble truths that you have never realized before.’

“Monks, a person who desired his own true benefit would do well to take up (the offer). Why is that? From an inconceivable beginning comes transmigration. A beginning point is not evident for the (pain of) blows from spears, swords, & axes. Even if this (offer) were to occur, I tell you that the realization of the four noble truths would not be accompanied by pain & distress. Instead, I tell you, the realization of the four noble truths would be accompanied by pleasure & happiness.” — [SN 56:35](#)

Given that the happiness of just a glimpse of awakening could obliterate the memory of that amount of pain and torture, imagine how great the happiness of total awakening to unbinding, free from desire and passion, could be.

14. The Names of Unbinding

More generally, though, the Buddha pointed out the desirable features of unbinding through the many names he gave to it. In a series of discourses, he listed 33 names in all, and even that list isn't exhaustive ([SN 43](#)).

Linguistically, most of the names fall into three general sorts: those that describe a limitation that doesn't exist in unbinding, those that describe a positive quality, and those that are metaphorical. Examples of the first sort would include *unborn*, *unmade*, *deathless*, *undeceptive*. Examples of the second would include *truth*, *permanence*, and *the ultimate*. Examples of the third would include *harbor*, *shelter*, and *refuge*.

In terms of the characteristics of unbinding that these names indicate, they fall into five classes:

1. Unbinding is experienced as a type of *consciousness*. This consciousness is said to be “unrestricted,” “without surface,” and “unestablished,” meaning that it makes contact with no object at all, not even consciousness itself ([MN 49](#) ; [AN 10:81](#) ; [Ud 8:1](#)). The Buddha illustrates these terms with a simile: a beam of light that lands on no surface anywhere, causing nothing to reflect it ([SN 12:64](#)). That's why it's said to be without surface. Still, even this simile is inadequate, because a light beam moves in only one direction, whereas this consciousness lies beyond all directions, in that it exists outside of space and time.

This is why it doesn't fall under the consciousness aggregate, which is limited to acts of consciousness within the coordinates of near and far, past, present, and future ([SN 22:59](#)). As the Buddha says, unestablished consciousness contains no coming nor going nor staying in place, as these activities would assume time; it has no here nor there nor between-the-two, as these concepts assume space ([Ud 1:10](#)). Existing outside of space and time, this consciousness is without end.

This consciousness is also unlike the consciousness aggregate, even in the meditative state of the infinitude of consciousness, in that it isn't known through the six senses. This is why unbinding is said to be *subtle* and *hard-to-see*. Yet because this consciousness is a form of knowing, the Buddha states that it's a mistake to say that fully awakened people do not know or see ([DN 15](#)). In other words, awakening is not a blanking out. If it were, the Buddha wouldn't have called it awakening to begin with ([SN 1:7-8](#)). He would have called it the Big Sleep. Actually, people who are fully awakened know and see to such a heightened extent that they're beyond even the need for conviction in what the Buddha taught ([SN 48:44](#); [Dhp 97](#)).

2. The second aspect of unbinding is its *truth*. Because it's *unfabricated*, *unborn*, *unmade*, it's not dependent on conditions, so it can't change into anything else. Ever. As the Buddha said, whatever is unfabricated has three characteristics: No arising is discernible, no passing away is discernible, no alteration while staying is discernible ([AN 3:48](#)). After all, it's outside of time. This is why he calls unbinding *ageless*, *undecaying*, *deathless*, *undeceptive*, *unwavering*, *permanence*, *unbent* (i.e., not tending in any direction), and *true*.

This truth also has a moral dimension: It's *purity*.

Because unbinding is a state (*pada*) rather than a being (*satta*), it doesn't have to be defined by attachment, so the Canon doesn't hesitate to say that it unequivocally *exists* ([Ud 8:1](#); [Ud 8:3](#)). And as I've noted, there's even one passage where the Buddha calls it the highest noble truth ([MN 140](#)).

3. The third positive aspect of unbinding is that it's the ultimate *sukha*—a term that can be translated as pleasure, happiness, ease, or bliss. Unbinding, as experienced in this lifetime, is invariably described as pleasurable: It's *bliss*, *the exquisite*, and *the unafflicted*. Just as consciousness without surface is totally apart from the consciousness aggregate, the bliss of unbinding is totally apart from the pleasure that comes under the feeling aggregate ([SN 36:19](#)).

Given that unbinding is unfabricated, it has no need for nutriment, which means that its bliss has nothing lacking. So the fully awakened person is said to be *hunger-free*. And because this bliss is known independently of the six sense media, it's not affected even by that

person's death ([MN 49](#); [Iti 44](#)), which is why the Buddha calls unbinding *peace, rest, the secure, security, island, shelter, harbor, and refuge*.

4. However, even though unbinding is pleasant, fully awakened people don't cling to this pleasure, so they're not limited by it. They're said to be beyond both pleasure and pain ([Ud 1:10](#)), and also free: free from the slightest disturbance or limitation, free from fabrication, free from the fires of passion, aversion, and delusion, free from passion for dispassion ([Sn 4:4](#)), and—as we've noted many times—free even from the confines of space and time. Because locations come from the desire and passion of craving, and because unbinding is free of craving, it doesn't count as a “place” at all. For this reason, those who fully attain it are said to be *everywhere released* and *everywhere independent* ([Dhp 348](#); [Sn 4:6](#)). Like the light beam that doesn't reflect off of anything, they can't even be located.

For these reasons, the fourth positive aspect of unbinding—and the one most emphasized in the Canon—is that it's total *freedom*.

This freedom is indicated in a general sense by the Buddha's two most common epithets for unbinding: the term *unbinding* itself, and *release*. Because, in line with the underlying metaphor of the extinguishing of fire, freedom comes from letting go, the remaining epithets for this freedom focus on the fact that unbinding is free from all the clinging defilements that cause suffering and stress: It's *attachment-free, free from longing, the ending of craving, and dispassion*. And as the Buddha indicates, the freedom of a person whose mind is released is no different from the freedom of the Buddha himself ([SN 22:58](#)).

5. In all the above aspects—consciousness, truth, bliss, and freedom—unbinding excels everything that there is, so its fifth aspect is its *excellence*. There's nothing to equal it, much less to exceed or surpass it. The Buddha calls it *the amazing, the astounding, the ultimate, and the beyond*.

Of these five aspects of unbinding, the fourth—total freedom—is the one the Buddha most frequently associates with dispassion. To wean his listeners away from their ordinary infatuation with their desires and passions, he frequently refers to desire and passion as fetters, and to dispassion as being free from fetters or confinement of any sort ([SN 35:63](#)). To illustrate this point, Ven. Sāriputta provides a simile:

Ven. Sāriputta: “Suppose that a black ox and a white ox were joined with a single collar or yoke. If someone were to say, ‘The black ox is the fetter of the white ox, the white ox is the fetter of the black’—speaking this way, would he be speaking rightly?”

Ven. Mahā Koṭṭhita: “No, my friend. The black ox isn’t the fetter of the white ox, nor is the white ox the fetter of the black. The single collar or yoke by which they are joined: That’s the fetter there.”

Ven. Sāriputta: “In the same way, the eye isn’t the fetter of forms, nor are forms the fetter of the eye. Whatever desire & passion arises in dependence on the two of them: That’s the fetter there.

[Similarly with the remaining senses.] ...

“Now, there is an eye in the Blessed One [the Buddha]. The Blessed One sees forms with the eye. There is no desire or passion in the Blessed One. The Blessed One is well-released in mind.

“There is an ear in the Blessed One...

“There is a nose in the Blessed One...

“There is a tongue in the Blessed One...

“There is a body in the Blessed One...

“There is an intellect in the Blessed One. The Blessed One knows ideas with the intellect. There is no desire or passion in the Blessed One. The Blessed One is well-released in mind.” — [*SN 35:191*](#)

15. Desires & Determination on the Path

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

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

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

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

The brahman admitted that that was the case.

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

This analogy explains several aspects of the role of desire in developing the fourth noble truth, the path to the end of suffering.

You need the desire for awakening in order to undertake the path.

While you're on the path, you need more than just desire: You also need right concentration, right effort, and—by implication—all the other factors of the path and the triple training.

You finally overcome your desire for awakening, not by suppressing or denying it, but by satisfying it. You satisfy it by using it in the course of developing the path.

These facts are reflected in the Buddha's extended discussion of the four noble truths in [DN 22](#). There he notes that one of the main forms of suffering is not getting what you want, and he defines what you want as freedom from aging, illness, and death; sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair. Simply wanting to gain these forms of freedom through the power of your desire is to suffer. But the Buddha doesn't tell you not to want them. After all, these were the wants that drove his own search for awakening in the first place ([MN 26](#)). Instead, he advises you to channel those wants into developing the path. That's how he gained results, and how you'll gain results, too.

The standard definitions for the factors of the path show that desire plays an explicit role in two of them: right resolve and right effort.

Right resolve is the determination to abandon resolves for sensual passion, ill will, and harmfulness, and to develop in their place resolves for renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness. The three resolves to be abandoned come under the first two of the hindrances: sensual desire and ill will. These hindrances, you may recall, are the conditions that sustain ignorance. This means that the resolves to be developed are aimed at putting an end to those conditions. Right resolve is, for this reason, the active side of the training in heightened discernment: You not only know the four noble truths, but—based on that knowledge—you also resolve to put an end to the conditions that keep you from mastering those truths along with their duties. That resolve is wise.

Right effort is defined as generating desire, arousing persistence, and upholding your intent to do four things: to prevent unskillful mental qualities from arising, to abandon those that have already arisen, to give rise to skillful mental qualities, and to develop to their culmination any skillful mental qualities that have already arisen.

Right resolve comes under the training of heightened discernment; right effort, under the training in heightened mind. This fact would make it seem as if there's no role for desire in the other aspect of the triple training, the training in heightened virtue, but that's not the case. The Buddha points out that right effort circles around every factor of the path: generating the desire to give rise to the right version of that factor and to abandon the wrong version ([MN 117](#)). For example, you have to generate desire to abandon wrong speech and wrong action, and to stay within the

bounds of right speech and right action. This is why one of the Buddha's most common teachings to people at large was to point out the rewards of virtue in this life and the next, so that they would generate the desire to practice virtue themselves ([DN 16](#)).

What's striking about the role of desire in developing the path is that it holds to an overarching skillful desire—the desire for awakening—to determine which desires should be encouraged and which should be abandoned. In other words, you establish priorities among your desires and you use skillful desires to stick to your priorities. Then you train yourself—with the help of the training you receive from others—to hold to those priorities every time you're faced with the choice of encouraging one desire over another.

If there weren't any conflict among your desires, there would be no need for training. This means that, by its very nature, training will involve inner conflict. There's no way you can progress in your training without it. As we survey each part of the triple training, we'll see exactly how this conflict plays out as you progress along the path.

This policy of holding to one desire so as to overcome any other desires that would get in its way is called determination (*adhiṭṭhāna*). Ironically, given the overriding role that determination plays in the path, the Canon contains only one passage where the Buddha discusses in any detail what it means to be determined on awakening. It's in [MN 140](#). There he separates this determination into four aims that all come together with the realization of unbinding.

- One, in aiming at unbinding, you're determined on *discernment*, because the knowledge of the ending of the effluents—the final knowledge before the experience of unbinding—is the highest noble discernment.
- Two, you're determined on *truth*, in that unbinding—the undeceptive—is the highest noble truth.
- Three, you're determined on *relinquishment*, because the relinquishment of mental acquisitions—the mental baggage of possessiveness that weighs you down—is the highest noble relinquishment.
- Four, you're determined on *calm*, because the abandoning of passion, aversion, and delusion is the highest noble calm.

In this way, discernment and relinquishment find their highest expression in the last steps of the path to unbinding; truth and calm, in unbinding itself. The fact that, in arriving at unbinding, you've arrived at the highest expression of each of these determinations means that your overriding desires have been totally satisfied. You've managed to establish order among your various desires, skillful and unskillful, seeing that the desire for awakening offers the only prospect for genuine happiness. Now that that happiness has been found, all your desires and determinations are allayed.

16. Honest & Observant

The Canon makes clear that, in order to reach the goal that offers the highest embodiment of the four determinations, you have to start with whatever powers of discernment, truthfulness, relinquishment, and calm you already have. You then develop them by using them to overcome any desires that run counter to the path. Just as you strengthen your body by exercising it, you strengthen these skillful inner powers by putting them to use.

The Canon associates each of these determinations with a verb. You're determined—

not to neglect discernment,
to guard the truth,
to be committed to relinquishment, and
to train only for calm.

- Not neglecting discernment means that you always keep in mind the questions that lie at the basis of discernment: “What is skillful? What is unskillful? What is blameworthy? What is blameless? What should be cultivated? What should not be cultivated?” And finally, the questions that summarize the rest: “What when I do it will lead to my long-term harm and suffering? What when I do it will lead to my long-term well-being and happiness?” ([MN 135](#)). You see that long-term happiness is possible, that it will depend on your actions, and that long-term is better than short-term. So you always keep the long-term results of your actions in mind.

This means that genuine discernment, instead of focusing exclusively on the present moment, takes the future into consideration as well, as you keep in mind the long-term consequences of what you're doing in the present moment. This fact is reflected in the passages where the Buddha recommends focusing on what needs to be done right now: In every case, these passages come in the context of his discussions of mindfulness of

death. Given that you could die at any moment, you should do what you can right now to master the skills you'll need to handle death well ([MN 131](#); [AN 5:77](#); [AN 6:19–20](#)).

The need to take the future into consideration is also reflected in the passage with which we opened this book: When Sāriputta explains why the Buddha recommends abandoning unskillful qualities and developing skillful ones, the reasons encompass the results both in the present moment and well into the future ([SN 22:2](#)).

- Guarding the truth means being clear about what you base your opinions about the truth on. Hearsay? Tradition? Reasoning? Logic? Direct experience? Of the possible bases for your opinions, the Buddha says that only direct experience is reliable ([MN 95](#)), and that *it's* reliable only when you yourself have become a reliable person ([MN 110](#)). So truth is a quality not only of intellectual honesty but also of personal integrity.

- Being committed to relinquishment means finding joy in abandoning any attachment that weighs the mind down and, once you've abandoned it, letting it go for good.

- Training only for calm means abandoning anything, within or without, that disturbs the mind. Here it's worth noting that, in the beginning stages, you focus on eliminating disturbances that would pull you off the path. Only as the path develops do you begin to focus on disturbances within the path itself.

It's also worth noting that, on this level of developing the four determinations, three of them—discernment, truthfulness, and relinquishment—function as means. Calm, even here, is a quality for whose sake you train.

By developing these four qualities in these ways, you can overcome desires that are ignorant, deceptive, grasping, or agitated. You're also going against many of the common habits that the world at large uses in pursuing its desires:

the habit of going for quick results without thought for the long-term consequences;

the habit of using deceit when you can't get what you want through honest means;

the habit of accumulating as much as you can; and

the habit of looking for happiness in variety, excitement, and change for the sake of change.

In an image frequently used in the Canon, when you take on the practice, you stop flowing along with the passions of the world. Instead, you go against the stream, even when it's hard ([AN 4:5](#)).

It's hard because the desires that flow against the four determinations don't give in easily. After all, they've been in charge of the mind for who knows how many eons. And just because these desires are ignorant doesn't mean they're not clever. They can easily have you fooled—and *have* had you fooled for a long, long time. They can even quote Dhamma to their own purposes when they want to, lulling you into thinking that by fighting them, you strengthen them, so you should avoid challenging them; or that because contentment is a virtue, it's best just to accept them and be at peace with them.

The Buddha, however, never shied away from the fact that the practice will involve an internal battle. This is why he used so many martial analogies to rouse his monks to be up for the fight. For instance, he compared the practice to a fortress on a frontier: Mindfulness is like the gatekeeper who knows how to recognize enemies—unskillful mental qualities—and keep them from entering the fortress. Persistence is like the soldiers who defend the fortress, while learning the Dhamma is like providing the soldiers with weapons ([AN 7:63](#)).

In another analogy, the Buddha says that a monk who disrobes on hearing that there's a beautiful woman in a nearby village is like a warrior who, on seeing the cloud of dust raised by an approaching army, can't steel himself to enter the battle. A monk who disrobes when a woman throws herself all over him is like a warrior who falls mortally wounded in hand-to-hand combat. However, a monk who can extricate himself from a situation like that and go into the wilderness where he gains awakening, is like a warrior who, when engaged in hand-to-hand combat, comes out victorious ([AN 5:75](#)).

An important parallel between a monk and a warrior is that, because the mind can change direction so quickly, especially when it meets with internal resistance, you need to be trained to stick with the battle and see it all the way through.

The training the Buddha offers is twofold: from without and from within. Because you're starting from ignorance, you need training from other people who are already more advanced on the path than you are. People of this sort are not only capable of giving you instruction when you need it, but they can also "rouse, urge, and encourage" you when you don't feel up for the fight. These, in fact, are precisely the verbs the Canon uses to describe how the Buddha and his monks taught their students. Unlike the *samaṇa* schools that could only instruct others in their teachings on the powerlessness of human action, the Buddha—in teaching the power of human action—could provide a complete course of training that both informed his students of the possibility and desirability of taking on the training, and also fired up their hearts to exercise the power of their own actions as far as possible.

That's training from without.

You also need training from within, because the actual battle is inside your mind. It's a battle that only you can fight. This means that you have to be alert to what's happening in your mind from moment to moment, to see how and where the battle lines have shifted. To deal effectively with your inner battles, you can't simply internalize general lessons from outside. You need to develop your powers of observation and your own ingenuity to generate solutions to specific internal problems on time.

That's the training from within.

Both sides of the training rely on the first two of the determinations: discernment and truth, in their more rudimentary forms of being observant and honest.

In receiving training from others, you have to observe what's going on in your mind and in your behavior in general, and report it honestly to those who are training you. That way, they can trust you and be genuinely helpful in giving advice.

In training yourself, you have to be observant and honest about what you're doing and the results you're getting from your actions. In particular, you have to pay attention to what's working and what's not working in dealing with unskillful desires, so that you can solve problems quickly and not let them fester—and so that your unskillful desires don't pull the wool over your eyes.

When you become truthful and discerning in these ways, you have a good foundation for developing the other two determinations, relinquishment and calm.

That's why the Buddha didn't teach only peaceful or unburdened people. But it's also why he noted clearly that not everyone could be trained. Only if someone were honest and observant would he be willing to take that person on as a student fit to be tamed.

17. Starting Out Right

It's also why, when he began training his own son, Rāhula, he started out with lessons in how best to develop qualities of honesty and powers of observation, focused on one's own actions ([MN 61](#)). These two qualities function as the beginning step in the training in heightened virtue, but then also inform the training in heightened mind and heightened discernment.

First he taught truthfulness. Rāhula had seen the Buddha approaching from afar, so he set out a pot of water and a dipper. When the Buddha arrived, he washed his feet with the water in the pot, leaving a little water in the dipper. Showing the dipper to Rāhula, he asked him: “Do you see how little water there is in this dipper?”

“Yes, sir.”

“That's how little of the quality of a contemplative there is in anyone who tells a deliberate lie with no sense of shame.”

The Buddha then threw the water away, showed Rāhula the empty dipper, and finally turned the dipper upside down, making the point that when you tell a deliberate lie with no sense of shame, your quality of a contemplative is thrown away, empty, and turned upside down.

He then told Rāhula to train himself: “I will not tell a deliberate lie even in jest.”

Having stressed the importance of truthfulness, the Buddha went on to give instructions on how to be observant. Just as you'd use a mirror repeatedly to reflect on your own face, in the same way you should reflect on your own actions again and again.

When planning to do an action in body, speech, or mind, you should reflect on the intention and desire behind it: “This action I want to do—would it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Would it be an unskillful action, with painful consequences, painful

results?” If you anticipate that it would cause harm, you shouldn’t do it. If you anticipate no harm, you can go ahead and do it.

While doing the action, you should reflect on its immediate results: “This action I’m doing—is it leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both?” If you see that it’s causing harm, you should stop then and there. If you see no harm, you can continue with it.

After the action is done, you’re still not done. You should reflect on it again: “This action I’ve done—did it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Was it an unskillful action, with painful consequences, painful results?” If you see that it did cause harm—even though you didn’t anticipate it—then if it was a bodily or verbal action, you should confess it to a fellow practitioner more advanced on the path, to see what advice you can gain on how not to repeat that mistake. Then you try to exercise restraint in the future. If it was a mental action, you should develop a healthy sense of shame around it—seeing that it was beneath you—and exercise future restraint.

But if you see that the action caused no harm at all, then you take joy in that fact and continue training in this way, day and night.

These are basically instructions for how Rāhula should develop his honesty and powers of observation to detect for himself which of his desires, when acted on, would be helpful on the path, and which would get in the way. But the Buddha covers a lot of other issues as well, in particular the other qualities of heart and mind that his son will have to bring to this task.

To begin with, he’s introducing Rāhula to the quality that he said elsewhere is the most important internal quality for achieving your first glimpse of awakening: *appropriate attention*. This is the ability to focus attention on asking the right questions for the sake of overcoming unskillful desires and developing skillful ones. These questions begin with the underlying questions leading to discernment as to which actions are skillful and which actions are not, and culminate in the questions related to the four noble truths: understanding suffering and developing the path that leads to its end. Appropriate attention is what gives proper focus to your powers of observation and your truthfulness. You focus attention on

your actions, beginning with your desires and intentions, and judge them as to whether you expect them to be harmful or not.

This step emphasizes the role of desire as the root of all intentions, and the role of intention—the desire to act—as the beginning of kamma. It also teaches you that, if you really want to learn from your mistakes, you try your best not to make them. When you act only on what you think are good intentions but later find out that actions based on those intentions led to harm, you’ve learned something. If you act on intentions you already know to be unskillful and they end up causing harm, you haven’t learned much.

Once you’ve set yourself on a course of action you think is skillful, then, given that actions can show some of their results in the present moment and some over time, you judge the results of your actions both while you’re doing them and again after they’re done. Here you use the same criteria: Are they causing—did they cause—harm or not? And, of course, you don’t stop with simply judging the results. You refrain from acting on intentions you judge to be potentially harmful, you stop continuing with any action you judge to be immediately harmful, and you resolve not to repeat any actions that turned out to be harmful in the end.

These instructions show the basic pattern for how to train yourself to stick with your determination for awakening. You commit to the path by trying to act in line with it, you reflect on the results of your actions, and then make adjustments wherever you see that you’re lacking, until you finally get things right. This is called success by approximation. As we’ll see, this pattern holds all the way to the end of the practice.

In teaching Rāhula to talk over his mistakes with someone more advanced on the path, the Buddha is introducing him to the most important external quality for achieving his first glimpse of awakening: *admirable friendship*. This is a matter not only of trying to choose admirable people as your friends, but also of emulating their good qualities and asking them about how to develop those qualities in yourself ([AN 8:54](#)). As the Buddha’s instructions to Rāhula make clear, this relationship works best if you’re truthful in reporting your mistakes to your friends so that you can get pertinent advice.

The Buddha is also introducing his son more generally to training in heightened virtue. It’s important to notice that this training takes two

forms: specific do's and don'ts, and qualities of the character.

He starts Rāhula with a don't: "I will not tell a deliberate lie, even in jest." As he points out, this is a rule that Rāhula will have to train himself in. In other words, Rāhula will have to be responsible for voluntarily taking on this rule, for sticking with it, and for detecting times when he's failed to hold to it, so that he can learn what unskillful desires or passions might have made him want to break it.

At the same time, the Buddha is teaching Rāhula virtue in terms of qualities of the character, both explicitly and implicitly. The quality he mentions explicitly is shame—not the unhealthy shame that's the opposite of pride, but the healthy shame that's the opposite of shamelessness. This is the shame that makes you want your behavior to look good in the eyes of people you respect. When you respect the right people—the noble ones—this type of shame can take you far. It goes together with a sense of honor—that giving in to unskillful desires is beneath you.

Other qualities that are more implicit in these instructions include:

heedfulness in that Rāhula should take the results of his actions seriously because they could cause harm if he's not careful;

compassion in that he shouldn't want to do harm to anyone, himself or others;

integrity in taking responsibility for any harm that he's done. (Notice how often the word "I" appears in the questions that Rāhula is supposed to ask himself. He's being taught to acknowledge his agency in deciding which desires to act on and how best to do it.)

Finally, the Buddha is also teaching Rāhula how to develop the four determinations:

- He learns *truthfulness* in his willingness to admit his mistakes.
- He commits himself to *relinquish* any desires that would run counter to this training.
- Note that when Rāhula is able to reflect on his actions and see that they have caused no harm, he is to take joy in that fact. That sense of joy is calming—the *calm* that comes from a life of virtue. This is a pattern that holds throughout the triple training. You don't simply force yourself to become calm and equanimous regardless of events. You first have to find

an inner sense of joy that comes from virtue, concentration, and discernment. That joy keeps your calm from becoming grudging or defeatist. Based on a sense of inner satisfaction, it's a calm that's expansive and strong.

- Above all, Rāhula is learning to develop his *discernment* through a process that, as we've noted, the Buddha calls commitment and reflection. Rāhula is to commit himself to acting as skillfully as he can, at the same time reflecting on:

the desire that motivates each action,
the action itself, and
its immediate and long-term results.

When he sees room for improvement, he commits himself further to making that improvement as best he can, using both his own determination to be skillful and ingenious in thinking up alternates, and the wisdom and compassion of others who can help him attain that aim.

As we noted above, the questions that lie at the basis of discernment are: "What when I do it will lead to my long-term harm and suffering? What when I do it will lead to my long-term well-being and happiness?" In the discourse where the Buddha sets forth these questions ([MN 135](#)), he recommends requesting answers from people who are more advanced on the path. Here, however, Rāhula is also being taught how to begin finding the answers for himself.

This is the basic approach that's required in learning any skill, although here it's applied to an especially high level of skill: putting an end to all suffering and stress. It's the basic framework for all the steps in taking on the triple training. And as we've already noted, it depends on what the Buddha observed about the mind: that it's luminous and has, in the present moment, the power of choice, together with the ability to change direction quickly. The power of choice allows you to commit to a course of action; the luminosity allows you to reflect on the results of following that course, at the same time to check to see whether the mind has switched direction, away from its commitment, while its ability to change course allows you to make adjustments as they seem advisable.

In terms of dependent co-arising, this approach is the way to overcome the ignorance—*avijjā*, which, as we noted, can also mean lack of skill—that

causes your processes of fabrication to lead to suffering. As you observe for yourself which desires work and which don't work, and as your standards for "what works" grow higher as you develop virtue, concentration, and discernment, you weaken ignorant desires and replace them with knowledgeable and skillful ones. In that way, you grow closer and closer to total freedom.

Those are some of the qualities of character that the Buddha taught to Rāhula.

If we want to understand virtue as taught by the Buddha, we have to understand both the rules of behavior he laid down, clearly delineating right and wrong, as well as the qualities of character he praised and tried to inculcate in his students. The rules are there to alert you to specific unskillful desires and passions that could hide behind general principles, as when you claim to be acting on compassion when it's nothing more than an excuse for what's actually unskillful behavior. They teach you that no unskillful desire is too small to merit your attention. After all, big fires come from little ones. At the same time, the qualities of character enable you to deal skillfully with areas calling for integrity that can't properly be covered by rules.

It's in this way that the training in virtue offered by the Buddha is both thorough and all-around.

18. Virtue in Rules

The rules and qualities of character that constitute the Buddha's training in virtue are best seen in his instructions for his monk disciples. This is a point often overlooked in modern Buddhist writings. Given that some exceptional lay people can attain the various levels of awakening, it's sometimes assumed that the training offered to lay people is the standard, whereas the training offered specifically to monks is superfluous. The decision to become a monk is often portrayed as an aesthetic one: The monk's life is a "lovely container" for the practice, an option available for those whose tastes run to incense, chanting, and robes.

The Canon, however, makes clear that the life of the monk is designed for those who want to commit themselves fully to the practice unencumbered by the responsibilities and moral ambiguities of lay life. It's like being trained to run a marathon: It is possible to complete the race if you handicap yourself with extra weights, but it's much easier to do so if you don't unnecessarily weigh yourself down. The monk's life allows you to run the race as lightly as possible.

The image of running a race doesn't come from the Canon, but the Canon does use other images to make the same point. In an image the Buddha often repeated, household life is confining, a dusty path. The life gone forth into the monkhood is the open air ([MN 36](#)). In another image, the Buddha compares the householder to a peacock that can fly only slowly, while a monk is a wild goose that can fly fast and far ([Sn 1:12](#)).

The training in virtue offered to the monks is the Buddha's ideal. Even if you can't follow it, it's good to know the ideal so that you can understand where you're placing restrictions on yourself when you don't or can't follow the ideal.

One of the least understood aspects of the monk's training in virtue is the body of training rules (*sikkhāpada*) contained in the part of the Canon called the Vinaya, the discipline. Yet the Buddha gave so much importance

to this part of his training that he actually called his teaching, not “Buddhism” or even just “Dhamma,” but “this Dhamma-Vinaya.”

The word *vinaya* is related to the verb *vineti*, to subdue. The rules of the Vinaya provide training in subduing the desires and passions expressed in the effluents. Central to these rules is a basic code called the Pāṭimokkha, which the monks listen to every fortnight. The rules contained in the Pāṭimokkha cover a wide range of prohibitions, ranging from rules against murder, theft, and sexual intercourse, to rules governing the proper etiquette in eating your meals and wearing your robes. In addition to the Pāṭimokkha, there are 22 chapters containing hundreds of extra rules governing every aspect of communal life, ranging from, on one extreme, how to use the bathroom and clean your hut, to how to conduct communal business on the other.

The severity of the penalty for breaking a rule varies with how serious it is. The strongest penalty is permanent expulsion from the monkhood. More intermediate is a period of penance. The lightest—and this applies to the vast majority of the rules—is having to confess the offense to another monk.

The rules perform an important function in that they remind you that the battle you take on in your determination to reach awakening isn’t engaged with desire in the abstract. It’s continually engaged with specific unskillful desires, large and small, on a day-to-day basis. Some of the rules are focused on minutia because desires focused on minutia can grow larger if they’re undetected and left unchecked. The rules help to make sure that your general aspiration for skillful behavior is an honest, truthful aspiration, and not just a vague, empty wish.

The practice of holding to the rules also provides a good opportunity for developing qualities of mind that will be useful in the practice of meditation. You need to develop:

mindfulness to keep the rules in mind;

alertness to make sure that your actions follow in line with the rules; and

ardency in stopping yourself whenever you’re tempted to break a rule, and in encouraging yourself to follow the rules as best you can.

These three qualities then help in the practice of right mindfulness, which is the basis for the training of right concentration in heightening the mind.

Holding to rules that you know are in your long-term interest also develops pragmatic *discernment*. As the Buddha notes, your ability to talk yourself into abstaining from a course of action that you like doing but will yield long-term harm is a measure of your discernment. The same holds true with your ability to talk yourself into adopting a course of action that you don't like doing but will yield long-term benefit ([AN 4:115](#)). Taking on the training rules gives you practical experience in the discernment that focuses, not on immediate gratification of your wants, but on the quest for happiness in the long term.

However, the act of following rules can develop your discernment in this way only if the rules are clearly designed to promote your long-term benefit. It's for this reason that the Vinaya introduces the rules in a way that shows how and why the rules serve a good purpose.

Each rule in the Pāṭimokkha is introduced with an origin story. The first part of the story tells of the incident in which a monk behaved in a way that motivated the Buddha to formulate the rule. Some of the stories, as might be expected, are fairly serious, such as the story of a monk killing animals. Others, though, are more humorous—and intentionally so, showing how foolish in an all-too-human way the monk's misbehavior was. This element of humor in the discipline helps the reader to side, not with the misbehaving monk, but with the Buddha for calling out such foolishness.

When the Buddha learns of the monk's misbehavior, he calls the monk into his presence and asks him if he really did misbehave in that way. When the monk confesses that, yes, he did, the Buddha admonishes him. This admonishment is the second part of the origin story, and it's the part that shows the Buddha's reasons for formulating the rule.

Below is an example of one of his stronger rebukes, which he gave to a monk who had had sex with his former wife. What's striking—given our discussion of passion and dispassion so far—is the prominent role that passion and dispassion play from the very beginning of the admonition. The Buddha wanted his followers to examine their behavior in terms of the

overarching goals of the practice: the subduing of passion, and the attainment of the freedom that comes with dispassion.

“Worthless man, [what you did] is unseemly, out of line, unsuitable, and unworthy of a contemplative; improper and not to be done.... Haven’t I taught the Dhamma in many ways for the sake of dispassion and not for passion; for unfettering and not for fettering; for freedom from clinging and not for clinging? Yet here, while I have taught the Dhamma for dispassion, you set your heart on passion; while I have taught the Dhamma for unfettering, you set your heart on being fettered; while I have taught the Dhamma for freedom from clinging, you set your heart on clinging.

“Worthless man, haven’t I taught the Dhamma in many ways for the fading of passion, the sobering of intoxication, the subduing of thirst, the uprooting of attachment, the severing of the round, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, unbinding? ...

“Worthless man, this neither inspires faith in the faithless nor increases the faithful. Rather, it inspires lack of faith in the faithless and wavering in some of the faithful.”

The second part of the rebuke deals in terms of personal qualities: those that a monk practicing discipline is to abandon, and those he is to develop.

Then the Blessed One—having in many ways rebuked Ven. Sudinna, having spoken in dispraise of being burdensome, demanding, arrogant, discontented, entangled, & indolent; in various ways having spoken in praise of being unburdensome, undemanding, modest, content, scrupulous, austere, gracious, self-effacing, & energetic; having given a Dhamma talk on what is seemly & becoming for monks—addressed the monks.

This was when the Buddha formulated the training rule, after first stating his reasons for doing so.

“In that case, monks, I will formulate a training rule for the monks with ten aims in mind: the excellence of the Community, the comfort of the Community, the curbing of the impudent, the comfort of well-behaved monks, the restraint of effluents related to the present life,

the prevention of effluents related to the next life, the arousing of faith in the faithless, the increase of the faithful, the establishment of the true Dhamma, and the fostering of discipline.” – *Pr 1*

These reasons fall into three main types. The first two are external: (1) to ensure peace and well-being within the Community itself, and (2) to foster and protect faith among the laity, on whom the monks depend for their support. (The origin stories depict the laity as being very quick to generalize. One monk misbehaves, and they complain, “How can these monks do that?”) The third type of reason, though, is internal: (3) The rule is to help restrain and prevent mental effluents within the individual monks. In this way, the rules aim not only at the external well-being of the Community but also at the internal well-being of the individual.

Knowing the reasons for the rule, a monk can use them to convince himself that it is in his best interest to abide by the rule. In this way, he’s borrowing the Buddha’s discernment to develop his own. At the same time, he’s showing compassion for himself, for his fellow monks, and for the Community as a whole, now and into the future.

19. Rules & Determinations

Training in the Vinaya fosters all four forms of determination. We've already discussed one way in which it fosters discernment: You learn how to talk yourself into abstaining from actions that you like doing but will lead to long-term harm, and to talk yourself into doing actions that you don't like doing but will lead to long-term well-being.

But the Vinaya also fosters discernment in another way. It contains discussions of many cases where a monk misbehaves in a way that doesn't quite come under a rule that has been formulated, and the question arises: How to determine what penalty, if any, his misbehavior might deserve?

In adjudicating cases like this, the Vinaya employs a framework for analyzing actions that's useful not only for grading levels of offenses, but also for understanding the nature of action itself. The framework looks at an action in terms of five aspects: the intention, the perception, the object, the effort, and the result. For instance, to break the rule against killing a human being, five conditions have to be met:

object: a living human being,

perception: you perceive the human being as a living being,

intention: you want to kill the person,

effort: you engage in a bodily or verbal action aimed at making that person die, and

result: the person dies as a result of the action.

If a monk acts in a way that meets all of these conditions, he's permanently expelled from the Community. If some of these conditions are met but others are not, the penalty is less severe. Examples would include: dropping a large rock on a human being in the dark and so killing him, but perceiving him to be another large rock; trying to kill a human being but only injuring him/her; hitting someone on the back to dislodge something caught in his throat, not intending to kill him, but he dies as a

result. The first two examples would entail the lesser penalty of confession; the last example, no penalty at all.

What's important about this framework is that it emphasizes two factors that, in dependent co-arising, occur prior to sensory contact: intention and perception. Knowing that you'll have to analyze your actions in this way if your behavior is ever called into question, you learn to apply this framework to all your actions. As a result, you become more sensitive to events in your own mind and their role in inspiring you to act. That helps to develop your discernment.

As for the other determinations:

The fact that the rules are clear-cut, with clearly delineated exceptions, forces you to be precise in judging your own actions. The clear boundaries provided by the rules make it hard to fudge the question of whether your actions are harmful or not. In this way, the rules foster the quality of *truth*.

The need to abandon any behavior that goes against the rules—including the mental tendency to make excuses for yourself for not abiding by them—fosters the quality of *relinquishment*.

The reward of following the rules is that you have no reason for remorse over your behavior. This freedom from remorse is a source of joy, and as we pointed out in the discussion of the Buddha's instructions to Rāhula, that joy helps to foster a radiant sense of inner *calm*.

20. Training Rules for All

The Buddha didn't expect lay people to follow the monks' rules, but he did recommend that they adopt five training rules as a constant practice. These rules are found in the Vinaya for monastics as well. The five are to refrain from:

killing any living being,
stealing what belongs to others,
engaging in sexual misconduct,
telling a deliberate lie, and
taking intoxicants that cause heedlessness.

With regard to the first training rule, "living being" covers human beings and all other animals large enough to see with the naked eye.

With regard to the second, stealing is defined as "taking what is not given," and covers all situations in which you know that an object has an owner, and the owner would not be pleased with your taking the object into your possession, but you take it anyhow. This rule does not cover cases where you borrow an object with the intention of returning it to its owner.

With regard to the third training rule, "sexual misconduct," for monks, means any sexual intercourse at all. For lay people, it means sexual intercourse with minors, with those who are married to someone else, with those who have taken a vow of celibacy, and even with those "going steady" with someone else ([MN 41](#)).

As for the fourth training rule, a deliberate lie is defined as any knowing misrepresentation of the truth, regardless of whether the intention is to deceive or to entertain with the falsehood, and regardless of whether your intentions toward your listener are compassionate or not. This training rule, the Buddha emphasized, was the most serious of the five. If you kill people or steal their belongings, the damage you do to them lasts only as long as this lifetime. But if you misrepresent the truth,

the misunderstanding you create in your listeners might lead them to do or think things that could have a detrimental effect for lifetimes to come.

As for the fifth training rule, “intoxicants” covers substances that make you lose mindfulness and heedfulness. Other substances that are addictive but don’t have this effect, such as caffeine or tobacco, wouldn’t come under this rule.

To train under these rules means that you not only refrain from breaking them yourself, but you also don’t get others to break them, and you don’t condone their behavior if they do ([Sn 2:14](#)). When you follow these training rules, you work for your own benefit. When you get others to follow them, you work for theirs ([AN 4:99](#)).

In [AN 8:39](#), the Buddha says that when you follow these rules in all situations, you’re giving safety to all beings, and you gain a portion of that universal safety as well. You possess what he calls the treasure of virtue ([AN 7:6](#)).

These five training rules are said to be the rudiments of the holy life. Monks who gain any of the noble attainments may still break other rules in the Vinaya, but they would never intentionally break these. Lay people who stick by these training rules in all situations are said to be like heavenly beings ([AN 4:53](#)). If they gain any of the noble attainments, they, too, would never intentionally break these rules.

If you’re a lay person, the inner rewards for following these five training rules are the same as those for the monks: You develop mindfulness, alertness, and ardency, the qualities needed for training in concentration. And because your behavior is harmless, you have no reason for remorse. That lack of remorse is a source of joy that calms the mind and nourishes you in the higher training of the mind. When you reflect on your virtue, you gain confidence in your ability to pursue the path deeper inside.

21. Virtue as Attitudes (1)

In addition to the rules of the Vinaya, a monk's training in virtue is also expressed in terms of attitudes he should adopt and qualities of character he should develop. There are many lists of these qualities in the Canon—we've already encountered one list in the Buddha's rebuke to Ven. Sudinna—but here we'll focus on three that seem most basic.

The first is a list that connects virtue with the quality of heart and mind called conviction—which in this context, means conviction in three things: that the Buddha was truly awakened, that he taught the Dhamma rightly in line with that awakening, and that the Saṅgha of his noble disciples has practiced rightly in line with that Dhamma and, at the very least, have gained a glimpse of that awakening as well ([AN 10:92](#)). These three objects of conviction boil down essentially to one: The Buddha's awakening was true.

The standard accounts of the Buddha's awakening state that he gained knowledge of three things:

1) Rebirth is a fact. At death, as long as there is still craving and clinging—desire and passion—you will be reborn in a new state of becoming, which can be either more pleasant or less pleasant than your current state. The Buddha never addresses the question of *what* gets reborn, but his teaching on dependent co-arising is a thorough discussion of *how* the process happens. And that's what matters: You're not responsible for the what, but you can do something about the how.

2) The type of becoming in which you take birth is determined by your actions. Skillful actions—intentions based on right view concerning action and rebirth—will lead to pleasant states of becoming. Unskillful intentions—based on wrong views that deny the power of action—will lead to painful states of becoming. This means that what you do now will have an impact not only in this lifetime, but also in lives to come. However, because these future states of becoming are based on causes that don't last forever, they,

too, will have to come to an end, as craving and clinging will lead to further becoming.

3) The process of further becoming can be brought to an end by putting an end to craving and clinging ([MN 19](#)), which is the same as subduing desire and passion. As a result of this knowledge, the Buddha was unbound.

Conviction in the Buddha's awakening means conviction in the truth of these three knowledges and the resulting unbinding. The fundamental need for this conviction when you take on the training is underlined by the fact that when the Buddha announced his decision to teach, conviction was the first thing he asked of his listeners:

Open are the doors to the deathless.

Let those with ears show their conviction. — [MN 26](#)

Conviction in the Buddha's awakening connects directly with the practice of virtue in that if you don't want to create suffering for yourself, you'll want to act in a way that causes no one any harm. This is the principle that underlies the Buddha's teachings to his son, and all his teachings on the topic of virtue.

The Buddha knew that he couldn't provide empirical proofs for the truths of action and rebirth to other people. Only when they had gained a first glimpse of awakening themselves would their confidence in these teachings be verified. So his challenge was to get his listeners to see that this confidence and conviction were desirable qualities to develop.

In some cases, the obvious force of his character was enough to convince some of his listeners. For others who were more skeptical, though, he would provide pragmatic proofs: If you consider how you'd behave if you took these knowledges as working hypotheses, you'll realize that you'd tend to behave in a more skillful way than if you didn't. Then if it turned out that the Buddha's knowledges were true, you would have made yourself safe. At the very least, you would have created the conditions for a good rebirth. If it turned out that his knowledges weren't true, you would still benefit. In one version of the argument, the Buddha describes this last benefit as being able to rest assured that you haven't created hostility, ill will, or trouble for yourself ([AN 3:66](#)). In another

version, the benefit is the consolation that your views and behavior would be praised by the wise ([MN 60](#)).

Obviously, these last arguments would be convincing only for certain people: those who want to avoid hostility and who care about the opinion of the wise—in other words, people who are willing to step back from their immediate desires to reflect objectively on the results of acting on them and who have a healthy sense of honor and shame. Given that the Buddha was teaching a course of training that involves both listening to the instructions of others and reflecting on your own actions, it follows that these are the people he would want to teach. You can take advantage of admirable friendship, the primary *external* factor leading to the first glimpse of awakening, only if you have a sense of shame toward those who are wise. You can develop appropriate attention, the primary *internal* factor leading to the first glimpse of awakening, only if you're willing to reflect objectively on your actions and their results, with an aim to being harmless. If you couldn't muster these two attitudes, the training wouldn't work. You would lie outside of the range of the Buddha's instructions.

This is why, even though the Buddha is said to be the teacher of human and divine beings, he wasn't the teacher of everyone. The standard description of the Buddha's qualities is careful to state that he's the unexcelled leader of *those fit to be tamed*. If you're not fit to be tamed, he wouldn't try to teach you. But if you can learn to develop the proper sense of objectivity and healthy shame, you can make yourself worthy of the Buddha's course of training.

That's why conviction often comes first in many lists of virtuous attitudes. It's the foundation post of the fortress of the practice ([AN 7:63](#)).

22. Virtue as Attitudes (2)

The second list of virtuous attitudes comes in a discourse that describes four qualities that keep you from regressing in the practice and that bring you into the presence of unbinding. The four are: scrupulousness, restraint of the senses, moderation in eating, and wakefulness ([AN 4:37](#)). The first quality is an expression of truthfulness in holding your actions to a high standard. The remaining three foster relinquishment in that they're aimed at subduing the basic desires and passions that tend to run people's lives: for sensual pleasures in general, for food, and for sleep.

[AN 4:37](#) gives basic definitions for each of these qualities and attitudes. Other passages in the Canon flesh out the definitions, explaining in more detail how these qualities are embodied in day-to-day practice. They also show how the Buddha would use poetry, stories, and similes to “urge, rouse, and encourage” his disciples to develop these qualities. Especially striking are the similes he uses: They give examples in how to use the mental fabrication of perception as a tool in developing the path.

Scrupulousness is defined as follows:

“There is the case where a monk is virtuous. He dwells restrained in accordance with the Pāṭimokkha, consummate in his behavior & sphere of activity. He trains himself, having undertaken the training rules, seeing danger in the slightest faults.” – [AN 4:37](#)

A humorous story from the Canon shows that this habit of seeing danger in the slightest fault applies not only to the rules, but also to any activity that suggests passion within the mind.

I have heard that on one occasion a certain monk was staying among the Kosalans in a forest grove. Now at that time, after his meal, returning from his almsround, he went down to a lotus pond and sniffed a red lotus.

Then the devatā inhabiting the forest grove, feeling sympathy for the monk, desiring his benefit, desiring to bring him to his senses, approached him and addressed him with this verse:

“You sniff this water-born flower
that hasn’t been given to you.
This, dear sir, is a factor of stealing.
You are the thief of a scent.”

The monk:

“I don’t take, don’t damage.
I sniff at the lotus
from far away.
So why do you call me
a thief of a scent?
One who
digs up the stalks,
damages flowers,
one of such ruthless behavior:
Why don’t you say it of him?”

The devatā:

“A person ruthless & grasping,
smeared like a nursing diaper:
To him
I have nothing to say.
It’s you
to whom I should speak.
To a person unblemished,
constantly searching for purity,
a hair-tip’s worth of evil
seems as large
as a cloud.”

The monk:

“Yes, spirit, you understand me
and show me sympathy.
Warn me again, spirit,
whenever again
you see something like this.”

The devatā:

“I don’t depend on you
for my living
nor am I
your hired hand.
You, monk,
you yourself should know
how to go to the good destination.”

The monk, chastened by the devatā, came to his senses. — [SN 9:14](#)

Restraint of the senses is defined as not focusing on any aspects of a sense impression that would give rise to unskillful qualities in the mind:

“And how does a monk guard the doors to his sense faculties? There is the case where a monk, on seeing a form with the eye, doesn’t grasp at any theme or variations by which—if he were to dwell without restraint over the faculty of the eye—evil, unskillful qualities such as greed or distress might assail him. He practices with restraint. He guards the faculty of the eye. He achieves restraint with regard to the faculty of the eye.

“[Similarly with the faculties of the ear, nose, tongue, body, and intellect.]” — [AN 4:37](#)

Now, sense restraint doesn’t mean going around with blinders on your eyes or plugs in your ears. You’re basically examining your engagement with the senses as part of a cause-and-effect process: which mental attitudes are motivating you to look, listen, etc., and which mind states

result when you allow those attitudes to take charge. You see your engagement with the senses as an active rather than a purely passive process. Then you use that perspective to take charge of how you deal with sights, sounds, etc. Instead of simply looking for pleasure from the senses, you treat them as lessons in how not to provoke unskillful states of mind.

As the Buddha points out, the first stage in restraint is to use mindfulness like a dam to hold the mind back from allowing sensory contact to provoke unskillful states of mind. However, you need discernment to cut through the source of the stream that you've been trying to keep dammed ([Sn 5:1](#)). The second process, though, depends on the first. As you keep the mind in check, you become sensitive to the factors of dependent co-arising that precede and condition sensory contact, and to the desire and passion that fetter the mind to sensory impressions both before and after contact happens. Think of what it's like when you build a dam across a river: You learn about strong currents in the water that don't show on the surface. In the same way, when you exercise restraint of the senses, you learn about strong currents in the mind that you otherwise wouldn't detect.

To urge and encourage his monks in restraint, the Buddha tells a story containing an analogy to show how not to engage with the sense of touch:

“Just as if a māluvā creeper pod were to burst open in the last month of the hot season, and a māluvā creeper seed were to fall at the foot of a Sal tree. The deva living in the tree would become frightened, apprehensive, & anxious. Her friends & companions, relatives & kin—garden devas, forest devas, tree devas, devas living in herbs, grass, & forest monarchs—would gather together to console her: ‘Have no fear, have no fear. In all likelihood a peacock is sure to swallow this māluvā creeper seed, or a deer will eat it, or a brush fire will burn it up, or woodsmen will pick it up, or termites will carry it off, and anyway it probably isn't really a seed.’

“And then no peacock swallowed it, no deer ate it, no brush fire burned it up, no woodsmen picked it up, no termites carried it off, and it really was a seed. Watered by a rain-laden cloud, it sprouted properly and curled its soft, tender, downy tendril around the Sal tree.

“The thought occurred to the deva living in the Sal tree: ‘Now what future danger did my friends & companions, relatives & kin—garden devas, forest devas, tree devas, devas living in herbs, grass, & forest monarchs—foresee in that māluvā creeper seed that they gathered together to console me: “Have no fear, have no fear. In all likelihood a peacock is sure to swallow this māluvā creeper seed, or a deer will eat it, or a brush fire will burn it up, or woodsmen will pick it up, or termites will carry it off, and anyway it probably isn’t really a seed.” It’s pleasant, the touch of this māluvā creeper’s soft, tender, downy tendril.’

“Then the creeper, having enwrapped the Sal tree, having made a canopy over it, & cascading down around it, caused the massive limbs of the Sal tree to come crashing down. The thought occurred to the deva living in the tree: ‘This was the future danger my friends... foresaw in that māluvā creeper seed, that they gathered together to console me.... It’s because of that māluvā creeper seed that I’m now experiencing sharp, burning pains.’

“In the same way, monks, there are some contemplatives & brahmans who hold to a doctrine, a view like this: ‘There is no harm in sensual pleasures.’ Thus they meet with their downfall through sensual pleasures. They consort with women wanderers who wear their hair coiled in a topknot.

“The thought occurs to them: ‘Now, what future danger do those (other) contemplatives & brahmans foresee that they speak of the abandoning of sensual pleasures and describe the comprehension of sensual pleasures? It’s pleasant, the touch of this woman wanderer’s soft, tender, downy arm.’

Thus they meet with their downfall through sensual pleasures. Then, having met with their downfall through sensual pleasures, with the break-up of the body, after death, they reappear in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell. There they experience sharp, burning pains. They say: ‘This was the future danger concerning sensual pleasures those contemplatives & brahmans foresaw that they spoke of the abandoning of sensual pleasures and described the comprehension of sensual pleasures. It’s

because of sensual pleasures, as a result of sensual pleasures, that we're now experiencing these sharp, burning pains.'

"This is called the taking on of a practice that is pleasant in the present but yields pain in the future." – [MN 45](#)

As this passage shows, the way you talk to yourself about sensual pleasures—or, to use terms derived from dependent co-arising, the way you engage in verbal fabrication—can easily provoke sensual desires. So to help make your inner conversation more skillful, the Buddha provides a large number mental fabrications in the form of analogies to help abort unskillful passions and desires. A few examples: Sensuality is like a dog trying to appease its hunger by chewing on a chain of bones without any flesh. It's like being thrown into a pit of burning embers; like a hawk carrying off a piece of flesh and being attacked by other hawks; like a person waking from a beautiful dream and seeing all the beautiful things in the dream disappear ([MN 54](#)).

The Buddha also uses a martial metaphor to rouse his monks, showing that restraint of the senses, instead of being a weakness, is a form of valor and strength.

"Now, a king's elephant endowed with five qualities is worthy of a king, is a king's asset, counts as a very limb of his king. Which five? There is the case where a king's elephant is resilient to sights, resilient to sounds, resilient to aromas, resilient to flavors, resilient to tactile sensations.

"And how is a king's elephant resilient to sights? There is the case where a king's elephant, having gone into battle, sees a troop of elephants, a troop of cavalry, a troop of chariots, a troop of foot soldiers, but he doesn't falter or faint. He steels himself and engages in the battle. This is how a king's elephant is resilient to sights.

"And how is a king's elephant resilient to sounds? There is the case where a king's elephant, having gone into battle, hears the sound of elephants, the sound of cavalry, the sound of chariots, the sound of foot soldiers, the resounding din of drums, cymbals, conchs, & tom-toms, but he doesn't falter or faint. He steels himself and engages in the battle. This is how a king's elephant is resilient to sounds.

“And how is a king’s elephant resilient to aromas? There is the case where a king’s elephant, having gone into battle, smells the stench of the urine & feces of those pedigreed royal elephants who are at home in the battlefield, but he doesn’t falter or faint. He steels himself and engages in the battle. This is how a king’s elephant is resilient to aromas.

“And how is a king’s elephant resilient to flavors? There is the case where a king’s elephant, having gone into battle, goes without his ration of grass & water for one day, two days, three days, four days, five, but he doesn’t falter or faint. He steels himself and engages in the battle. This is how a king’s elephant is resilient to flavors.

“And how is a king’s elephant resilient to tactile sensations? There is the case where a king’s elephant, having gone into battle, is pierced by a flight of arrows, two flights, three flights, four flights, five flights of arrows, but he doesn’t falter or faint. He steels himself and engages in the battle. This is how a king’s elephant is resilient to tactile sensations.

“Endowed with these five qualities, monks, a king’s elephant is worthy of a king, is a king’s asset, counts as a very limb of his king.

“In the same way, a monk endowed with five qualities is deserving of gifts, deserving of hospitality, deserving of offerings, deserving of respect, an unexcelled field of merit for the world. Which five? There is the case where a monk is resilient to sights, resilient to sounds, resilient to aromas, resilient to flavors, resilient to tactile sensations.

“And how is a monk resilient to sights? There is the case where a monk, on seeing a sight with the eye, feels no passion for a sight that incites passion and can center his mind. This is how a monk is resilient to sights.

“[Similarly with the remaining senses.]” – [*AN 5:139*](#)

The Buddha used another analogy to show how restraint of the senses depends on having a strong foundation of mindfulness based in the body. If that mindfulness is based on the breath—as we’ll discuss below—it feeds the mind with a sense of pleasure so that it’s not hungry for the unhealthy food of sensory contacts. If it’s based on a contemplation of the

unattractiveness of the body, it serves to remind you of what's inside any outside body you might find attractive.

Notice in this passage how the Buddha provides you with an example of a good image or perception—a mental fabrication—to help with this practice, ending with an example of a verbal fabrication with which you can urge yourself to stick with it.

“And what is restraint? There is the case where a monk, seeing a form with the eye, is not set on pleasing forms, is not repelled by unpleasing forms, and remains with body-mindfulness established, with immeasurable awareness. He discerns, as it has come to be, the awareness-release, the discernment-release, where all evil, unskillful mental qualities that have arisen utterly cease without remainder.

“[Similarly when hearing a sound with the ear, smelling an aroma with the nose, tasting a flavor with the tongue, touching a tactile sensation with the body, or cognizing an idea with the intellect.]

“Just as if a person, catching six animals of different ranges, of different habitats, were to bind them with a strong rope. Catching a snake, he would bind it with a strong rope. Catching a crocodile... a bird... a dog... a hyena... a monkey, he would bind it with a strong rope. Binding them all with a strong rope, he would tether them to a strong post or stake.

“Then those six animals, of different ranges, of different habitats, would each pull toward its own range & habitat. The snake would pull, thinking, ‘I’ll go into the anthill.’ The crocodile would pull, thinking, ‘I’ll go into the water.’ The bird would pull, thinking, ‘I’ll fly up into the air.’ The dog would pull, thinking, ‘I’ll go into the village.’ The hyena would pull, thinking, ‘I’ll go into the charnel ground.’ The monkey would pull, thinking, ‘I’ll go into the forest.’ And when these six animals became internally exhausted, they would stand, sit, or lie down right there next to the post or stake.

“In the same way, in any monk whose mindfulness immersed in the body is developed & pursued, the eye doesn’t pull toward pleasing forms, and unpleasing forms are not repellent. The ear doesn’t pull toward pleasing sounds... The nose doesn’t pull toward pleasing aromas... The tongue doesn’t pull toward pleasing flavors... The body

doesn't pull toward pleasing tactile sensations... The intellect doesn't pull toward pleasing ideas, and unpleasing ideas are not repellent. This, monks, is restraint.

"The 'strong post or stake' is a synonym for mindfulness immersed in the body.

"Thus you should train yourselves: 'We will develop mindfulness immersed in the body. We will pursue it, give it a means of transport, give it a grounding. We will steady it, consolidate it, and set about it properly.' That's how you should train yourselves." – [SN 35:206](#)

Moderation in eating is defined both in terms of the amount of food you eat and in terms of your motivation for eating.

"And how does a monk know moderation in eating? There is the case where a monk, considering it appropriately, takes his food not playfully, nor for intoxication, nor for putting on bulk, nor for beautification, but simply for the survival & continuance of this body, for ending its afflictions, for the support of the holy life, thinking, 'I will destroy old feelings (of hunger) & not create new feelings (from overeating). Thus I will maintain myself, be blameless, & live in comfort.' This is how a monk knows moderation in eating." – [AN 4:37](#)

This definition is repeated several times in the Canon, but with no further explanation. However, the fact that the Buddha included the following verse in his description of the path to the highest sagacity shows that he regarded your attitude toward food as an important part of the training.

Stomach not full,
moderate in food,
modest,
not being greedy,
always not hungering for wants:
One without hunger
is one who's unbound. – [Sn 3:11](#)

The Canon also contains a gruesome story to illustrate the appropriate attitude toward comprehending food. If you fully comprehend food, you arrive at the third and penultimate level of awakening, non-return. That shows how important it is to develop the right attitude toward eating.

“And how is physical food to be regarded? Suppose a couple, husband & wife, taking meager provisions, were to travel through a desert. With them would be their only baby son, dear & appealing. Then the meager provisions of the couple going through the desert would be used up & depleted while there was still a stretch of the desert yet to be crossed. The thought would occur to them, ‘Our meager provisions are used up & depleted while there is still a stretch of this desert yet to be crossed. What if we were to kill this only baby son of ours, dear & appealing, and make dried meat & jerky? That way—chewing on the flesh of our son—at least the two of us would make it through this desert. Otherwise, all three of us would perish.’

“So they would kill their only baby son, dear & appealing, and make dried meat & jerky. Chewing on the flesh of their son, they would make it through the desert. While eating the flesh of their only son, they would beat their breasts, (crying,) ‘Where have you gone, our only baby son? Where have you gone, our only baby son?’ Now what do you think, monks? Would that couple eat that food playfully or for intoxication, or for putting on bulk, or for beautification?”

“No, lord.”

“Wouldn’t they eat that food simply for the sake of making it through that desert?”

“Yes, lord.”

“In the same way, I tell you, is the nutriment of physical food to be regarded. When physical food is comprehended, passion for the five strings of sensuality is comprehended. When passion for the five strings of sensuality is comprehended, there is no fetter bound by which a disciple of the noble ones would come back again to this world.” — [SN 12:63](#)

Wakefulness is defined both as a matter of making do with little sleep and of developing heedfulness during your waking hours. It lays the groundwork for the qualities needed in mindfulness and concentration practice: ardency, alertness, and mindfulness itself.

“And how is a monk committed to wakefulness? There is the case where a monk during the day, sitting & pacing back & forth, cleanses his mind of any qualities that would hold the mind in check. During the first watch of the night [dusk to 10 p.m.], sitting & pacing back & forth, he cleanses his mind of any qualities that would hold the mind in check. During the second watch of the night [10 p.m. to 2 a.m.], reclining on his right side, he takes up the lion’s posture, one foot placed on top of the other, mindful, alert, with his mind set on getting up [either as soon as he awakens or at a particular time]. During the last watch of the night [2 a.m. to dawn], sitting & pacing back & forth, he cleanses his mind of any qualities that would hold the mind in check. This is how a monk is committed to wakefulness.” – [AN 4:37](#)

Ven. Sona Poṭiriyaputta:

It’s not for sleeping,
the night garlanded
with zodiac stars.
The night, for one who knows,
is for staying awake. – [Thag 2:37](#)

23. Virtue as Attitudes (3)

Another discourse in the Canon—[AN 8:30](#)—lists eight qualities that, when you develop them, make you worthy of the Dhamma. Three of the qualities correspond to the training in heightened mind, or concentration, and two to the training in heightened discernment. We'll discuss them when we get to those parts of the training.

The three remaining qualities are part of the training in heightened virtue: being reclusive rather than entangled; being modest rather than self-aggrandizing; and being content rather than discontent.

These three qualities appear as a set in many other lists of qualities that the Buddha encouraged as well, probably because they're mutually supportive. Being reclusive—seeking solitude—is the quality most prized as a prerequisite for developing concentration and discernment. The other two qualities serve to support solitude, but the support goes the other way as well. Living in solitude means that your material needs are less than they would be if you had a family, so you can be content with less. It also makes it easier to be modest.

But in addition to supporting solitude, contentment and modesty also perform other functions, too. In training yourself to be modest, you learn to curb your sense of self. In training yourself to be content with few material possessions, you make yourself less of a burden on others, which is an expression of compassion.

All three of these qualities are expressions of two determinations: relinquishment and calm. In this way, they prepare the mind for concentration practice.

The Buddha notes that not all his disciples are ready to go find seclusion in the forest. Only when they've received proper training can they handle the hardships of seclusion. This is why a new monk has to live for at least five years under the guidance of a mentor, in order to take advantage of the benefits that can come from admirable friendship. Even

the Rhinoceros Sutta, the Canon’s strongest statement of the values of seclusion, praises admirable friendship:

If you gain an astute companion,
a fellow traveler, right-living, enlightened,
overcoming all troubles,
go with him, gratified,
mindful. – [Sn 1:3](#)

The duty of a mentor is not only to teach the new monk the Dhamma, but also to train him in the qualities needed to make the most of seclusion. Without that training, a new monk could “sink to the bottom or float away”:

“Imagine, Upāli, a great freshwater lake. Then there would come a great bull elephant, seven or seven and a half cubits tall. The thought would occur to him, ‘What if I were to plunge into this freshwater lake, to playfully squirt water into my ears and along my back, and then—having playfully squirted water into my ears and along my back, having bathed & drunk & come back out—to go off as I please?’ So, having plunged into the freshwater lake, he would playfully squirt water into his ears and along his back, and then—having playfully squirted water into his ears and along his back, having bathed & drunk & come back out—he would go off as he pleased. Why is that? Because his large body finds a footing in the depth.

“Then a rabbit or a cat would come along. The thought would occur to it, ‘What’s the difference between me and a bull elephant? What if I were to plunge into this freshwater lake, to playfully squirt water into my ears and along my back, and then—having playfully squirted water into my ears and along my back, having bathed & drunk & come back out—to go off as I please?’ So, without reflecting, he jumps rashly into the freshwater lake, and of him it can be expected that he will either sink to the bottom or float away. Why is that? Because his small body doesn’t find a footing in the depth.

“In the same way, whoever would say, ‘I, without having gained concentration, will spend time in isolated wilderness & forest lodgings,’ of him it can be expected that he will sink to the bottom or float away.” – [AN 10:99](#)

This fact presents a practical problem: As we’ll see, the ability to progress in concentration requires that you have some time in seclusion, and yet here the Buddha is saying that living in a forest can plunder the state of your mind if you haven’t already gained concentration. This would seem to create an impasse, but there are three ways around the impasse.

1) A young monk, even when living in dependence on his mentor, is encouraged to spend temporary periods alone in the forest, to grow accustomed to the challenges presented by that environment. As long as his meditation is going well, he’s allowed to stay there alone.

2) There are other ways of finding seclusion beside going into the forest. The texts mention living in an empty dwelling as an alternative that allows you to be alone but without having to face the dangers of forest life.

3) One of the main challenges in staying in the forest is the tendency for your inner conversation to run wild. We’ve already noted that training in restraint of the senses is one way to gain some control over the ways in which you talk to yourself. As we’ll see, training in contentment and modesty offer good training in this area as well.

Contentment is defined as follows:

“There is the case where a monk is content with any old robe cloth at all, any old almsfood, any old lodging, any old medicinal requisites for curing sickness at all.” – [AN 8:30](#)

The Buddha’s standards for what counts as adequate food, clothing, and shelter for a monk are quite bare. Every new monk is told, at the end of his ordination ceremony, that his supports in the holy life will be almsfood, robes made from thrown-away cloth, the roots of a tree as his dwelling, and smelly urine medicine for treating disease. There’s a lot of disagreement as to what that last support is, but what’s obvious in all four cases is that the monk should learn to be happy with the barest minimum in terms of material requisites. Anything finer than that is to be regarded a superfluous luxury.

However, the Buddha was wise enough to know that desires related to greed are not the only defilements you have to deal with when trying to be content with little. As you get used to living with the bare minimum, you can also give rise to desires related to pride and conceit over the fact that you have greater powers of endurance than those who live more luxuriously. The dangers of pride and conceit are that they can make you heedless, blinding you to subtler defilements inside. That's why he encouraged his monks to adopt a noble attitude toward their contentment:

“There is the case where a monk is content with any old robe cloth at all. He speaks in praise of being content with any old robe cloth at all. He doesn’t, for the sake of robe cloth, do anything unseemly or inappropriate. Not getting cloth, he isn’t agitated. Getting cloth, he uses it unattached to it, uninfatuated, guiltless, seeing the drawbacks [of attachment to it], and discerning the escape from them. He doesn’t, on account of his contentment with any old robe cloth at all, exalt himself or disparage others. Any monk who is diligent, deft, alert, & mindful in this is said to be a monk standing firm in the ancient, original traditions of the noble ones.

“[Similarly with food and lodging.]” – [AN 4:28](#)

Contentment requires equanimity.

Not in hopes of material gain
does he take on the training;
when without material gain
he isn't upset. — [Sn 4:10](#)

When gaining food & drink,
 staples & cloth,
 he should not make a hoard.
 Nor should he be upset
 when receiving no gains. — [Sn 4:14](#)

Contentment also requires developing powers of endurance.

An enlightened monk,

living circumscribed,
mindful,
shouldn't fear the five fears:
of horseflies, mosquitoes, snakes,
human contact, four-footed beings...

Touched
by the touch
of disease, hunger,
he should endure cold
& inordinate heat.
He with no home,
in many ways touched by these things,
striving, should make firm his persistence. — [*Sn 4:16*](#)

All of the Buddha's teachings, and the poems in particular, count as advice on how to train your inner conversation. But it's particularly interesting to see him give specific advice on how to talk to yourself to strengthen your contentment—an example of how to use skillful verbal fabrication on the path:

Deferring to discernment
enraptured with what's admirable,
he should overcome these dangers,
should conquer discontent
 in his isolated spot,
should conquer these four
 thoughts of lament:

“What will I eat,
or where will I eat?
How badly I slept.
Tonight where will I sleep?”

These lamenting thoughts
he should subdue—

one under training,
wandering without home. – [Sn 4:16](#)

Having gone to the village,
the sage shouldn't go
forcing his way among families.
Cutting off chatter,
he shouldn't utter a scheming word.

“I got something.
That's fine.
I got nothing.
That, too, is good.” – [Sn 3:11](#)

Here it's important to note that the Buddha encouraged contentment only for material things. As long as you hadn't gained full awakening, he did not encourage contentment with the state of your mind. This can be seen in the fact that his description of the original traditions of the noble ones ends, not with instructions on how to be content with medicine, the fourth requisite, but on how to find delight in developing and abandoning –i.e., developing skillful qualities and abandoning unskillful ones. Even more strongly, he attributed his own awakening to the fact that he didn't let himself rest content with the level of skill he had attained prior to his total release.

“Monks, I have known two qualities through experience: discontent with regard to skillful qualities and unrelenting exertion. Relentlessly I exerted myself, (thinking,) ‘Gladly would I let the flesh & blood in my body dry up, leaving just the skin, tendons, & bones, but if I have not attained what can be reached through manly firmness, manly persistence, manly striving, there will be no relaxing my persistence.’ From this heedfulness of mine was attained awakening. From this heedfulness of mine was attained the unexcelled freedom from bondage.” – [AN 2:5](#)

This means that the Buddha taught contentment, not as a blanket denial of your desires, but as a way of establishing priorities among them. You curb your desires for unnecessary material comforts so that they don't

get in the way of your most important desire and determination: to attain awakening.

Modesty is defined as not wanting people to know of the good qualities you've developed. It's an antidote to the desires that come from vanity and conceit.

“There is the case where a monk, being modest, doesn't want it to be known that ‘He is modest.’ Being content, he doesn't want it to be known that ‘He is content.’ Being reclusive, he doesn't want it to be known that ‘He is reclusive.’ His persistence being aroused, he doesn't want it to be known that ‘His persistence is aroused.’ His mindfulness being established, he doesn't want it to be known that ‘His mindfulness is established.’ His mind being concentrated, he doesn't want it to be known that ‘His mind is concentrated.’ Being endowed with discernment, he doesn't want it to be known that ‘He is endowed with discernment.’ Enjoying non-objectification, he doesn't want it to be known that ‘He is enjoying non-objectification.’” – [AN 8:30](#)

Whoever boasts to others, unasked,
of his practices, habits,
is, say the skilled,
ignoble by nature—
 he who speaks of himself
 of his own accord.

But a monk at peace,
 fully unbound in himself,
 not boasting of his habits,
 ”That's how I am”:
He, say the skilled,
is noble by nature—
 he with no vanity
 anywhere in the world. – [Sn 4:3](#)

Modesty is also a way of making yourself content when you receive meager gifts from others.

Wandering with his bowl in hand
—not dumb,
but seemingly dumb—
he shouldn't despise a piddling gift
nor disparage the giver. — [Sn 3:11](#)

Modesty also allows you to avoid needless arguments and debates. When you feel no need to show off your knowledge, you free yourself from entanglements of that sort. In this way, your modesty helps you to maintain seclusion and to avoid the conceit that motivates, and is aggravated by, a desire to shine in debate.

These debates have arisen among contemplatives.

In them are elation,
dejection.

Seeing this, one should abstain from debates,
for they have no other goal
than the gaining of praise.

While he who is praised there
for expounding his doctrine
in the midst of the assembly,
laughs on that account & grows haughty,
attaining his heart's desire.

That haughtiness will be grounds for his damage,
for he'll speak in pride & conceit.

Seeing this, one should abstain from debates.

No purity is attained by them, say the skilled. — [Sn 4:8](#)

Above all, modesty is a sign of honor and integrity. You practice goodness for its own sake, and not to look good in the eyes of others. You can keep reminding yourself that the good things in the practice are so good that there's no point in telling anyone else that you have them.

Know from the rivers
in clefts & in crevices:
Those in small channels flow

noisily,
the great
flow silent.
Whatever's deficient
makes noise.
Whatever is full
is quiet.
The fool is like a half-empty pot;
one who is wise, a full lake.
A contemplative who speaks a great deal
endowed with meaning:
Knowing, he teaches the Dhamma;
knowing, he speaks a great deal.
But he who,
knowing, is restrained,
knowing, doesn't speak a great deal:
He is a sage
worthy of sagehood.
He is a sage,
his sagehood attained. — [Sn 3:11](#)

For the monk who has left
all kamma
behind,
shaking off the dust of the past,
steady, unpossessive,
Such:
There's no point in telling
anyone else. — [Ud 3:1](#)

Being reclusive doesn't mean that you totally avoid human contact. After all, a monk has to go for alms every day if he wants to eat, and he should teach Dhamma to those who request it. Still, he should teach them, not with the aim of forming friendships or networks of supporters, but with the aim of giving them satisfactory answers to their questions and then letting them go.

“There is the case where a monk, when living reclusively, is visited by monks, nuns, lay men, lay women, kings, royal ministers, sectarians & their disciples. With his mind bent on seclusion, tending toward seclusion, inclined toward seclusion, aiming at seclusion, relishing renunciation, he converses with them only as much is necessary for them to take their leave.” — [AN 8:30](#)

Because desire and passion for loving relationships is the biggest enemy to seclusion, the Canon tells many stories of the sufferings that come from having partners, families, and intimate friends. For instance, after seeing a married wanderer suffering greatly in trying to care for his pregnant wife, the Buddha exclaimed:

How blissful it is, for one who has nothing.
Attainers-of-wisdom
are people with nothing.
See him suffering, one who has something,
a person bound in mind
with people. — [Ud 2:6](#)

Once, Lady Visākhā, one of the Buddha’s most prominent supporters, came to see him after she had lost a grandchild. He asked her if she wanted more grandchildren—as many as there were people in the city of Sāvattihī—and she at first said, “Yes.” Then he reminded her that a day didn’t pass without a death in Sāvattihī. If she had that many grandchildren, a day wouldn’t pass without her going to a funeral.

She agreed that her original wish was foolish, so he exclaimed:

The sorrows, lamentations,
the many kinds of suffering in the world,
exist dependent on something dear.
They don’t exist
when there’s nothing dear.
And thus blissful & sorrowless
are those for whom nothing
in the world is anywhere dear.
So one who aspires

to the stainless & sorrowless
shouldn't make anything
dear
in the world
anywhere. — [Ud 8:8](#)

This attitude may sound heartless, but we should remember that the monk is also enjoined to develop an attitude of goodwill for all. Instead of keeping his heart narrow, partial to some and indifferent to others, he must broaden his heart to wish for the happiness of all beings.

Another challenge when living alone, especially in the wilderness, is having to deal with fear. The Buddha advises you, when living in the forest, to console yourself with the knowledge that if your mind is well-trained, there's no reason to give in to unskillful fears. He provides a checklist of qualities that can provide you with confidence. The list includes: purity of virtue in terms of your thoughts, words, and deeds; purity in terms of your livelihood; being free of sensual passion and the other hindrances; being modest and content; being persistent, mindful, alert, concentrated, and discerning. The Buddha also gives encouragement by discussing how he himself dealt with fear and terror when living in the wilderness prior to his awakening:

“The thought occurred to me: ‘What if—on recognized, designated nights such as the eighth, fourteenth, & fifteenth of the lunar fortnight—I were to stay in the sorts of places that are awe-inspiring and make your hair stand on end, such as park-shrines, forest-shrines, & tree-shrines? Perhaps I would get to see that fear & terror.’ So at a later time—on recognized, designated nights such as the eighth, fourteenth, & fifteenth of the lunar fortnight—I stayed in the sorts of places that are awe-inspiring and make your hair stand on end, such as park-shrines, forest-shrines, & tree-shrines. And while I was staying there, a wild animal would come, or a bird would drop a twig, or wind would rustle the fallen leaves. The thought would occur to me: ‘Is this that fear & terror coming?’ Then the thought occurred to me: ‘Why do I just keep waiting for fear? What if I were to subdue fear & terror in whatever state they come?’

“So when fear & terror came while I was walking back & forth, I would not stand or sit or lie down. I would keep walking back & forth until I had subdued that fear & terror. When fear & terror came while I was standing, I would not walk or sit or lie down. I would keep standing until I had subdued that fear & terror. When fear & terror came while I was sitting, I would not lie down or stand up or walk. I would keep sitting until I had subdued that fear & terror. When fear & terror came while I was lying down, I would not sit up or stand or walk. I would keep lying down until I had subdued that fear & terror.” — [*MN 4*](#)

The positive virtue of reclusiveness and seclusion is that they allow you to devote full time to training the mind.

“There’s no way
that one delighting in company
can touch even momentary release.”
Heeding the words
of the Kinsman of the Sun [the Buddha],
wander alone
like a rhinoceros....

At the right time consorting
with the release through goodwill,
compassion,
empathetic joy,
equanimity,
unobstructed by all the world,
any world,
wander alone
like a rhinoceros. — *Sn 1:3*

Turning your back on pleasure & pain,
as earlier with sorrow & joy,
attaining pure equanimity,
tranquility,

wander alone
like a rhinoceros.

With persistence aroused
for the highest goal's attainment,
with mind unsmeared, not lazy in action,
firm in effort, with steadfastness & strength arisen,
wander alone
like a rhinoceros.

Not neglecting seclusion, jhāna,
constantly living the Dhamma
 in line with the Dhamma,
comprehending the danger
in states of becoming,
wander alone
like a rhinoceros. — [Sn 1:3](#)

Solitude
is called
sagacity.
Alone, you truly delight
 & shine in the ten directions. — [Sn 3:11](#)

The delight you can find in getting the mind concentrated while in seclusion can more than compensate for the hardships that come from living alone.

“When elephants & cow-elephants & calf-elephants & baby elephants go ahead of a wilderness tusker foraging for food and break off the tips of the grasses, the wilderness tusker feels irritated, upset, & disgusted. When elephants & cow-elephants & calf-elephants & baby elephants devour the wilderness tusker's bunches of branches, he feels irritated, upset, & disgusted. When elephants & cow-elephants & calf-elephants & baby elephants go ahead of the wilderness tusker on his way down to his bath and stir up the mud in the water with their trunks, he feels irritated, upset, & disgusted.

When cow-elephants go along as the wilderness tusker is bathing and bang up against his body, he feels irritated, upset, & disgusted.

“Then the thought occurs to the wilderness tusker, ‘I now live hemmed in by elephants & cow-elephants & calf-elephants & baby elephants. I feed off grass with broken-off tips. My bunches of branches are devoured. I drink muddied water. Even when I bathe, cow-elephants go along and bang up against my body. What if I were to live alone, apart from the crowd?’

“So at a later time he lives alone, apart from the crowd. He feeds off grass with unbroken tips. His bunches of branches are undevooured. He drinks unmuddied water. When he bathes, cow-elephants don’t go along and bang up against his body. The thought occurs to him, ‘Before, I lived hemmed in by elephants & cow-elephants & calf-elephants & baby elephants.... But now I live alone, apart from the crowd....’ Breaking off a branch with his trunk and scratching his body with it, gratified, he allays his itch.

In the same way, when a monk lives hemmed in with monks, nuns, male & female lay followers, kings, royal ministers, sectarians, & their disciples, the thought occurs to him, ‘I now live hemmed in by monks, nuns, male & female lay followers, kings, royal ministers, sectarians, & their disciples. What if I were to live alone, apart from the crowd?’

“So he seeks out a secluded dwelling: a wilderness, the shade of a tree, a mountain, a glen, a hillside cave, a charnel ground, a forest grove, the open air, a heap of straw. He, having gone to the wilderness, to the shade of a tree, or to an empty building, sits down, crosses his legs, holds his body erect, and brings mindfulness to the fore....

“Having abandoned these five hindrances—corruptions of awareness that weaken discernment—then quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities, he enters & remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. Gratified, he allays his itch.

“[And so on with the remaining concentration attainments.]” — [AN 9:40](#)

24. Herding Your Thoughts (1)

Those concentration attainments, in fact, lie at the heart of the second phase in the training to subdue desire and passion: training in the heightened mind.

In one of the Buddha's autobiographical accounts ([MN 19](#)), he relates how he brought his mind to concentration by first dividing his thoughts into two sorts—based, not on whether he liked them or not, but on the results they would lead to. On the one side were thoughts imbued with sensuality, ill will, or harmfulness. On the other, thoughts imbued with renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness. Thoughts of the first sort, he saw, would lead either to his own affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both. They would obstruct discernment and not lead to unbinding. Thoughts of the second sort, though, would lead to affliction for no one. They would promote discernment and lead to unbinding.

So he resolved on holding thoughts of the first sort in check, but would allow thoughts of the second sort to roam free. He compared himself to a cowherd. During the rainy season, when rice is growing in the fields, the cowherd has to keep beating his cows away from the rice fields so that they don't damage the crops. That's how the Buddha had to treat his unskillful thoughts and desires: He would "abandon them, destroy them, dispel them, and wipe them out of existence."

At the end of the dry season, though, the rice has been harvested, so there's no danger of the cows' damaging the crops. At that time of the year, the cowherd "while resting under the shade of a tree or out in the open, simply keeps himself mindful of 'those cows.'" That's how the Buddha could treat his skillful thoughts, simply being mindful of their existence.

He noted that he could think skillful thoughts for a whole day or night without causing any danger aside from the fact that thinking a lot tires the body. When the body is tired, the mind is disturbed and far from

concentration. So to keep his mind undisturbed, he steadied it within and brought it into right concentration.

The Buddha's account here teaches two important lessons. First, it shows how his lessons to Rāhula in how to grow in the Dhamma through commitment and reflection—commitment to the practice of skillfulness and reflection on the results of your commitment—lead directly to the practice of concentration. The Buddha judged his thoughts by their results, abandoning those that led to affliction, promoting those that avoided it. Then he further refined his standards so that he would act in ways that would avoid not only affliction, but also mental disturbance.

The second lesson is that the practice of concentration has to carry on the battle between your determination for awakening on the one hand, and your unruly desires and passions on the other. This is reflected in the many martial metaphors the Canon applies to the entire path, from the beginning all the way through the practice of concentration and discernment, to victory at awakening ([SN 45:4](#); [Iti 57](#), 62, 82). However, it's worth noting that when moving from the discussion of virtue to concentration, the Buddha supplements martial metaphors with metaphors based on people developing skills—such as cooks or archers in training—apparently to indicate that the work of avoiding unskillful actions and promoting skillful ones in their place continues but gets more refined.

The need to overcome many unskillful desires before you can enter right concentration is shown throughout the Canon in two facts: (1) Discussions of the stages of the practice mention that the five hindrances, including sensual desire and the desires of ill will, have to be overcome first before entering the first jhāna. (2) The definition of the first jhāna, or level of mental absorption, starts by saying that the meditator is “secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities.” [SN 45:22](#) defines unskillful qualities as wrong versions of the factors of the noble eightfold path, from wrong view through wrong concentration.

This is why right effort and right mindfulness are part of training in the heightened mind. They do the work of eliminating unskillful mental states.

[AN 8:30](#), the discourse that describes the mental qualities that make you worthy of the Dhamma, defines persistence, which is equivalent to right effort, as follows:

“There is the case where a monk keeps his persistence aroused for abandoning unskillful mental qualities and taking on skillful mental qualities. He is steadfast, solid in his effort, not shirking his duties with regard to skillful mental qualities.”

Desire plays two main roles in developing this sort of persistence. The first role is implicit in discussions of right effort and relates to the prime duty of effort and persistence in the larger context of the four noble truths. Because the path as a whole is designed to attack the problem of suffering at its causes—unskillful desires and passions—those are the things that right effort has to attack. As the Buddha notes, these causes fall into two sorts: those for which you can develop dispassion simply by looking at them with equanimity, and those for which you can develop dispassion only when you exert fabrications against them ([MN 101](#)). “Fabrications” here apparently means the three fabrications listed in dependent co-arising: bodily, verbal, and mental.

Causes of suffering that fall into the first sort can be abandoned with minimal effort. However, it’s not the case that this requires no desire or effort at all. After all, even equanimity is a fabricated state of mind, which means that you have to *want* to be equanimous toward causes of this sort if you’re going to get past them. It’s simply that the strategy in dealing with them is fairly straightforward. You talk yourself into looking at them steadily, and they wither away in the steadiness of your gaze.

Causes of the second sort, though, don’t. When you stare at them, they stare right back. To get rid of them, you have to think strategically, using concerted determination and desire to foster the proper types of fabrication to do battle with them.

To help with both strategies, the Buddha’s teachings in the discourses are full of guidelines for how to develop skillful fabrications of all three types: how to breathe, how to talk to yourself, and what images/perceptions to hold in mind to develop dispassion for the causes of suffering, whatever the sort. *In fact, you could say that all of his teachings are guidelines for how to apply knowledge to fostering skillful versions of these three types of fabrication so as to turn them into the path.*

The second role for desire in persistence is explicitly mentioned in the standard definition for right effort, which emphasizes the need to generate desire to motivate your efforts:

“There is the case where a monk generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the sake of the non-arising of evil, unskillful qualities that have not yet arisen... for the sake of the abandoning of evil, unskillful qualities that have arisen... for the sake of the arising of skillful qualities that have not yet arisen... [and] for the maintenance, non-confusion, increase, plenitude, development, & culmination of skillful qualities that have arisen. This, monks, is called right effort.” – [SN 45:8](#)

All three fabrications play a role in generating the desire to practice, and the Buddha provides examples of how to skillfully employ all three.

Skillful ways of breathing will be discussed under the topic of breath meditation, below.

As for the other two types of fabrication:

The Canon recommends many similes to be used as perceptions—mental fabrications—to motivate your efforts. One we’ve already noted above: Persistence is like the soldiers defending a fortress on the edge of a frontier ([AN 7:63](#)). Another is that if you stick with your efforts all the way to awakening, you’re like a person searching for heartwood who doesn’t let himself rest content with the easier-to-attain leaves, bark, or softwood. He keeps on searching until he finds the heartwood that can best serve his true purpose ([MN 29](#)).

The Canon also recommends many ways of talking to yourself—exerting verbal fabrications—to generate skillful desires to stick with the path in general, and with the practice of concentration in particular. The primary desires it recommends are those connected with heedfulness. You see the dangers that come from not training the mind, and how they can be avoided if you do train the mind, so you want to exert right effort right now.

“There is the case where a monk living in the wilderness reminds himself of this: ‘I’m now living alone in the wilderness. While I’m living alone in the wilderness, a snake might bite me, a scorpion might sting me, a centipede might bite me. That would be how my death would come about. That would be an obstruction for me. So let me make an effort for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the

reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized.’” – [AN 5:77](#)

“There is the case where a monk reminds himself of this: ‘At present, I’m young, black-haired, endowed with the blessings of youth in the first stage of life. The time will come, though, when aging touches this body. When one is overcome with old age & decay, it’s not easy to pay attention to the Buddha’s teachings. It’s not easy to reside in isolated forest or wilderness dwellings. Before this unwelcome, disagreeable, displeasing thing happens, let me first arouse persistence for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized, so that—endowed with that Dhamma—I will live in peace even when old.’...

“And further, the monk reminds himself of this: ‘At present, I’m free from illness & discomfort, endowed with good digestion: not too cold, not too hot, of medium strength & tolerance. The time will come, though, when illness touches this body. When one is overcome with illness, it’s not easy to pay attention to the Buddha’s teachings. It’s not easy to reside in isolated forest or wilderness dwellings. Before this unwelcome, disagreeable, displeasing thing happens, let me first arouse persistence for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized, so that—endowed with that Dhamma—I will live in peace even when ill.’...

“And further, the monk reminds himself of this: ‘At present, food is plentiful, alms are easy to come by. It’s easy to maintain oneself by gleanings & patronage. The time will come, though, when there is famine: Food is scarce, alms are hard to come by, and it’s not easy to maintain oneself by gleanings & patronage. When there’s famine, people will congregate where food is plentiful. There they will live packed & crowded together. When one is living packed & crowded together, it’s not easy to pay attention to the Buddha’s teachings. It’s not easy to reside in isolated forest or wilderness dwellings. Before this unwelcome, disagreeable, displeasing thing happens, let me first arouse persistence for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-

unrealized, so that—endowed with that Dhamma—I will live in peace even when there is famine.’...

“And further, the monk reminds himself of this: ‘At present, people are in harmony, on friendly terms, without quarreling, like milk mixed with water, viewing one another with eyes of affection. The time will come, though, when there is danger & an invasion of savage tribes. Taking power, they will surround the countryside. When there is danger, people will congregate where it is safe. There they will live packed & crowded together. When one is living packed & crowded together, it’s not easy to pay attention to the Buddha’s teachings. It’s not easy to reside in isolated forest or wilderness dwellings. Before this unwelcome, disagreeable, displeasing thing happens, let me first arouse persistence for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized, so that—endowed with that Dhamma—I will live in peace even when there is danger.’...

“And further, the monk reminds himself of this: ‘At present, the Saṅgha—in harmony, on friendly terms, without quarreling—lives in comfort with a single recitation. The time will come, though, when the Saṅgha splits. When the Saṅgha is split, it’s not easy to pay attention to the Buddha’s teachings. It’s not easy to reside in isolated forest or wilderness dwellings. Before this unwelcome, disagreeable, displeasing thing happens, let me first arouse persistence for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized, so that—endowed with that Dhamma—I will live in peace even when the Saṅgha is split.’” — [AN 5:78](#)

Other ways of generating skillful desires recommended in the Canon include developing—

goodwill with the thought that you and others will suffer less if you have trained your mind to be free of defilements, and—if you’ve attained any of the noble attainments—the gifts given to you will bear great fruit for the donors ([MN 6](#) ; [MN 39](#));

shame with the thought that when you’re on your deathbed and your fellow monks ask you if you’ve gained any superior attainments, you don’t

want to suffer the embarrassment of having to say you have none ([AN 10:48](#));

inspiration, thinking of the great meditators of the past who were able to train their minds in spite of hardships, and letting that thought rouse you to follow their example ([Thag 5:8](#)).

The Canon even shows how to skillfully use craving and conceit when talking to yourself to motivate your efforts to overcome any craving and conceit that would get in the way of following the path:

Ven. Ānanda [speaking to a nun]: “‘This body comes into being through craving. And yet it is by relying on craving that craving is to be abandoned.’ Thus it was said. And in reference to what was it said? There is the case, sister, where a monk hears, ‘The monk named such-&-such, they say, through the ending of the effluents, has entered & remains in the effluent-free awareness-release & discernment-release, having known & realized them for himself right in the here & now.’ The thought occurs to him, ‘I hope that I, too, will—through the ending of the effluents—enter & remain in the effluent-free awareness-release & discernment-release, having directly known & realized them for myself right in the here & now.’ Then, at a later time, he abandons craving, having relied on craving....

“‘This body comes into being through conceit. And yet it is by relying on conceit that conceit is to be abandoned.’ Thus it was said. And in reference to what was it said? There is the case, sister, where a monk hears, ‘The monk named such-&-such, they say, through the ending of the effluents, has entered & remains in the effluent-free awareness-release & discernment-release, having directly known & realized them for himself right in the here & now.’ The thought occurs to him, ‘The monk named such-&-such, they say, through the ending of the effluents, has entered & remains in the effluent-free awareness-release & discernment-release, having directly known & realized them for himself right in the here & now. Then why not me?’ Then, at a later time, he abandons conceit, having relied on conceit.” — [AN 4:159](#)

And—contrary to those who hold that the desire to attain the goal should be dropped because there's pain when you realize that you haven't arrived there yet—the Buddha actually recommends cultivating what he calls renunciation-based distress as motivation for doing the practice so that you can arrive at the happiness of liberating insight. In the following passage, he provides an example of how to employ verbal fabrication to induce the mental fabrication of this skillful feeling of distress:

“And what are the six kinds of house-based distress? The distress that arises when one regards as a non-acquisition the non-acquisition of forms cognizable by the eye—agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, connected with worldly baits—or when one recalls the previous non-acquisition of such forms after they have passed, ceased, & changed: That is called house-based distress. [Similarly with sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, & ideas.]

“And what are the six kinds of renunciation-based distress? The distress coming from the longing that arises in one who is filled with longing for the unexcelled liberations when—experiencing the inconstancy of those very forms, their change, fading, & cessation—he sees with right discernment as it has come to be that all forms, both before and now, are inconstant, stressful, subject to change, and he is filled with this longing: ‘O when will I enter & remain in the dimension that the noble ones now enter & remain in?’ This is called renunciation-based distress. [Similarly with sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, & ideas.] ...

“By depending & relying on the six kinds of renunciation-based distress, abandon & transcend the six kinds of house-based distress. Such is their abandoning, such is their transcending.” – [*MN 137*](#)

As we'll see, on the higher levels of the path, the desire to gain awakening can sometimes get in the way of awakening, but before you reach that stage of the practice, you need that desire to keep you going in your efforts to abandon unskillful mental qualities and to develop skillful ones in their place.

The ability to motivate yourself to practice right effort requires that you be able to read your mind, to detect what sort of motivation will work at any particular time. As we noted above, one of the measures of

discernment is your ability to talk yourself into abstaining from a course of action that you like to do but will yield long-term harm, or to talk yourself into adopting a course of action that you don't like doing but will yield long-term benefit. In this way, your determination on discernment and truthfulness work together to relinquish what has to be abandoned to bring the mind to calm.

25. Herding Your Thoughts (2)

The main work of right effort in fostering right concentration is to get rid of distracting thoughts that would pull you away from the object of your concentration. The Canon lists five ways to do this:

attending to another theme,
scrutinizing the drawbacks of those thoughts,
paying no mind and no attention to those thoughts,
attending to the relaxing of thought-fabrication with regard to
those thoughts, and
beating down, constraining, and crushing your mind with your
awareness.

It describes these five strategies in detail, along with analogies for each: perceptions that help you to fabricate the right attitude that wants to pull out of your distractions.

“Just as a dexterous carpenter or his apprentice would use a small peg to knock out, drive out, & pull out a large one; in the same way, if evil, unskillful thoughts—connected with desire, aversion, or delusion—arise in a monk while he is referring to and attending to a particular theme, he should attend to another theme, apart from that one, connected with what is skillful. When he is attending to this other theme, apart from that one, connected with what is skillful, then those evil, unskillful thoughts—connected with desire, aversion, or delusion—are abandoned and subside. With their abandoning, he steadies his mind right within, settles it, unifies it, & concentrates it....

“Just as a young woman—or man—fond of adornment, would be horrified, humiliated, & disgusted if the carcass of a snake or a dog or a human being were hung from her neck; in the same way, if evil, unskillful thoughts—connected with desire, aversion, or delusion—

still arise in the monk while he is attending to this other theme, connected with what is skillful, he should scrutinize the drawbacks of those thoughts: ‘Really, these thoughts of mine are unskillful, these thoughts of mine are blameworthy, these thoughts of mine result in stress.’...

“Just as a man with good eyes, not wanting to see forms that had come into range, would close his eyes or look away; in the same way, if evil, unskillful thoughts—connected with desire, aversion, or delusion—still arise in the monk while he is scrutinizing the drawbacks of those thoughts, he should pay no mind and pay no attention to those thoughts....

“Just as the thought would occur to a man walking quickly, ‘Why am I walking quickly? Why don’t I walk slowly?’ So he walks slowly. The thought occurs to him, ‘Why am I walking slowly? Why don’t I stand?’ So he stands. The thought occurs to him, ‘Why am I standing? Why don’t I sit down?’ So he sits down. The thought occurs to him, ‘Why am I sitting? Why don’t I lie down?’ So he lies down. In this way, giving up the grosser posture, he takes up the more refined one. In the same way, if evil, unskillful thoughts—connected with desire, aversion, or delusion—still arise in the monk while he is paying no mind and paying no attention to those thoughts, he should attend to the relaxing of thought-fabrication with regard to those thoughts....

“Just as a strong man, seizing a weaker man by the head or the throat or the shoulders, would beat him down, constrain, & crush him; in the same way, if evil, unskillful thoughts—connected with desire, aversion, or delusion—still arise in the monk while he is attending to the relaxing of thought-fabrication with regard to those thoughts, then—with his teeth clenched and his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth—he should beat down, constrain, & crush his mind with his awareness. As—with his teeth clenched and his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth—he is beating down, constraining, & crushing his mind with his awareness, those evil, unskillful thoughts are abandoned & subside. With their abandoning, he steadies his mind right within, settles it, unifies it, and concentrates it.” — [MN 20](#)

26. Training in Mindfulness

Right mindfulness—which the Buddha defines as a faculty of the active memory—builds on the work of right effort to foster concentration in two ways. To begin with, it helps in a general way to keep things in mind, which will be necessary to keep staying with the object of your concentration and to keep putting away any thoughts that would distract you from that object.

“There is the case where a monk is mindful, endowed with excellent proficiency in mindfulness, remembering & able to call to mind even things that were done & said long ago.” — [AN 8:30](#)

More specifically, the full formula for right mindfulness, given below, provides the how-to instructions for getting the mind into concentration. It boils down to two activities:

- 1) keeping the mind focused on a single object, such as an aspect of the body in and of itself, like the breath; and
- 2) subduing any thoughts of greed or distress that would pull you away from the framework of your focus and into the mental framework of the world outside.

To aid in perfecting both of these tasks as skills, the formula for right mindfulness recommends three helpful mental qualities that carry on the work of commitment and reflection as the Buddha taught it to Rāhula:

- a) ardency, which is the same as right effort;
- b) alertness, which is the ability to observe what you’re doing while you’re doing it; and
- c) mindfulness itself, which can draw on your memory to recognize skillful or unskillful qualities as they arise, to remember what needs to be done with them, and to remember the lessons you learn in the course of being ardent and alert to what you’re doing.

“There is the case where a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings in & of themselves... the mind in & of itself... mental qualities in & of themselves—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. This, monks, is called right mindfulness.” — [SN 45:8](#)

These four ways of developing mindfulness—focused on body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities, all in and of themselves as your frame of reference—are called the four establishing of mindfulness.

There’s a common misperception that mindfulness practice means adopting an open, accepting attitude toward everything that arises in the mind, free from judgments or agendas. The Canon, however, doesn’t support this view. Its definition of mindfulness as the governing principle in the practice shows that right mindfulness definitely has an agenda: Instead of simply watching mental qualities arise and pass away, it remembers, using verbal fabrications, to *make* skillful qualities arise and to *prevent* them from passing away.

“And how is mindfulness the governing principle? The mindfulness that ‘I will make complete any training with regard to good conduct that is not yet complete, or I will protect with discernment any training with regard to good conduct that is complete’ is well established right within. The mindfulness that ‘I will make complete any training with regard to the basics of the holy life that is not yet complete, or I will protect with discernment any training with regard to the basics of the holy life that is complete’ is well established right within. The mindfulness that ‘I will scrutinize with discernment any Dhamma that is not yet scrutinized, or I will protect with discernment any Dhamma that has been scrutinized’ is well established right within. The mindfulness that ‘I will touch through release any Dhamma that is not yet touched, or I will protect with discernment any Dhamma that has been touched’ is well established right within.

“This is how mindfulness is the governing principle.” — [AN 4:245](#)

The Canon also contains many analogies to show that right mindfulness applies clear standards of judgment as to what should and shouldn't be fostered in the training of the mind.

To begin with, its role is to prepare the mind for right concentration by keeping the mind away from thoughts that engender sensual desire. In this way, it's not open and accepting at all. It accepts only what will help concentration, and rejects what doesn't.

"Once a hawk suddenly swooped down on a quail and seized it. Then the quail, as it was being carried off by the hawk, lamented, 'O, just my bad luck & lack of merit that I was wandering out of my proper range and into the territory of others! If only I had kept to my proper range today, to my own ancestral territory, this hawk would have been no match for me in battle.'

"'But what is your proper range?' the hawk asked. 'What is your own ancestral territory?'

"'A newly plowed field with stones all turned up.'

"So the hawk, without bragging about its own strength, without mentioning its own strength, let go of the quail. 'Go, quail, but even when you have gone there you won't escape me.'

"Then the quail, having gone to a newly plowed field with stones all turned up and climbing up on top of a large stone, stood taunting the hawk, 'Now come and get me, you hawk! Now come and get me, you hawk!'

"So the hawk, without bragging about its own strength, without mentioning its own strength, folded its two wings and suddenly swooped down toward the quail. When the quail knew, 'The hawk is coming at me full speed,' it slipped behind the stone, and right there the hawk shattered its own breast.

"This is what happens to anyone who wanders into what is not his proper range and is the territory of others.

"For this reason, you should not wander into what is not your proper range and is the territory of others. In one who wanders into what is not his proper range and is the territory of others, Māra gains an opening, Māra gains a foothold. And what, for a monk, is not his proper range and is the territory of others? The five strings of

sensuality. Which five? Forms cognizable by the eye—agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, enticing, linked with sensual desire. Sounds cognizable by the ear... Aromas cognizable by the nose... Flavors cognizable by the tongue... Tactile sensations cognizable by the body—agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, enticing, linked with sensual desire. These, for a monk, are not his proper range and are the territory of others.

“Wander, monks, in what is your proper range, your own ancestral territory. In one who wanders in what is his proper range, his own ancestral territory, Māra gains no opening, Māra gains no foothold. And what, for a monk, is his proper range, his own ancestral territory? The four establishings of mindfulness. Which four? There is the case where a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings in & of themselves... the mind in & of itself... mental qualities in & of themselves—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. This, for a monk, is his proper range, his own ancestral territory.” — [SN 47:6](#)

Secondly, mindfulness takes note of what works and what doesn't work in trying to get the mind to settle down into concentration. In this way, mindfulness—instead of simply accepting what is—carries on the practice of commitment and reflection devoted to developing what you want: greater and greater skill in reaching inner states of well-being and calm.

“Now suppose that there is a wise, competent, skillful cook who has presented a king or a king's minister with various kinds of curry: mainly sour, mainly bitter, mainly peppery, mainly sweet, alkaline or non-alkaline, salty or non-salty. He takes note of his master, thinking, ‘Today my master likes this curry, or he reaches out for that curry, or he takes a lot of this curry, or he praises that curry. Today my master likes mainly sour curry.... Today my master likes mainly bitter curry... mainly peppery curry... mainly sweet curry... alkaline curry... non-alkaline curry... salty curry... Today my master likes non-salty curry, or he reaches out for non-salty curry, or he takes a lot of non-salty curry, or he praises non-salty curry.’ As a result, he is rewarded with clothing, wages, & gifts. Why is that?

Because the wise, competent, skillful cook takes note of his own master.

“In the same way, there is the case where a wise, competent, skillful monk remains focused on the body in & of itself... feelings in & of themselves... the mind in & of itself... mental qualities in & of themselves—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. As he remains thus focused on mental qualities in & of themselves, his mind becomes concentrated, his defilements are abandoned. He takes note of that fact. As a result, he is rewarded with a pleasant abiding here & now, together with mindfulness & alertness. Why is that? Because the wise, competent, skillful monk takes note of his own mind.” — [*SN 47:8*](#)

27. Training in Concentration

The Buddha defines concentration as the mind's having a single gathering place (*cittass'ek'aggatā*). In his standard definition of right concentration, he doesn't mention the object that acts as the mind's gathering place, but those objects are listed elsewhere in the discourses: In one passage, the themes of right concentration are said to be the four establishings of mindfulness ([MN 44](#)). Another passage, [AN 8:70](#), lists these four themes and adds four more: the four sublime attitudes of universal goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. These sublime attitudes count as mental qualities, which means that right concentration focuses on gathering the mind around one of the themes of right mindfulness.

Note, too, that in the standard definition of right concentration, the Buddha doesn't give instructions on how to get into right concentration. He does that elsewhere, as we've noted, in his description of right mindfulness.

Instead, the standard definition of right concentration is concerned more with how right concentration is experienced in terms of four levels of *jhāna*, or mental absorption. These levels differ from one another both in the mind's relationship to the object in the various levels, and in the feeling-tone characteristic of each.

The first *jhāna* is characterized by feelings of pleasure and rapture—both physical and mental—coming from the fact that the mind is secluded from unskillful thoughts. However, it's still thinking about and evaluating the object of its focus—as in the simile of the cook evaluating whether his master likes or doesn't like his food—and making adjustments to get better results: both in making sure the mind stays secluded from sensuality and in maximizing the rapture and pleasure that come from seclusion. [MN 78](#) notes that this is the highest level of skillful resolves.

In the second jhāna, the mind no longer has to question its relationship to the object. As [MN 125](#) notes, it's focused on its object but doesn't engage in any thinking, even about the object itself. [MN 78](#) adds that even skillful resolves cease on this level of concentration. The mind's focus is maintained by an intention and a single perception of the object ([MN 111](#) ; [AN 9:36](#)). The simplicity of both the intention and perception allows the mind to plunge with assurance into a state of oneness with the object. This oneness carries through the remaining jhānas. On this level, stronger feelings of pleasure and rapture result from the oneness of the mind.

In the third jhāna, rapture fades away, the mind is equanimous, but there are still feelings of pleasure in the body.

In the fourth jhāna, the pleasure fades away. Equanimity and mindfulness reach a state of purity.

Here's the Canon's standard description of these four jhānas:

“There is the case where a monk—quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful dhammas—enters & remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation.

“With the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, he enters & remains in the second jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought & evaluation—internal assurance.

“With the fading of rapture, he remains equanimous, mindful, & alert, and senses pleasure with the body. He enters & remains in the third jhāna, of which the noble ones declare, ‘Equanimous & mindful, he has a pleasant abiding.’

“With the abandoning of pleasure & pain—as with the earlier disappearance of elation & distress—he enters & remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain.” — [SN 45:8](#)

The Buddha also gives a set of similes to describe the jhānas, and which provide more information about them. To begin with, they show that jhāna, instead of being narrowly one-pointed, is actually a state of stable full-body awareness. In the first three jhānas, the feeling-tones of the jhānas are allowed to permeate and saturate the body to the extent that no

part of the body is unsaturated by that feeling-tone. In the fourth jhāna, the body is simply filled by a pure bright awareness. Other passages note that, in the fourth jhāna, the in-and-out breathing naturally stops ([SN 36:11](#); [AN 10:72](#)). In other words, you don't sense any in-and-out breathing, even though you are fully aware of the body throughout. This is when absorption becomes strongest and most stable.

[The first jhāna:] “Just as if a dexterous bathman or bathman's apprentice would pour bath powder into a brass basin and knead it together, sprinkling it again & again with water, so that his ball of bath powder—saturated, moisture-laden, permeated within & without—would nevertheless not drip; in the same way, the monk permeates & pervades, suffuses & fills this very body with the rapture & pleasure born of seclusion. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture & pleasure born of seclusion.”

[The second jhāna:] “Just like a lake with spring-water welling up from within, having no inflow from the east, west, north, or south, and with the skies supplying abundant showers time & again, so that the cool fount of water welling up from within the lake would permeate & pervade, suffuse & fill it with cool waters, there being no part of the lake unpervaded by the cool waters; in the same way, the monk permeates & pervades, suffuses & fills this very body with the rapture & pleasure born of concentration. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture & pleasure born of concentration.”

[The third jhāna:] “Just as in a lotus pond, some of the lotuses, born & growing in the water, stay immersed in the water and flourish without standing up out of the water, so that they are permeated & pervaded, suffused & filled with cool water from their roots to their tips, and nothing of those lotuses would be unpervaded with cool water; in the same way, the monk permeates & pervades, suffuses & fills this very body with the pleasure divested of rapture. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded with pleasure divested of rapture.”

[The fourth jhāna:] “Just as if a man were sitting covered from head to foot with a white cloth so that there would be no part of his body to which the white cloth did not extend; in the same way, the monk

sits, permeating the body with a pure, bright awareness. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by pure, bright awareness.” – [DN 2](#)

In all of these similes, water represents pleasure; and movement, rapture. The amount of water in the second and third similes, as compared to the amount in the first, indicates that the pleasure in these two jhānas is much stronger and more pervasive than the pleasure in the first. The stillness of the lotuses in the third simile, and of the sitting man in the fourth, indicate that although rapture may be refreshing on the earlier levels of jhāna, its absence—after it has done its work—is very peaceful and calm.

Other details in the similes also make important points about the differences and relationships among the jhānas. For example, the activity of the bathman in the simile for the first jhāna—the only simile that has a conscious agent doing anything—symbolizes the activity of directed thought and evaluation, which figure out how to spread the sense of pleasure and rapture throughout the body. This is unlike the movement of the spring water in the simile for the second jhāna, which involves no conscious effort at all. Also—unlike the movement of the spring water, which is totally immersed in the water of the lake—the bathman isn’t totally immersed in the water he’s kneading into the bath powder. This symbolizes the fact that the mind isn’t totally immersed and surrounded by pleasure in the first jhāna, but stands somewhat apart from it. Only in the second jhāna is the mind totally immersed in a sense of oneness with its object.

At the same time, however, without the efforts of the bathman, the water wouldn’t get thoroughly worked into the ball of bath powder, and there would be no body-filling pleasure into which the mind could get immersed in the second jhāna. So the work of directed thought and evaluation, instead of being a mere instability in the first jhāna, actually accomplishes a necessary task: It prepares the way for the mind to enter the higher jhānas.

As [MN 117](#) notes, when directed thought and evaluation are doing this work, they’re performing the work of noble right resolve. In this way, the simile of the bathman—who has to be sensitive to the right combination of water and bath powder—conveys a message similar to the simile of the

cook above, who has to be sensitive to the needs and tastes of his employer. Both similes portray the work of discernment in preparing the mind to enter and remain in concentration. And, because evaluation can play a role in moving from one jhāna to a higher one, both similes can also be applied to the work of discernment in being sensitive to what needs to be done to refine your mastery of concentration as well.

28. Other Maps of Concentration

Many discourses, when discussing the levels of right concentration, list not only four jhānas but also five additional attainments that the suttas call the “formlessnesses beyond forms.” Modern discussions call these the “formless jhānas.” Because some discourses show how the discernment that leads to awakening can be gained based on any of these formless attainments, these attainments count as right concentration, too. [MN 140](#) explains that these attainments are simply applications of the equanimity found in the fourth jhāna to formless themes.

The standard description of these five levels is this:

“With the complete transcending of perceptions of (physical) form, with the disappearance of perceptions of resistance, and not attending to perceptions of multiplicity, (perceiving,) ‘Infinite space,’ one enters & remains in the dimension of the infinitude of space.

“With the complete transcending of the dimension of the infinitude of space, (perceiving,) ‘Infinite consciousness,’ one enters & remains in the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness.

“With the complete transcending of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, (perceiving,) ‘There is nothing,’ one enters & remains in the dimension of nothingness.

“With the complete transcending of the dimension of nothingness, he enters and remains in the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception.

“With the complete transcending of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception, one enters & remains in the cessation of perception and feeling.” — [AN 9:32](#)

Notice that the differences among the four jhānas relate to different ways of relating to the same object: with or without pleasure or rapture, with or without directed thought and evaluation. With the first two

formless states, though, the object—the perception—changes, but the way the mind relates to the perception stays the same: You hold to the oneness provided by the perception in a state of equanimity. With the third state, the oneness that has characterized all the concentration attainments beginning with the second jhāna falls away and is replaced by a perception of nothingness. In the fourth, perception becomes so attenuated that it can't rightly be called perception or devoid of perception. In the fifth, all perceptions and feelings—all mental fabrications—cease.

As for the ways in which you can attain the formless states, the Canon lists four.

The most standard way is through the four jhānas, which offer practice in seeing how the mind fabricates the different levels.

An alternative map lists five levels of jhāna, adding an intermediate level between the first and the second, in which there is no directed thought but there is still a modicum of evaluation ([AN 8:70](#)). None of the discourses explain this variant, but apparently it simply reflects the fact that the mind can settle down in a variety of ways.

Two other maps are even more different from the standard definition of the four jhānas. They apply to people whose meditative experience focuses less on the body and more on perceptions of light and forms that appear to the mind's eye.

In one of these maps, which emphasizes light, there are two steps prior to the infinitude of space:

the property of light
the property of beauty ([SN 14:11](#)).

In the other map, which emphasizes the perception of forms, the steps prior to the infinitude of space are three:

Possessed of form, one sees forms.
Not percipient of form internally, one sees forms externally.
One is intent only on the beautiful ([DN 15](#)).

[MN 128](#) gives an indication of how these steps relate to the practice of jhāna. There the Buddha discusses how, to master the perception of forms and light, he had to investigate what caused either of those perceptions to vanish against his will. Engaging in a process of commitment and

reflection, he came up with the following list of causes: doubt, inattention, sloth-~~ft~~-drowsiness, panic, excitement, boredom, excess persistence, slack persistence, a perception of multiplicity (focusing on sense objects), and excessive absorption in forms. By fine-tuning his focus to avoid these defilements, he was able to bring his concentration into a state of balanced calm and alertness.

Then he followed the five-stage map of the jhānas and was able to attain full awakening.

This suggests that concentration focused on light and forms can be a good way to improve the focus and steadiness of your concentration if your mind tends toward visual experiences while it settles down, but that the practice of the jhānas is what provides direct insight into the processes of fabrication: bodily, verbal, and mental. For that reason, it's the ideal foundation for liberating insight to arise.

This point becomes especially clear when we consider the topic of mindfulness and concentration that the Buddha taught most extensively, and that he himself used on the night of his awakening: mindfulness of in-and-out breathing (*ānāpānasati*)—breath meditation for short.

29. More than Just Calm

The Buddha once addressed a group of monks, telling them that they should practice breath meditation. One of the monks, Ven. Ariṭṭha, who didn't have a particularly good reputation in the Community, responded that he already practiced breath meditation. The Buddha asked him what kind of breath meditation he practiced, and Ariṭṭha replied,

“Having abandoned sensual desire for past sensualities, having done away with sensual desire for future sensualities, and having thoroughly subdued perceptions of resistance with regard to internal & external events, I breathe in mindfully and breathe out mindfully.”
– [SN 54:6](#)

The Buddha commented that there did exist that sort of breath meditation, he didn't deny it, but that it wasn't the sort that would give complete results. He then described his own sixteen-step formula for the practice of breath meditation that would bear great fruit.

Before we look at the Buddha's formula, we can stop and ask what was wrong with Ariṭṭha's. The main problem appears to be that his formula promotes calm but without much discernment. It does try to do away with unskillful desires, and to that extent involves some discernment, but it replaces them simply with equanimity. It doesn't dig down into what ignorant desires might lie buried in the present moment under the equanimity.

As we've already noted, there are two sorts of causes of suffering: those for which you can develop dispassion simply by looking at them with equanimity, and those for which you can develop dispassion only when you exert fabrications against them. Ariṭṭha's method would work with the first sort, but not with the second, in that it makes no mention of any skillful fabrications—trained desires—that need to be employed to help skillful determinations prevail over unskillful desires. As we'll see, the

Buddha's formula for breath meditation does precisely that, which means that it can deal with both sorts of causes of suffering.

This relates to another problem with Ariṭṭha's formula: In promoting a blanket attitude of equanimity to the present moment, it doesn't promote insight into the fabricated nature of that moment. For this reason, it doesn't provide any insight into how fabrications have to be used to develop states of right concentration. This creates two problems:

- 1) It doesn't provide any guidance on how to fabricate any of the jhānas, and so doesn't help you attain them.
- 2) It doesn't help you gain the deeper insight into the fabricated nature of the jhānas so that you can eventually step back from them and deconstruct them so as to bring the mind to total freedom.

As we'll see, the Buddha's formula for breath meditation highlights the role of fabrication in relating to the breath, and so addresses both of these failings in Ariṭṭha's formula. In this way, it uses discernment into the processes of fabrication to relinquish disturbance, to promote calm, and then to promote further discernment. It takes the step of fabrication in dependent co-arising—which, when functioning in ignorance, creates the conditions of suffering—and brings knowledge to it, so that it can be turned around and used to bring suffering to an end. In doing so, breath meditation employs these three types of determination—discernment, relinquishment, and calm—to overcome unskillful desires and passions in an all-around way.

The Buddha's instructions on breath meditation are repeated many times throughout the discourses. They're even included in the Vinaya. In fact, they're the only meditation instructions contained there, which shows that they were considered especially important: a necessary part of the training for monks who, specializing in memorizing that part of the Canon, might not have had time to memorize any of the discourses.

These instructions come in sixteen steps divided into four sets of four, called tetrads. The tetrads, in order, correspond to the four frames of reference in the establishing of mindfulness: The first tetrad focuses on the body, the second on feelings, the third on the mind, and the fourth on mental qualities.

Note, however, that whereas the steps within the tetrads are followed sequentially, the tetrads themselves are not. In other words, the first three

tetrads are followed simultaneously, in parallel, to create a state of concentration in which the sensation of the whole body, a feeling of pleasure filling the whole body, and an awareness filling the whole body are brought to a state of singleness. Sometimes, in the process of creating this state of singleness, the breath is the main issue standing in the way, sometimes feelings, sometimes the state of the mind, so you switch your attention to the appropriate tetrad in relation to the breath to solve that particular problem. Then you try to consolidate all three into one.

As for the fourth tetrad, it's used—in the beginning stages of meditation—to get rid of distracting thoughts related to the world that would interfere with the concentration being developed through the first three tetrads. You focus on the inconstancy of those thoughts so as to see their drawbacks (this would also involve seeing them as stressful or not-self). This insight into their drawbacks would lead to dispassion for them, followed by their cessation, and then the contemplation of their drawbacks would itself be relinquished.

In the translation below, I've highlighted the steps that explicitly mention fabrication. Hold in mind, though, that every step that counts as a training implicitly involves fabrication as well.

“Now, how is mindfulness of in-&-out breathing developed & pursued so as to be of great fruit, of great benefit?

“There is the case where a monk, having gone to the wilderness, to the shade of a tree, or to an empty building, sits down folding his legs crosswise, holding his body erect, and establishing mindfulness to the fore. Always mindful, he breathes in; mindful he breathes out.

The first tetrad, dealing with the body:

“[1] Breathing in long, he discerns, ‘I am breathing in long’; or breathing out long, he discerns, ‘I am breathing out long.’ [2] Or breathing in short, he discerns, ‘I am breathing in short’; or breathing out short, he discerns, ‘I am breathing out short.’ [3] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to the entire body.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to the entire body.’ [4] *He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in calming bodily fabrication.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out calming bodily fabrication.’*

The second tetrad, dealing with feelings:

“[5] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to rapture.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to rapture.’ [6] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to pleasure.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to pleasure.’ [7] *He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to mental fabrication.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to mental fabrication.’* [8] *He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in calming mental fabrication.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out calming mental fabrication.’*

The third tetrad, dealing with the mind:

“[9] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to the mind.’ [10] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in gladdening the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out gladdening the mind.’ [11] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in concentrating the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out concentrating the mind.’ [12] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in releasing the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out releasing the mind.’

The fourth tetrad, dealing with mental qualities:

“[13] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in focusing on inconstancy.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out focusing on inconstancy.’ [14] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in focusing on dispassion *[or: fading]*.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out focusing on dispassion.’ [15] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in focusing on cessation.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out focusing on cessation.’ [16] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in focusing on relinquishing.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out focusing on relinquishing.’” — [*MN 118*](#)

Notice how the Buddha’s instructions start where Ariṭṭha’s end—breathing in and out mindfully—and then progress from there. Notice, too, how proactive this practice is. Instead of just watching your breath, you discern differences in the breath in the first two steps, and then you train yourself to breathe in and out fostering skillful feelings, mind states, and mental qualities in the remaining steps. As we’ve noted before, training

involves using the desires aligned with the determination for awakening to overcome any desires that would thwart that determination.

Finally, notice how the Buddha calls attention to two types of fabrication in his instructions—bodily and mental—and how the instructions themselves describe how to talk to yourself—how to engage in verbal fabrication—as you do all the steps. By making you sensitive to these three types of fabrication and teaching you how to generate them and calm them at will, the sixteen steps develop insight and calm at the same time: insight in focusing attention on the desires implicit in fabrication, calm in using those desires to pacify body and mind. In calling attention to fabrication in the present moment, the sixteen steps also give you practice in dealing with the causes of suffering against which you have to exert fabrication: how to breathe, how to talk to yourself, and how to fashion perceptions and feelings that will uproot any unskillful desires that may arise.

This emphasis on the processes of fabrication shows how breath meditation won't abandon you at the time of death. Even though the breath will have to fall away, the skills you've gained in mastering verbal and mental fabrications through this meditation won't. They'll help guide you to skillfully handle the cravings and clingings—desires and passions in their roles of hungering and feeding—that can become so strong in the mind when the body can no longer survive.

And as we noted above, in calling attention to how you need to fabricate states of concentration, the Buddha is also providing you with advance warning that these fabricated states, and the desires underlying their fabrication, will eventually have to be abandoned.

30. Discernment in Concentration

That warning is the message of the discernment aimed solely at calm. This means that training in breath meditation in particular, and right concentration in general, play a role not only in training in the heightened mind, but also in training in heightened discernment.

To appreciate how this is so, we have to look at how the Buddha defines discernment before we look at how the four tetrads of breath meditation fulfill the training in right mindfulness and right concentration. That way, we can notice the activity of discernment inherent in those four tetrads.

The discourse that lists the qualities that make you worthy of the Dhamma defines discernment as follows:

“There is the case where a monk is discerning, endowed with discernment of arising & passing away—noble, penetrating, leading to the right ending of stress.” — [AN 8:30](#)

Discernment starts with recognizing the distinctive mark of fabrication: events arising and passing away ([AN 3:47](#)). In this way, it establishes the *fact* of fabrication. But just as mindfulness is not bare awareness of events arising and passing away, neither is discernment. It also has to discern the *value* of fabrication to see that, although fabrications are useful in constructing the path to the end of suffering, ultimately, when that path has been fully developed, no further fabrications are worth the effort that goes into them.

In other words, discernment has to see that fabrication in all its forms—such as the aggregates and consciousness at the senses—is a type of kamma, something you *do*, and that beyond the path, it’s not worth doing. After all, desire and passion for the processes of fabrication are based on the value judgment that those processes are worth the effort that goes into them. You won’t be able to subdue desire and passion until you arrive at

an opposing and more persuasive value judgment, that fabrications, no matter how good, are simply not worth the effort.

These aspects of discernment's role—seeing both the fact and value of fabrications—are contained in the remaining words in the definition of discernment: *noble, penetrating, and leading to the right ending of stress.*

In the Buddha's vocabulary, *noble* relates to the noble search for the deathless ([MN 26](#)). This means you don't look at arising and passing away simply to affirm that it's happening. You're searching for a way to put an end to it, to arrive at something unfabricated. This is why you need discernment that's *penetrating*.

A discourse named Penetrating ([AN 6:63](#)) shows what this means. To have penetrating knowledge of something, you have to know:

what it is,
its cause,
its diversity—in other words, the range of its skillful and unskillful forms,
its results—good or bad,
its cessation, and
the path to its cessation.

Applied to fabrication, penetrating knowledge would have to see that:

fabrication is identical with intention;
its immediate cause is contact (such as the contact in name and form);
its diversity covers all skillful and unskillful actions, including the aggregates;
its results are pleasures and pains;
its cessation comes with the cessation of contact—this would mean the cessation of all six senses ([SN 35:117](#))—and
the path to its cessation is the noble eightfold path ([SN 22:57](#)).

So instead of simply observing arising and passing away, if you want your knowledge to be penetrating, you have to dig into the causes and results of that arising and passing away, and to see their different potentials. This requires that you take a proactive approach to fabrication. If you simply watch fabrications coming and going, you don't really know

which causes lead to which results. But if you consciously and intentionally manipulate the causes, you can learn for yourself what causes what. This is why the Buddha recommended a more proactive approach to breath meditation, in which you train yourself to engage in different bodily, verbal, and mental fabrications to calm the body and mind and to arrive at your own direct knowledge of causal relationships.

For this program of penetrating discernment to *lead to the right ending of stress*, you not only have to penetrate the six aspects of fabrication listed in [AN 6:63](#), but you also have to put the noble eightfold path into practice. Again, you learn by doing. The path ends stress by fostering dispassion for its cause, which is craving. So to put an end to stress, discernment has to look at the arising and passing away of fabrications in a way that leads to dispassion for craving.

Keep these points in mind as we review the ways in which the four tetrads of breath meditation foster right mindfulness and right concentration. You'll see that these tetrads also foster discernment that's noble, penetrating, and leads to the right ending of stress.

31. Mindfulness, Concentration, & Discernment at the Breath

The Buddha calls his sixteen steps for breath meditation both a mindfulness practice and a concentration practice ([SN 54:8](#)). The way these two aspects of the practice overlap can be shown by how the sixteen steps map both onto the standard formula for right mindfulness and onto the standard formula for right concentration, or the four jhānas.

First, **mindfulness**: [MN 118](#), in describing how the four tetrads map onto the four establishing of mindfulness, shows that the first three tetrads form a set, in that the breath forms the focal point for all three.

In the first tetrad, the act of focusing on the breath counts as keeping track of the body. That's because, in the Buddha's way of classifying physical phenomena, the in-and-out breath counts as part of the wind property in the body ([MN 28](#)). In other words, if we were to classify it under the factors of dependent co-arising, it's an aspect of form, in name and form, rather than an object of the bodily sense medium. So when the Buddha tells you to focus on the breath, he's not telling you to focus on the tactile sensation of air flowing in and out the nose. Instead, he's having you focus on the flow of energy in the body, as felt from within, that allows the air to come in and out.

Now, as we noted when quoting the sixteen steps, when you move to the second tetrad, you don't change your focus away from the breath to feelings; when moving to the third, you don't change your focus from the breath to the mind. Instead, you stay with the breath and notice that, in paying close attention to the breath, you're creating feelings; in order to stay with the breath, you need mind states of mindfulness and alertness. Wherever there's the sensation of breath in the body, feelings are right there. Mind states are right there. In this way, the first three tetrads promote the essential quality of concentration: having a single gathering place for the mind.

At the same time, they work together in performing the first duty of right mindfulness—keeping track of body, feelings, and mind, in and of themselves, all at once. In terms of the determination underlying the path, the first three tetrads promote desires that fall in line with the determination for calm.

The fourth tetrad, though, focuses on the second duty of right mindfulness: subduing greed and distress with reference to the world. However, because this tetrad involves understanding inconstancy to the point of giving rise to dispassion, you do more than simply pacify distracting thoughts, as you would in Ariṭṭha's method. You actually abandon and relinquish them through discernment.

Here, in terms of determination, you're using discernment to truly relinquish any desires that would run counter to your determination for awakening, and in so doing, you bring the mind to calm. In other words, you're employing all four determinations at once.

As for how the sixteen steps of breath meditation relate to the practice of right **concentration** or the four jhānas: Here again, it's important to notice that the practice is aimed, not just at calming the mind, but also at developing discernment.

As we just noted, because the first three tetrads form a set, they provide a single gathering place for the mind, which is the defining feature of concentration. They bring together the three things that characterize any of the four jhānas: the sensation of the body as felt from within, a feeling-tone, and an alert, mindful state of mind.

This fact has two practical applications. The first is that if you have trouble getting the mind to settle down with a sense of ease in the breath, you can look to see which of the tetrads is lacking: Is the problem with the breath, with the feeling-tone, or with the mind? Then you can look to see which of the steps in which tetrad are deficient, so that you can make up the lack.

The second practical application is that, when you read the three tetrads as parallel instructions, you'll notice that one tetrad can fill in details missing from the others. Even though the sixteen steps are the Buddha's most complete meditation instructions, when we compare the tetrads with one another and with other passages in the Canon that describe

meditation, we can see that some details are missing. The Buddha may have chosen the format of sixteen steps—four tetrads of four steps each—for ease of memorization, and expected his students to fill in the implicit steps when teaching their own students.

For instance, the first tetrad makes only one explicit reference to fabrication—calming bodily fabrication—but the standard formula for the factors of awakening says that before the body and mind are calmed, they should first be energized ([MN 118](#)). The second tetrad makes a similar point: You should breathe in a way that allows you to sense rapture and pleasure—here the rapture would be energizing—before you calm mental fabrication. So there would be nothing wrong with filling in two steps in the first tetrad: Before calming bodily fabrication, you sensitize yourself to it and then you use it to energize the body with feelings of rapture and pleasure.

Here’s how the tetrads map onto the jhānas:

The first tetrad—discerning the breath as long or short, training yourself to be sensitive to the entire body, and to calm bodily fabrication—describes the progress of breath meditation up through the fourth jhāna. You start by maintaining focus on the breath and then, as you enter the first jhāna, develop a full-body awareness ([DN 2](#)). The breath grows progressively more refined and calm as you move through the jhānas until you reach the fourth, at which stage in-and-out breathing stops ([SN 36:11](#); [AN 10:20](#); [AN 10:72](#)).

The second tetrad—training yourself to be sensitive to rapture, to be sensitive to pleasure, to be sensitive to mental fabrication (perception and feeling), and to calm mental fabrication—describes the progress from the early stages of meditation up through the cessation of perception and feeling. Rapture is present in the first two jhānas; pleasure, in the first three. Perception plays a role in all the meditative attainments up through the dimension of nothingness ([AN 9:36](#)); as you go through these levels, the underlying perception grows more refined ([MN 121](#)). Similarly with feelings: From the rapture and pleasure of the first two jhānas, feelings become more refined through the equanimous pleasure of the third, and then to the pure equanimity of the fourth, which forms a foundation for the next four formless attainments ([MN 140](#)). Finally, the total calming of

perception and feeling occurs with the cessation of perception and feeling, the ninth attainment.

The question arises, if verbal fabrication ceases with the second jhāna, and the breath with the fourth, how can any of the sixteen steps apply to those attainments or to any of the higher levels of concentration? After all, all of the steps are done in conjunction with breathing, and steps 3 through 16 employ verbal fabrication in the act of training.

The answer is that even though these forms of fabrication are not present in the higher levels of concentration, the mind will sometimes have to make a deliberate choice when moving from one attainment to the next ([MN 121](#); [AN 9:34](#); [AN 9:41](#)). This will require a moment of reflection in which you step back from your full focus before plunging in again. [AN 5:28](#) illustrates this process with the image of a person standing and watching a person sitting down; or a person sitting and watching a person lying down. Verbal and bodily fabrication will resume during those moments of choice, which means that any of the sixteen steps could also be applied at those times.

The third tetrad—training yourself to be sensitive to the mind, to gladden it, to concentrate it, and to release it—covers all the stages of training the mind. You start by simply observing it, and then you train it in the proper direction in any of the following ways through exerting skillful fabrications: bodily, verbal, and mental.

Gladdening begins with the preliminary practices of practicing generosity, observing the precepts, and abandoning the hindrances, practices that give rise to a sense of well-being and joy that can induce the mind to settle down in concentration. The gladdening grows more refined as the mind progresses through the first three jhānas, where you experience rapture and pleasure. It culminates in the joy that accompanies the attainment of the goal ([MN 137](#)).

Concentrating the mind is also a process of progressive refinement up through the cessation of perception and feeling. Although each level of jhāna and each formless attainment grows increasingly steady as you go up the series, only the levels beginning with the fourth jhāna are said to be imperturbable ([MN 106](#)).

Likewise, releasing the mind is a progressive process: You release the mind at least temporarily from the affliction of attending to perceptions of

sensuality on entering the first jhāna, from the affliction of attending to perceptions of directed thought on entering the second jhāna, and so on up through the cessation of perception and feeling. Finally, release from affliction becomes total on reaching unbinding ([AN 9:34](#)).

The fourth tetrad—training yourself to remain focused on inconstancy, dispassion, cessation, and relinquishing—goes into more detail on how the last step in the third tetrad, releasing the mind, is carried out.

This release, as we just noted, develops through progressive levels of refinement while mastering concentration. But then it goes beyond refinement with the attainment of total unbinding.

In the beginning stages, when you're trying to master concentration, you direct the four steps of this fourth tetrad to any object that would distract you from your theme. In other words, you focus these contemplations on anything that would provoke greed and distress with reference to the world outside of your concentration, seeing the distraction as composed of events (*dhammas*) that are inherently unworthy of attachment. In this way, you wean the mind from the distraction and from the desires and passions underlying it.

When concentration is fully mastered, you then turn these same contemplations onto the internal world of becoming created around the concentration itself. You see that it, too, is composed of dhammas that are inconstant—even though the inconstancy is very subtle—and from that insight you develop dispassion for the process of continuing to fabricate anything at all, even the most refined states of concentration. This dispassion puts an end to the passion that fuels fabrication, so all fabrications cease. At that point, everything—even passion for the deathless—is relinquished, and total unbinding occurs ([AN 9:36](#)).

These are some of the ways in which the four tetrads of the sixteen steps, when developed and pursued, bear great fruit. They start with mindfulness and concentration, and then lead through discernment to dispassion and total release.

However, even though the fourth tetrad gives more detail than the third in explaining how the mind is released, it's still just a bare outline. The Canon has many more useful things to say on the topic.

32. Leaping Up

The discourses describe two approaches for how to train the mind in liberating discernment based on the practice of jhāna. In the first, you gain insight into the processes of fabrication by observing the mind as it goes from one level of jhāna to another. In the other, you observe and evaluate a state of jhāna while you're still in it.

In both approaches, discernment performs two functions. You engage in the practice of jhāna with commitment and reflection first to discern the *fact* of fabrication in each level of jhāna. In other words, you see how that state of concentration is intentionally put together. Then, based on a desire for even greater calm, you refine your commitment and reflection to arrive at a *value judgment*, discerning the drawbacks of those fabrications and the jhānas created from them.

As we've already noted, this value judgment is a necessary part of liberating discernment. You fabricate states of jhāna based on desire and passion for them, and you feel desire and passion for them because of a value judgment: that the effort that goes into them is amply rewarded by the pleasure, rapture, and pleasing equanimity they provide.

So to free yourself from the fetter of desire and passion, you have to arrive at the opposite value judgment: They're not worth the effort they require. You get yourself to see that even though these are the ultimate fabricated states, the fact that you have to keep on fabricating them means that they're still not satisfying. They require subtle but continual effort. True peace and calm would have to require no fabrication at all. Only when the mind is struck with the realization that nothing fabricated can provide satisfactory happiness will it genuinely develop dispassion for all things fabricated and then incline to the unfabricated.

An example of the first approach, observing the mind as it goes from one state of jhāna to another, is the following passage, which focuses on the first step of reflection: realizing the fact of fabrication in the jhānas.

As you progress up the ladder of concentration, you see how the three types of fabrication—verbal, bodily, and mental—fall away.

“There are these six calmings. When one has attained the first jhāna, speech has been calmed. When one has attained the second jhāna, directed thought & evaluation [verbal fabrications] have been calmed. When one has attained the third jhāna, rapture has been calmed. When one has attained the fourth jhāna, in-and-out breathing [bodily fabrication] has been calmed. When one has attained the cessation of perception & feeling, perception & feeling [mental fabrications] have been calmed. When a monk’s effluents have ended, passion has been calmed, aversion has been calmed, delusion has been calmed.” — [*SN 36:11*](#)

This process is like subjecting a hunk of ore-bearing rock to heat. As the temperature rises progressively higher, first any lead in the rock melts and flows out, then the zinc, then the silver, then the gold.

You need to follow the approach of commitment and reflection to watch these fabrications fall away. Otherwise, you just stay absorbed in the jhānas. However, simply observing these types of fabrication fall away isn’t enough to develop dispassion for them. You have to desire to contemplate further for the sake of the even greater calm that can come only when you arrive at the value judgment that even the highest levels of concentration are not worth the effort that goes into them.

The Canon describes many ways in which you might arrive at this value judgment. The Buddha himself describes one way that he himself followed, presenting it as an inner battle between his determination for greater calm and his resistance to relinquishing something he already had. Training for greater and greater calm at each step of deepening concentration, he had to use discernment to overcome the desires that resisted that training. He did this by contemplating the drawbacks of the state he was in, and the rewards of abandoning and relinquishing whatever perception within that state was still afflicting his mind.

Here’s how he described bringing the mind into the first jhāna.

“I myself, before my self-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 released, (though) 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 released, (though) seeing it as peace?’ Then the thought occurred to me: ‘I haven’t seen the drawback of sensuality; I haven’t pursued (that theme). 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 released, (though) seeing it as peace.’

“Then the thought occurred to me: ‘If, having seen the drawback of sensuality, I were to pursue that theme; and if, having understood the reward of renunciation, I were to familiarize myself with it, there’s the possibility that my heart would leap up at renunciation, grow confident, steadfast, & released, seeing it as peace.’

“So at a later time, having seen the drawback of sensuality, I pursued that theme; having understood the reward of renunciation, I familiarized myself with it. My heart leaped up at renunciation, grew confident, steadfast, & released, seeing it as peace. Then, quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities, I entered & remained in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation.” – [AN 9:41](#)

Then, as he stayed in the first jhāna, any perceptions of sensuality that occurred to the mind struck him as an affliction.

So he saw that it would be good to go to an even higher stage of jhāna. But then again he encountered resistance in his own mind. He followed a similar program of contemplating the drawbacks of the state he was in, and the rewards of abandoning whatever perception was still afflicting his mind.

These were the afflicting perceptions that he noticed as he ascended the stages of jhāna:

Second jhāna: perceptions of directed thought;

Third jhāna: perceptions of rapture;

Fourth jhāna: perceptions of equanimity;

Infinite space: perceptions of form (such as the shape of the body as felt from within);

Infinite consciousness: perceptions of the dimension of the infinitude of space;

Nothingness: perceptions of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness;

Neither perception nor non-perception: perceptions of the dimension of nothingness.

After contemplating the drawbacks of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception, he attained the cessation of perception and feeling. As he saw that with discernment, he gained total release.

In this case, the Buddha's liberating value judgment came through reflection devoted to seeing the drawbacks of the state he was in, along with the rewards of going beyond that state.

It's worth noting that at each step along the way, his reflection was motivated by a determined desire: to overcome any other desires that stood in the way of deeper calm. If he hadn't been motivated by that determined desire, he would never have been able to master concentration or to arrive at the value judgment that inspired dispassion. This is an excellent example of how he used desire strategically to overcome the desires that stood in the way of awakening.

33. The Skilled Archer

The Buddha's instructions for how to train the mind in liberating discernment by using the second method—observing and evaluating a state of jhāna while you're still in it—show that here, too, the contemplation has to focus on discerning the *fact* of fabrication in the jhāna and on arriving at a *value judgment* that inclines the mind to the unfabricated. In this case, the imagery is less that of a battle than of a person perfecting his skill—although the skill in question would be useful if he's ever called into battle.

“I tell you, the ending of the effluents depends on the first jhāna... the second jhāna... the third... the fourth... the dimension of the infinitude of space... the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness... the dimension of nothingness. I tell you, the ending of the effluents depends on the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception....

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

the relinquishment of all acquisitions; the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; unbinding.’

“Staying right there, he reaches the ending of the effluents. Or, if not, then—through this very Dhamma-passion, this Dhamma-delight, and from the total ending of the five lower fetters [self-identification views, grasping at habits & practices, doubt, sensual passion, and irritation]—he is due to arise spontaneously (in the Pure Abodes), there to be totally unbound, never again to return from that world.

“[Similarly with the remaining stages of concentration.]” – [AN 9:36](#)

There are several points worth noticing here. First, in terms of the contemplation of the state of jhāna, you have to engage in enough commitment to the jhāna to be skilled at it before contemplating it further. If you try analyzing it when the mind is still not securely in place, your concentration would simply fall apart. But when you *have* achieved some mastery, then the next step is to look for the fact of fabrication, here expressed in the fact that the jhāna is composed of the five aggregates.

To see how that’s so, we can take as an example the first jhāna as attained through breath meditation. Form would be the object of the concentration, the in-and-out breath. Feeling would be the feelings of pleasure experienced through being continually attentive to the breath. Perception would be the perception of the breath and the pleasure permeating the whole body. Fabrication would be the intention to stay with the breath, plus the directed thought and evaluation that allow the pleasure of the breath to spread throughout the whole body. Consciousness would be aware of all these activities.

Once you’ve seen the fact of these fabrications in the state of jhāna, the next step is to arrive at a value judgment of them. Here the Buddha recommends using skillful mental fabrications—perceptions—to induce dispassion for the fabrications of concentration. He lists eleven perceptions in all, which would fall under the three perceptions he most often uses for persuading his listeners to see the drawbacks of the aggregates and to develop dispassion for them:

Inconstancy: inconstant, a disintegration;

Stress: stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction;

Not-self: not-self, alien, an emptiness.

These perceptions are designed to develop an attitude of dispassion for all things fabricated, and to incline the mind to seeing dispassion as a good thing.

Here again, the approach of commitment and reflection arrives at a liberating value judgment by focusing on the drawbacks of where you are in concentration, and then the rewards of abandoning passion for it. The main difference here is that the contemplation focuses, not just on the rewards of a higher level of concentration, but on the rewards of going straight to the unfabricated.

This liberating appreciation of the unfabricated is identical with the eighth and final quality that makes you worthy of the Dhamma: delighting in non-objectification.

“There is the case where a monk’s mind leaps up, grows confident, steadfast, & released in the cessation of objectification. ‘This Dhamma is for one who enjoys non-objectification, who delights in non-objectification, not for one who enjoys & delights in objectification.’ Thus was it said. And with reference to this was it said.” – [AN 8:30](#)

Non-objectification is one of the Buddha’s epithets for unbinding. It’s based on his technical definition of the word “objectification”—*papañca*—as a type of thinking that begins with the perception “I am the thinker” ([Sn 4:14](#)). As you objectify yourself with this perception, you develop other perceptions based on it, until you identify yourself as a being with a need to feed. Because of that need, you inevitably come into conflict with other beings who have been objectifying themselves and need to feed as well. Non-objectification comes from digging out the root of that original perception, and so liberates the mind from all conflict. To delight in non-objectification is to delight in the prospect of being totally free from conflict and, once that freedom is attained, to enjoy that freedom.

One last thing to notice about this approach to dispassion given in [AN 9:36](#) is that it is possible, on discerning the deathless as a result of this contemplation, to feel passion both for the deathless and for the verbal and mental fabrications of discernment that opened the way to it. This

passion comes from a blind spot in your all-around reflection at that moment: You haven't fully reflected on what's left to be abandoned. The passion in this blind spot would prevent you from gaining full awakening.

It's because of this possibility that the Buddha, in many places throughout the Canon, recommends applying the perception of not-self not only to fabrications, but even to the unfabricated ([MN 35](#); [Dhp 277–279](#)): All phenomena are not-self. Of course, once you've developed dispassion for the unfabricated, you have to drop this last instance of fabricated discernment—the perception that all phenomena are not-self—for your release to be all-around. Because the perception itself is a phenomenon, if you reflect thoroughly on it in an all-around way, you see that it contains the seeds for its own transcendence.

34. Allure & Drawbacks

The Canon provides other guidelines for how to reflect in a way that gives rise to the value judgment that all things fabricated are not worth the effort that goes into them. Two guidelines in particular stand out, both because they're repeated so frequently in the discourses and because they provide details that are missing in the guidelines offered in [AN 9:41](#) and [AN 9:36](#).

The first provides a general overview for the reflections aimed at subduing desire and passion, dividing those reflections into five steps: You look for the

origination of the fabrications in question; for their
passing away; for their
allure; for their
drawbacks; and for the
escape from them, which is the subduing of desire and passion.

The discourses apply this formula to the six internal sense spheres (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, intellect), the six external sense spheres (sights, sounds, aromas, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas), the four physical properties (earth, water, wind, fire), and the cosmos as a whole ([SN 14:31](#), [SN 35:13–14](#); [AN 3:104](#)). It applies a seven-step variant of this formula to the five aggregates, incorporating in its first four steps the pattern of the four noble truths—what the aggregates are, their origination, their cessation, the path of practice leading to their cessation—followed by the three steps of seeing their allure, their drawbacks, and the escape from them in the subduing of desire and passion ([SN 22:57](#)).

However, the Canon also contains two discourses that, put together, apply the five-step formula to the aggregates as well ([SN 22:5](#); [SN 22:26](#)). In fact, these two discourses flesh out the five-step formula in more detail than any of the others.

The five steps fall into two parts. The first two steps focus on the fact of fabrication; the last three, on its value.

In the first two steps, the origination is sometimes identified in a way that follows the explicit wording of the standard version of dependent co-arising, and sometimes not. And it's more interesting when it doesn't. [SN 22:5](#) is a case in point. It says that the aggregate in question originates when you "enjoy, welcome, and remain fastened to" it. It passes away when you don't. This is in line with the teaching that all phenomena are rooted in desire—which, as we noted earlier, implicitly underlies dependent co-arising even though it's not explicitly mentioned in it.

The part of the reflection that focuses on the value of fabrication begins with a step not mentioned in either [AN 9:36](#) or [AN 9:41](#): seeing the allure of what it is that you desire. This step is crucial. Until you see the actual allure of the desired object—what you find attractive about it—you can't really let go of your desire and passion for it, no matter how much you focus on the drawbacks of the fabrication in question. As long as the allure stays buried, you can't identify it clearly and so can't abandon it.

[SN 22:26](#) says simply that the allure lies in whatever pleasure or joy arises in dependence on the fabrication, which doesn't tell us much.

More informative is a list in [DN 22](#) that details all the places where craving arises and settles. Wherever your craving is located, that's where you'll find the allure. It could be focused on:

- the external sense media,
- the internal sense media,
- consciousness at the sense media,
- contact at the sense media,
- feeling born of that contact,
- perception of the external sense media,
- intention for the external sense media,
- craving for the external sense media,
- thought directed at the external sense media,
- evaluation of the external sense media.

For instance, if you crave a person and want to get past that craving, you have to determine whether the allure is in the sight, sound, etc., of that person, in the perceptions you have about that person (or of yourself

in relation to that person, as you build your self image around that relationship), in the things you tell yourself about that person, or in the act of craving itself—as when people are in love with the idea of being in love.

The location of the allure can often be obscured by conflicted emotions around it, which is why determination on truth plays an especially important role in this step of the reflection. The same point applies to seeing the drawbacks: As long as you're protective of your desire and passion for the allure, you'll resist seeing the drawbacks for what they actually are.

However, when you can honestly compare the allure with the drawbacks and see that the fabrication in question is not worth the trouble involved in continuing to fabricate it, that's when you can arrive at an honest value judgment: The allure is worthless. That judgment is what takes direct aim at subduing desire and passion. After all, desire and passion are aroused by the allure. When you can pinpoint the allure and see that it has been lying to you—promising happiness but making you pay a heavy price—it loses its appeal. The more thorough your understanding of the allure and of the drawbacks, the more thorough the dispassion and release that result.

This is where the Buddha's second guide to inducing dispassion comes in. In his second discourse ([SN 22:59](#)), he focuses on three perceptions that, when applied in a thoroughgoing way to the aggregates, can result in full awakening. In terms of the five-step program, these perceptions function on the fourth step: seeing the drawbacks of the aggregates.

We've already encountered these perceptions in [AN 9:36](#): inconstancy, stress, not-self. There we saw that any of them can induce dispassion for the aggregates, but in [SN 22:59](#) the Buddha fleshes them out further in two ways.

First, he shows the interrelationship among them: If something is inconstant, it's inherently stressful, because any happiness based on it is unreliable. If it's inconstant and stressful, it's not worth claiming as you or yours. In other words, you have to perceive it as not-self.

Here the Buddha is asking his listeners to engage in some verbal fabrication to arrive at a value judgment: The aggregates—and all other fabrications—don't measure up to the standards set by the question that

lies at the base of discernment: “What when I do it will lead to my long-term well-being and happiness?” If something is inconstant, it doesn’t qualify as long-term. If it’s stressful, it doesn’t qualify as well-being and happiness. And if something isn’t long-term happiness, it’s not worth claiming as “me” or “mine.” In more basic terms, whatever the allure of those fabrications, it’s outweighed by their drawbacks. Whatever effort goes into fabricating those fabrications is simply not worth it.

This value judgment, of course, can be effective only if you’re convinced that a higher happiness is possible if you let go of what you’re attached to. This is why this reflection carries weight only in the context of the four noble truths: Either you’ve already had a glimpse of that higher happiness in your first glimpse of the deathless—this was the case of the Buddha’s listeners in [SN 22:59](#)—or you firmly believe in the reality of the third noble truth: that dispassion constitutes the end of suffering.

Applying the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self to the fabrications you’re experiencing in the here and now is enough to induce dispassion for those fabrications, but the mind might be able to imagine satisfaction in better fabrications at some other time or place. That would keep its dispassion from being complete.

Which is why the Buddha doesn’t stop there. He goes on to have his listeners reflect that all the aggregates—“past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near”—should be seen as: “This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.” This reflection covers every option in time and space. If you truly follow it, it leaves only one possibility open: dropping the parameters of time and space entirely.

That’s when desire and passion are totally subdued, and that’s the total escape. The mind is totally released.

35. Relinquishing the Path

The Canon stresses again and again that to put an end to suffering and stress, desire and passion have to be brought to an end in a thoroughgoing way. This may be why, when the Buddha introduced his son to the path, he used the image of a mirror: You have to reflect and examine your mind thoroughly to make sure there's no trace of blemish ([MN 61](#)).

For instance, we've just seen that the Buddha recommended reflecting not only on present fabrications in the here and now, but also on all fabrications past, present, and future, near and far. And in our discussions of concentration, we've noted frequently that you have to reflect on the drawbacks of concentration, after having mastered it if you want to gain total freedom.

However, this reflection has to apply not only to right concentration, but also to all other aspects of the triple training and the noble eightfold path as well.

This fact is shown by the final use of the Buddha's five-step program: to induce dispassion for the five faculties, which are an expanded expression of the triple training. The five faculties are conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. The faculty of conviction is developed through the training in heightened virtue; the faculties of persistence, mindfulness, and concentration through the training in the heightened mind; and the faculty of discernment through the training in heightened discernment. [SN 48:3](#) states that when you investigate these five faculties using all five steps of the program—discerning their origination, their passing away, their allure, their drawbacks, and the escape from them—you arrive at the first level of awakening: stream-entry. [SN 48:4](#) states that when your mind is released from all clinging—all desire and passion—on discerning these five aspects of the faculties, you attain full awakening.

We've discussed many examples of how to subdue desire and passion for right concentration. Here, to round out the picture, we can cite two examples of how to subdue desire and passion for right effort and right view.

Both examples are conversations. In the conversation concerning *right effort*, a devatā comes to the Buddha and asks him how he crossed over the flood—in other words, how he crossed over the flood of becoming and ignorance to get to the deathless on the other side.

Then a certain devatā, in the far extreme of the night, her extreme radiance lighting up the entirety of Jeta's Grove, went to the Blessed One. On arrival, having bowed down to him, she stood to one side. As she was standing there, she said to him, "Tell me, dear sir, how you crossed over the flood."

"I crossed over the flood without pushing forward, without staying in place."

"But how, dear sir, did you cross over the flood without pushing forward, without staying in place?"

"When I pushed forward, I was whirled about. When I stayed in place, I sank. And so I crossed over the flood without pushing forward, without staying in place."

The devatā:

"At long last I see
a brahman, totally unbound,
who without pushing forward,
 without staying in place,
has crossed over
 the entanglements
 of the world." — [*SN 1:1*](#)

The conversation ends there, with the Buddha not really answering the devatā's question of *how* he neither pushed forward nor stayed in place. He only tells her *why*. Perhaps he sensed that the devatā wouldn't have understood; perhaps he knew she—along with all other meditators—would have to explore the issue herself. But we

can gain a sense of what he's talking about by referring to other passages in the Canon.

As we've noted, all phenomena are rooted in desire. The definition of the four noble truths takes this general statement and makes it more specific. Each process of becoming, both on the small scale and on the large, coalesces around a nucleus of desire, the act of craving that relishes "now here, now there" ([SN 56:11](#)). In fact, this act of craving is what creates the "here" and "there," both for the world of becoming and for your identity within it.

As you develop the path, a sense of location is necessary for centering the mind and developing all the other skillful qualities of the path around that center, so on this level of right effort there is a need for a "here" and a "there." For instance, as [AN 9:41](#) shows, there are times when you want the mind to stay *here* in concentration, and not go *there* into afflictive distractions; there are other times when you want it to go from this state of concentration here to that better state of concentration there. The allure of right effort in cases like this is that it enables you to get the mind to go where you want it to, in line with the determination to keep training for calm.

But when the path has been fully developed, there's no longer any need for that sense of location. You see it as a disturbance, and your determination on calm allows you to see the drawbacks of right effort in that it keeps you stuck in the here and there of space and time.

This determination leads to one last manifestation of desire and effort prior to awakening, as—in the words of [AN 9:36](#)—you *turn your mind away* from the aggregates you've been creating through right effort in the practice of jhāna, and you *incline it* to the property of deathlessness:

“This is peace, this is exquisite—the pacification of all fabrications; the relinquishment of all acquisitions; the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; unbinding.”

If the dispassion at this point is total, it subdues desire and passion for all phenomena, all desires and determinations, skillful or

unskillful, even the sense of “here” and “there” within the mind. As was the case in the Buddha’s questionnaire in [SN 22:59](#), you drop the parameters of space entirely. With no here and there, there’s no need to choose between staying in place here and pushing forward to there. In fact, there’s nothing to do—nothing the mind *can* do—so there’s no fabrication, even the fabrication of the intention not to fabricate. When even these basic orientations in the world can be abandoned, right effort loses its orientation, and the mind is freed from the worlds of becoming entirely.

As [Ud 8:1](#) states, in the dimension of unbinding there is neither coming nor going, and that’s because, as [Ud 8:4](#) adds, that dimension has neither a here nor a there nor a between-the-two from which you could come or to which you could go. The total subduing of desire and passion for right effort, in abandoning all sense of here and there, is directly connected to that dimension.

As for seeing the allure, drawbacks, and escape from *right view*: One of the distinctive features of right view is that it contains the seeds for its own transcendence. That’s because it gives you insight into the fact of fabrication and also the value of fabrication. After it has helped you to see the allure, drawbacks, and escape from wrong views and all other forms of fabrication, if your reflective gaze is all around and you’re truly training for calm, you can’t help but notice that right view itself is an instance of fabrication, so it must have the same drawbacks as well. You see that its allure lies in the fact that it has freed you from many fetters, but its drawbacks lie in that, as a fabrication, it can’t, in itself, provide you with total calm. If you hold to it, you’re clinging to inconstancy and stress. This realization allows you to find the escape in subduing desire and passion for right view.

We’ve already seen this dynamic at work in the case of the teaching, “All phenomena are not-self” ([MN 35](#); [Dhp 277–279](#)). A more extended example comes from a conversation between Anāthapiṇḍika, one of the Buddha’s lay students, and a group of wanderers. The conversation begins with the wanderers’ asking Anāthapiṇḍika to tell them the Buddha’s views. He, even though he has had his first glimpse of awakening, responds that he doesn’t

know the entirety of the Buddha's views, nor of the views of the Buddha's fully awakened disciples.

The wanderers sneer at his response and ask him his own views. He replies that he'd be happy to tell them his views, but first he'd like to hear theirs.

They reply with the standard hot issues of the day: whether the world is eternal or not, infinite or not; whether the soul is the same as the body or something separate; whether a fully awakened being, after death, could be described as existing, not existing, both, or neither.

When this had been said, Anāthapiṇḍika the householder said to the wanderers, "As for the venerable one who says, '*The cosmos is eternal. Only this is true; anything otherwise is worthless.* This is the sort of view I have,' his view arises from his own inappropriate attention or in dependence on the words of another. Now, this view has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen. Whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen: That is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stressful. This venerable one thus adheres to that very stress, submits himself to that very stress." [Similarly for the nine other view-standpoints expounded by the wanderers.]

When this had been said, the wanderers said to Anāthapiṇḍika the householder, "We have each & every one expounded to you in line with our own view-standpoints. Now tell us what views you have."

"Whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen: That is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stressful. Whatever is stressful is not me, is not what I am, is not my self. This is the sort of view I have."

"So, householder, whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen: That is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stressful. You thus adhere to that very stress, submit yourself to that very stress."

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

When this was said, the wanderers fell silent, abashed, sitting with their shoulders drooping, their heads down, brooding, at a loss for words. — [AN 10:93](#)

Right view allows Anāthapiṇḍika to see the escape from right view because it regards all views, not so much in terms of their content, but in terms of their fabricated nature: They’re brought into being, willed, and dependently co-arisen. When you focus on the fact of their fabrication, you get a clear view of their value.

In the case of wrong views, you see that they’re not worth the effort. The worst among them can induce you to do many unskillful things that lead to miserable destinations. Even the best among them, if you cling to them, entail stress.

But if your training in commitment and reflection is really all-around, you can’t help but turn the analysis onto the fabricated nature of right view itself. You see that the value of right view is that it frees you from the suffering inherent in wrong views. The pleasure that comes with that freedom is its allure. Its drawback, though, is the same as that of right effort and right concentration: It’s fabricated, like all other views. The fact that, ultimately, right view points you to this value judgment is what makes it right. It directs you to the escape from itself: Seeing that it’s not worth claiming as you or yours, it induces you to subdue desire and passion for it and for everything else so that you can gain all-around release.

36. Levels of Awakening

As we've noted, the triple training in heightened virtue, heightened mind (concentration), and heightened discernment lists the factors of the path in the order in which they're mastered. Mastery occurs on the different levels of awakening.

Before we look at the differences among these levels, it's good to look at what they have in common. All awakening experiences center on an experience of the unfabricated: deathless, unbinding ([Mv 1.23.5](#); [MN 1](#); [MN 48](#)), outside of space and time. All are attained by bringing the four determinations for discernment, truth, relinquishment, and calm to bear on the committed practice of the five faculties, and then on the reflection that follows the Buddha's five-step program of seeing the origination, the passing away, the allure, the drawbacks, and the escape from those same faculties ([SN 48:3–4](#)).

Where they differ is in the quality of each individual meditator's powers of reflection on having the experience of the deathless. This is why the Buddha stressed the need for reflection from the very beginning of the path. The more practice you gain in reflection, the more likely you'll be to reflect skillfully, in an all-around way, on the experience of the deathless when it occurs. As [AN 9:36](#) notes, if you don't detect the passion and delight you feel for the deathless or for the discernment that provided the opening to that dimension, your awakening won't be total. Only if, on reflection, you can abandon that passion, too, will your awakening—and your release—be complete.

The discourses illustrate this point with a simile: Those who don't attain full awakening on experiencing the deathless are like a person who stands by a well and sees that there's water in the well, but hasn't plunged into it. This is why they are said to have gained the Dhamma eye. Those who reach full awakening are like a person who has taken the plunge ([SN 12:68](#); [Sn 2:1](#)).

What the Dhamma eye sees is often expressed as the realization, “Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation” ([SN 56:11](#)). This insight into causality occurs naturally and justifiably only to a mind that has seen what isn’t subject to origination and is not subject to cessation.

The Canon, in its standard discussion of the levels of awakening, lists four, distinguishing them in terms of the fetters that are cut at each level and in terms of their long-term consequences: the personal qualities of those who have attained each level, and the number of rebirths remaining to them.

[MN 118](#) lists those who have achieved these four levels in descending order, starting with the fully awakened students of the Buddha, called arahants, who have cut through ten fetters and will never be reborn again.

“In this Saṅgha of monks there are monks who are arahants, whose effluents are ended, who have reached fulfillment, done the task, laid down the burden, attained the true goal, laid to waste the fetter of becoming, and who are released through right gnosis: Such are the monks in this Saṅgha of monks.

“In this Saṅgha of monks there are monks who, with the wasting away of the five lower fetters, are due to arise spontaneously (in the Pure Abodes), there to be totally unbound, destined never again to return from that world: Such are the monks in this Saṅgha of monks.

“In this Saṅgha of monks there are monks who, with the wasting away of (the first) three fetters, and with the attenuation of passion, aversion, & delusion, are once-returners, who—on returning only once more to this world—will put an end to suffering & stress: Such are the monks in this Saṅgha of monks.

“In this Saṅgha of monks there are monks who, with the wasting away of (the first) three fetters, are stream-enterers, certain, never again destined for the lower realms, headed for self-awakening: Such are the monks in this Saṅgha of monks.” — [MN 118](#)

Missing from this description are two important details. One, the fact that stream-enterers, in addition to being freed from rebirth on any level

lower than the human, will be reborn at most seven more times ([AN 3:88](#); [Sn 2:1](#)).

Two, this description doesn't identify which fetters are cut at which level. This information can be gleaned from the list of fetters in [AN 10:13](#):

“There are these ten fetters. Which ten? Five lower fetters & five higher fetters. And which are the five lower fetters? Self-identification views, doubt, grasping at habits & practices, sensual desire, & ill will. These are the five lower fetters. And which are the five higher fetters? Passion for form, passion for what is formless, conceit, restlessness, & ignorance. These are the five higher fetters. And these are the ten fetters.”

Thus, stream-enterers have cut through the fetters of self-identification views, doubt, and grasping at habits & practices. These can be explained as follows:

- The fetter of self-identification views would be any view that identifies one's self—“what I am”—

as being *identical* to any of the five aggregates,
as the *owner* of any of the five aggregates,
as *in* any of the five aggregates, or
as *containing* any of the five aggregates within it ([SN 22:1](#)).

Because the aggregates don't exist in the experience of the deathless, even though there is a consciousness that does not partake of any of the six senses ([MN 49](#)), stream-enterers see no reason to identify themselves as “I am this” in connection with any of the aggregates.

[SN 22:89](#) points out that when the fetter of self-identification views has been cut, one no longer believes “I am this” in any way connected to the aggregates, but as long as one still hasn't cut the higher fetter of conceit, there is still a lingering sense of “I am” around those aggregates. It illustrates this point with a simile: When you've washed a cloth in a cleaning agent, it's clean and spotless, but it still has a lingering scent of the cleaning agent around it.

- The fetter of doubt is doubt in the fact that the Buddha is awakened, the Dhamma is well-taught, or that the Saṅgha of the Buddha's noble disciples has practiced well. Stream-enterers, in seeing the deathless and

realizing that it was attained through the path taught by the Buddha, have verified confidence that these things are, in fact, true.

- The fetter of grasping at habits & practices can be explained in two ways: (1) any sense that awakening can be attained simply through following rules; and (2) any sense of identity built around one's habits and practices. [MN 78](#) notes that those who have gone beyond this fetter are virtuous but not “made of virtue.” In other words, they don't build any sense of conceit around their virtue, exalting themselves or disparaging others. As [SN 55:26](#) notes:

“[T]he disciple of the noble ones is endowed with virtues that are appealing to the noble ones: untorn, unbroken, unspotted, unsplattered, liberating, praised by the observant, ungrasped at, leading to concentration.”

What the noble ones find appealing in these virtues is that the precepts that are the rudiments of the holy life—against killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, and taking intoxicants—are never intentionally broken, but at the same time are not grasped at: Stream-enterers observe them, not because of pride, but from having seen that their own unskillful actions were what prevented any previous experience of the deathless, so they wouldn't want to delay their further awakening by behaving in unskillful ways ever again.

Those are the fetters that stream-enterers have cut. As [AN 3:87](#) notes, such people are fully accomplished in virtue, but only moderately accomplished in concentration and discernment. [SN 55:5](#) adds that the stream itself is equal to the noble eightfold path, which includes the factors covering discernment and concentration along with those covering virtue. This means that stream-enterers have had some experience of jhāna and in seeing things in terms of right view, simply that they haven't mastered these factors.

As the Canon notes in many places, it's when you become a stream-enterer that you are now in training. Having gained the perspective that comes from experiencing the deathless, your sense of which pleasures are worth the effort and which ones are not worth the effort is informed by that experience. You may not yet be consummate in the discernment that

comes from full mastery of the skills appropriate to the four noble truths, but you are consummate in view.

The fourth fetter is sensual passion. This, as we've noted before, would be any passion for sensual fantasies and plans.

The fifth fetter is ill will. Because ill will comes from thwarted sensuality, these two fetters are cut together.

These are the two extra fetters cut by non-returners. As [AN 3:87](#) notes, such people are fully accomplished in virtue, fully accomplished in concentration, and moderately accomplished in discernment.

The sixth fetter is passion for form: the pleasures of the four jhānas.

The seventh fetter is passion for what is formless: the subtle pleasure of the equanimity in the formless states of concentration.

The eighth fetter is conceit, the lingering sense of “I am.” The Canon notes that those who have abandoned this fetter may still use the words “I” and “mine” in their conversation, but they don't make any assumptions based on those words ([SN 1:25](#)).

The ninth fetter is restlessness—any “stirring up” of the mind—and the tenth is ignorance. As we've already noted, the word ignorance—*avijjā*—can also mean lack of skill. Ignorance on this level is ended when you've mastered all the skills required by the duties of the four noble truths.

These are the five higher fetters abandoned on the attainment of arahantship. They are extremely subtle, a point well-illustrated by the following exchange:

Then Ven. Anuruddha went to Ven. Sāriputta and, on arrival, exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he said to Ven. Sāriputta, “Here, by means of the divine eye, purified & surpassing the human, I see the thousand-fold cosmos. And my persistence is aroused & unsluggish. My mindfulness is established & unmuddled. My body is calm & unaroused. My mind is concentrated & gathered into singleness. And yet my mind is not released from the effluents through lack of clinging/sustenance.”

Ven. Sāriputta: “My friend, when the thought occurs to you, ‘By means of the divine eye, purified & surpassing the human, I see the thousand-fold cosmos,’ that is related to your conceit. When the

thought occurs to you, ‘My persistence is aroused & unsluggish. My mindfulness is established & unmuddled. My body is calm & unaroused. My mind is concentrated & gathered into singleness,’ that is related to your restlessness. When the thought occurs to you, ‘And yet my mind is not released from the effluents through lack of clinging/sustenance,’ that is related to your anxiety. It would be well if—abandoning these three qualities, not attending to these three qualities—you directed your mind to the deathless property.” – [AN 3:131](#)

As [MN 118](#) notes, arahants have cut the fetter of becoming. As you may remember from the introductory explanation of the four noble truths, there are three levels of becoming: on the level of sensuality, form, and formlessness. Similarly, three of the ten fetters are types of passion corresponding to the same three levels: Sensual passion is cut on the level of non-return; passion for form and for formlessness, on the level of arahantship. That covers all possible forms of passion that could lead to further becoming. That’s why, when arahants have cut these three fetters, there’s no possibility for them ever to be reborn again.

Such people are said to be *asekha*, beyond training. As far as the ending of suffering and stress is concerned, the Buddha has nothing more to teach them. At the same time, they have no more need for conviction in the Buddha’s awakening or in the path leading there, because—having followed that path with commitment and reflection—they’ve gained direct knowledge of the deathless for themselves.

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Sāvatthī at the Eastern Gatehouse. There he addressed Ven.

Sāriputta: “Sāriputta, do you take it on conviction that the faculty of conviction, when developed & pursued, gains a footing in the deathless, has the deathless as its final end & consummation? Do you take it on conviction that the faculty of persistence... mindfulness... concentration... discernment, when developed & pursued, gains a footing in the deathless, has the deathless as its final end & consummation?”

“Lord, it’s not that I take it on conviction in the Blessed One that the faculty of conviction... persistence... mindfulness... concentration...

discernment, when developed & pursued, gains a footing in the deathless, has the deathless as its final end & consummation.... I have known, seen, penetrated, realized, & attained it by means of discernment. I have no doubt or uncertainty that the faculty of conviction... persistence... mindfulness... concentration... discernment, when developed & pursued, gains a footing in the deathless, has the deathless as its final end & consummation.” – [SN 48:44](#)

Totally free of passion, arahants dwell with unrestricted awareness ([AN 10:81](#)). After their awakening, they return to the six senses, but with a sense of being disjoined from them ([MN 140](#)). They experience the results of old kamma, they practice mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, but again, the objects of their awareness make no inroads on the mind ([MN 107](#); [SN 22:122](#); [SN 47:4](#)). That’s because, being free from passion, they no longer take these things in by trying to feed on them.

The Canon illustrates this point with a vivid simile:

Ven. Nandaka: “Just as if a dexterous butcher or butcher’s apprentice, having killed a cow, were to carve it up with a sharp carving knife so that—without damaging the substance of the inner flesh, without damaging the substance of the outer hide—he would cut, sever, & detach only the skin muscles, connective tissues, & attachments in between. Having cut, severed, & detached the outer skin, and then covering the cow again with that very skin, if he were to say that the cow was joined to the skin just as it had been: Would he be speaking rightly?”

A group of nuns: “No, venerable sir. Why is that? Because if the dexterous butcher or butcher’s apprentice, having killed a cow, were to... cut, sever, & detach only the skin muscles, connective tissues, & attachments in between; and... having covered the cow again with that very skin, then no matter how much he might say that the cow was joined to the skin just as it had been, the cow would still be disjoined from the skin.”

Ven. Nandaka: “This simile, sisters, I have given to convey a message. The message is this: The substance of the inner flesh stands for the six internal media; the substance of the outer hide, for the

six external media. The skin muscles, connective tissues, & attachments in between stand for passion & delight. And the sharp knife stands for noble discernment—the noble discernment that cuts, severs, & detaches the defilements, fetters, & bonds in between.’ — [MN 146](#)

Arahants still have intentions and engage in purposeful actions, but because their actions are done without greed, aversion, or delusion, they bear no karmic fruit. The Buddha illustrates this point with the simile of a good seed that has been destroyed:

“Just as when seeds are not broken, not rotten, not damaged by wind & heat, capable of sprouting, well-buried, planted in well-prepared soil, and a man would burn them with fire and, burning them with fire, would make them into fine ashes. Having made them into fine ashes, he would winnow them before a high wind or wash them away in a swift-flowing stream. Those seeds would thus be destroyed at the root, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising.

“In the same way, any action performed with non-greed—born of non-greed, caused by non-greed, originating from non-greed: When greed is gone, that action is thus abandoned, its root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising.

“Any action performed with non-aversion...

“Any action performed with non-delusion—born of non-delusion, caused by non-delusion, originating from non-delusion: When delusion is gone, that action is thus abandoned, its root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising.” — [AN 3:34](#)

Arahants will experience death simply as “all this will grow cold right here”—“all,” here, standing for the six sense media ([SN 35:23](#); [Iti 49](#)). Because the consciousness of awakening is not known through the six senses ([MN 49](#)), that consciousness will not be affected when the six senses grow cold. In the present life, arahants can’t be pinned down as to what they are, and after death they can’t be described as existing, not existing, both, neither, or in any other way ([SN 22:85–86](#)). Because they

are free of the desires and passions that define people as beings, they are undefined and immeasurable, “like the great ocean” ([MN 72](#)).

37. To Summarize

We noted at the beginning of this book that when Ven. Sāriputta introduced the Buddha's teachings as the subduing of desire and passion, he was making five implicit assertions:

1) *The mind is not simply on the receiving end of experiences.* It can influence events both inside and out. In fact, it's the primary source of your experiences. If this were not the case, very little would be accomplished by subduing mental acts of desire and passion. There would have been no reason for the Buddha to focus his teachings on this or any other mental action. But because the mind is the primary agent shaping experience, and because desire is the root of all its actions, this is the right place to start.

2) *The mind has the power of choice and can change directions quickly.* Its experience of the present moment is not totally determined by forces coming from outside or from its own past. If it didn't have the power to change its ways and choose to subdue desire and passion here and now, again, there would have been no reason for the Buddha to teach.

3) *The Buddha's teaching is essentially a how-to teaching:* one that gives instructions, not only on what to believe, but also, and more importantly, on what to *do* so as to enjoy the rewards of subduing desire and passion.

4) *That how-to teaching is based on a value judgment:* Your actions should be judged by their results, and the best actions are those that release you from the fetter of desire and passion, and from suffering as a whole.

5) *There is a paradoxical element in the teachings* in that the Buddha had to rouse in his listeners the desire and passion to want to subdue desire and passion. In this way, he had to be operating strategically, or else he'd be trapped in an inconsistency.

We also noted that, in making these implicit assertions, Sāriputta was raising a number of questions, so as to guide his listeners in their further inquiry into the practice of the Buddha's teachings. The purpose of this book has been to provide some extended answers to those questions. By way of summary, though, here are some short answers.

1) The first question, based on the assumption that the mind plays a creative role in shaping its experience: In what way does it create suffering and how do its workings allow it to stop doing that?

Suffering isn't something the mind simply receives. It's something it does. The suffering itself is the act of feeding, through desire and passion, on the aggregates. It wants a happiness out of the aggregates that the aggregates can provide only in small measure, not enough to give any real satisfaction.

But the fault doesn't lie with the aggregates. The fault lies with the desire and passion. Those are the things that need to be abandoned.

That's because the mind doesn't experience the aggregates ready-made. Through its desires and passions, it plays a role in shaping the aggregates. The three types of fabrication in the present moment—bodily, verbal, and mental—take the potentials for the aggregates resulting from past actions and turn them into actual fabricated aggregates. They do this for the sake of a purpose rooted in desire. In effect, the mind is fixing its own food, but because the desires and passions that provided the raw ingredients and those that drive the fabrications that fix food from those ingredients are inconstant and stressful, the resulting food is inconstant and stressful as well.

This means that the present moment isn't composed of static facts. It's composed of purposeful actions, driven by an aim for results. It's done *for the sake of* having aggregates to experience, and those aggregates are done *for the sake of* happiness. All of these actions are based on desire coming from a value judgment: that the happiness resulting from the act of fabricating aggregates is worth the effort that goes into it.

Because each moment is created for the sake of results, the mind's relationship to every moment contains two assumptions: One, the mind is able to choose its actions, to at least some extent, to get the results it wants; and, two, it's luminous enough that it can observe its actions so as

to judge whether those actions got the desired results, or if something should be changed.

Suffering comes when our powers of observation—and the resulting value judgments—are distorted by ignorance. It's because of this ignorance that even though experience is shaped by intentions, it doesn't necessarily turn out the way those intentions intended it to be.

Ignorance means both a lack of knowledge and a lack of skill. In terms of knowledge, we may be blinded by our desires and passions so that we can't see the connections between our actions and their results. We want the actions we like to yield results we like, and we refuse to admit when those actions actually cause harm. We either deny the harm or deny that it was connected to our actions in any way at all. As a result, we often end up denying responsibility for the harm we've caused. This type of ignorance comes from a failure—sometimes willful, sometimes not—in our powers of observation.

In terms of skill, our ignorance comes from limitations in our skill set: We know only a small range of actions, and can't imagine other ways of acting or the results they could yield. So we've limited ourselves to choices that all turn out unsatisfactorily. This type of ignorance comes from a failure in imagination in exploring our powers of choice.

From the Buddha's point of view, the most serious form of ignorance comes from a failure both in observation and in skill: We're ignorant of the fact that there is a path of action that can lead to a deathless happiness, one that provides complete satisfaction. So we keep trying to satisfy ourselves with the lesser pleasures provided by the aggregates, putting up with whatever failures—moral or cognitive—they entail. We're blind to the fact that there's something infinitely better.

What needs to be done is to have conviction, as a working hypothesis, in the possibility of a path to a deathless happiness. Based on that hypothesis, we can learn to exercise our powers of choice, observation, and judgment so as to get on that path and follow it to the end.

2) How can the mind learn to change its ways and head in the right direction?

Simply trying to stop desire and passion won't work, and you can't just wish your desires and passions away. You need to take on a course of

training, pitting the overarching desire for awakening against all the various desires that would get in the way. This overarching desire takes four forms: the determinations on discernment, truth, relinquishment, and calm. You're determined to discern which actions actually lead to long-term happiness, you're truthful in admitting your own mistakes, and you relinquish whatever desires and passions get in the way of the calm that can come only with total freedom.

These determinations, in turn, are motivated by the thoughts and perceptions—the verbal and mental fabrications—motivated by the view that the subduing of those contrary desires and passions will lead to freedom from all things that limit and constrain the mind. This is why the Buddha frequently associated passion with being fettered, and dispassion with being unfettered: He wanted his listeners to make the same association and to act on it.

This battle between skillful and unskillful desires will be won through discernment, as it learns to detect the *fact* of fabrication and can arrive at a true judgment of the *value* of fabrication. But, on its own, discernment of general principles won't be enough to win the battle. Desire and passion are not monolithic, nor do they function in the abstract. Your discernment will have to become pragmatic and strategic in order to deal with specific desires and passions that have many different strategies of their own. To do this, it'll have to be helped by a complete training of your thoughts, words, and deeds.

3) What kind of training does the Buddha propose? Also, given that his teaching will have to involve a training, how does that influence not only what he taught, but also how he taught it, why he taught, who he would teach, and what kind of people he wanted to train them to be?

The Buddha proposes a course of training that develops

—your powers of truth and choice as you *commit* to a path of practice aimed at the subduing of desire and passion, and

—your powers of honest observation, based on the luminosity of the mind, as you *reflect* on the results of that commitment, to see where it could be improved to be more in line with that overarching aim.

This training starts with instructions from others, which is the first reason that the Buddha asked for honesty and conviction in those he was

going to train. If you don't have conviction in those who are training you, and are not honest in reporting what's going on in your mind, the student-teacher relationship won't work.

Over time, the training evolves into self-training, as you educate yourself: another reason why the Buddha asked for conviction and honesty, plus good powers of self-observation. To learn from your own actions, you have to be honest with yourself about what you're doing and about the results that come from what you're doing and have done.

To embark on this self-training, you need to develop a healthy sense of self that manifests in three functions: a sense of yourself as an agent capable of committing to the training, a sense of yourself as the enjoyer who will benefit from the training, and a sense of yourself as the inner commentator who can reflect on how well the training is going and can offer suggestions on how to keep it on course.

Eventually, the training will require that you put aside all sense of self, but only after you have mastered these three functions and they have done all the work that needs to be done to develop the path.

The training itself covers three skills: training in heightened virtue, the heightened mind, and heightened discernment. These qualities become heightened as they strengthen one another through continual commitment and repeated reflection.

As you commit to the training in virtue, you overcome the gross unskillful desires that would cause you to harm yourself or others. As you reflect on what you learn as you do battle with the desires that run counter to your precepts—sometimes winning, sometimes losing—you become more sensitive to the intentions behind your actions. This sensitivity will help your concentration and discernment in forcing you to be scrupulously honest and truthful with yourself.

In particular, virtue makes you sensitive to the mental qualities you bring to each action, and to the fact that events in the mind prior to outward actions—such as perception and intention—actually play a crucial role in shaping your experience. You see the fact of fabrication more clearly. And you realize that it's only through honesty that your powers of observation can actually yield good results.

When you commit to the training in the heightened mind, the process of developing concentration helps your discernment in that it brings the

mind to a state of calm where it can see subtle events within it more clearly, with a minimum of background mental noise. As you reflect on how you get the mind into concentration and keep it there, you become sensitized to the workings of the mind, both as you see how it falls under the influence of the hindrances and as you learn to overcome those hindrances and successfully fashion states of concentration out of the three types of fabrication.

Discernment becomes heightened as you commit to the triple training (or, in its expanded form, to the five faculties) by bringing the four determinations to that commitment, and then again as you bring those determinations to the five-step program of reflection that takes direct aim at subduing desire and passion. You begin by applying this program to the desires and passions that go against the training. Ultimately, you apply it to the desires and passions underlying the training itself. In this way, the training takes you beyond itself to the freedom of a dispassion that's truly thorough and all-around.

That's *what* the Buddha taught. As for *how* he taught: Because he had to inspire in his listeners the desire to take on the training, he didn't limit his teachings to providing information. In addition to instructing his listeners, he also urged, roused, and encouraged them. Examples we've seen of his urging them include his recommendations to the monks to practice mindfulness immersed in the body as a basis for sense restraint, and to Rāhula to refrain from telling falsehoods even in jest. Examples of rousing his listeners include the similes that compare the good meditator to elephants who can steel themselves in battle and to a warrior who comes out of a battle victorious. Examples of encouraging them include the passages where he talks of the all-too-human difficulties he himself faced and overcame in conquering his fears and finding the right way, the message being that if he could do it, so can you.

The images the Buddha used in this way point to another aspect of how he taught: Just as he was teaching his listeners to replace their unskillful desires with new, more skillful ones, he also gave them examples of how to engage in the three types of fabrication in skillful ways as part of the path. As dependent co-arising shows, these fabrications, if done in ignorance, lead to suffering. But as the Buddha's teaching methods show, if they're done with knowledge, they can lead to suffering's end. They're

the fabrications that can induce dispassion for the causes of suffering that won't go away when you simply watch their comings and goings with equanimity.

His many similes, for instance, are examples of skillful perceptions, or mental fabrications. He gives you many examples of how to use skillful verbal fabrications as you talk to yourself, as when he taught Rāhula to train himself: "I will not tell a deliberate lie even in jest" or when he taught the monks in general how to talk to themselves to generate right effort and to develop qualities like restraint of the senses, contentment, and concentration. He even teaches you how to breathe in a way that's conducive to awakening.

As for *why* he taught: As we come to appreciate the Buddha's course of training, we can see that he wasn't interested in teaching others simply for the sake of gaining their assent, for winning debates, or for exerting power over his listeners. He wanted to train people in how to stop causing themselves to suffer. As he saw it, people were bewildered by their sufferings and were seeking someone who might show them how to put an end to those sufferings ([AN 6:63](#)). He offered them an effective answer to their search. He asked for nothing in return but that they practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, putting his teachings into practice to gain the freedom that comes from disenchantment with fabrications and from total dispassion ([DN 16](#); [SN 12:67](#)). In short, he was motivated by pure compassion.

As for *who* the Buddha would teach, we've already noted the qualities he looked for in a potential student: someone who was honest and observant, willing to act on conviction in what he taught. He would train this person to use these qualities in the direction of becoming virtuous, exercising restraint of the senses, becoming wakeful, and knowing moderation in eating. He also noted that, to be worthy of the Dhamma, you have to be content with few material possessions, modest, reclusive, persistent, mindful, concentrated, and discerning. You also have to learn to delight in non-objectification: freeing the mind from thoughts that lead to conflict. That's the kind of person he would train you to be.

When you become fully awakened, you no longer have any need for conviction, because conviction in the Buddha's awakening has now been replaced by knowledge. As for the other qualities developed on the path,

you're no longer "made" of them—in other words, you no longer need to create a sense of self around them to perfect them—but they're still available for you to use in the work of teaching others and in maintaining a comfortable abiding for the mind until it's totally released at death.

4) What sort of arguments does the Buddha propose on the topic of life after death? And how objective are the standards he uses for judging actions and their results?

The Buddha knew he couldn't prove the fact of rebirth to others, and that they would have to come to know it for themselves through the practice. However, he saw that belief in rebirth was a useful working hypothesis along the way, so he would encourage you to adopt that hypothesis because it would give you good reason to be skillful and heedful in all your actions. Even if it turned out that the teachings on kamma and rebirth were not true, at the very least you would have lived your life in a way that created no hostility and would be praised by the wise.

These reasons, the Buddha knew, would be convincing to people who were willing to step back from their desires and passions so as to judge their results objectively, and who had enough of a healthy sense of honor and shame to care about how wise people would view their actions. However, if you couldn't muster these qualities and accept the Buddha's reasons, you wouldn't be ready for the training anyhow, so he wouldn't be interested in teaching you. Yet if you're weak in these qualities but willing to develop them, then you can make yourself worthy to be his student.

As for the objectivity of his standards, that came from the fact that, in stepping outside of space and time, he had come to a knowledge that wasn't influenced by the conditions that shape knowledge within space and time: the factors of dependent co-arising that come prior to sensory contact, such as perception, intention, and attention. Stepping outside of these conditions and from all influences from the past, he was stepping outside of the ordinary conditions that prevent knowledge from being genuinely objective.

5) Was the Buddha, in encouraging desire along the path, being inconsistent, or was he thinking strategically? And if he was being

strategic, what's the strategy?

In answering the preceding questions, we've shown clearly that the Buddha was being strategic in using desire and passion to overcome desire and passion—and in encouraging his listeners to use desire and passion strategically as well. Examples include the role of skillful forms of clinging in fashioning the path, the role of the four types of determination in motivating and guiding the path, along with the skillful desires of right effort, right resolve, and the bases of power. This strategic use of desire and passion is simply one aspect of the strategic nature of the Buddha's teachings as a whole: His teachings were aimed at a purpose outside of themselves: total freedom. He taught by means of fabrications, and the purpose of those fabrications was to get *you* to engage in fabrications that, when they've done their work, would encourage you to let them go so that you can arrive at the unfabricated.

But there is one aspect of how the Buddha used desire strategically that deserves special notice.

In teaching the subduing of desire and passion, he wasn't teaching his listeners to subdue their desire for unalloyed happiness, or to lower their sights and to content themselves with the pleasures of fabrication as they already knew them. Instead, he taught them to raise their sights. He showed them how to abandon the desires and passions that lead to suffering and to replace them with desires and passions that lead to something beyond what they could fabricate: the deathless, a happiness so totally satisfying and unrestricted that there's no more need for any further desire or passion for anything else ever again.

38. The Gist

Ven. Sāriputta first encountered the Dhamma when he was a wanderer studying under another teacher. One morning he happened to see one of the Buddha's first five arahant disciples, Ven. Assaji, going for alms in the city of Rājagaha. Inspired by Assaji's comportment—"gracious in the way he approached and departed, looked ahead and behind, drew in and stretched out his arm; his eyes downcast, his every movement consummate"—he followed Assaji outside of the city and asked him who his teacher was, and what Dhamma that teacher taught. Assaji replied that he was a student of the Great Contemplative from the Sakyan clan. Modestly, he added that he was still new in that teacher's Dhamma and so couldn't explain it in detail, but he could give the gist.

Sāriputta replied,

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

Assaji then said,

“Whatever phenomena arise from cause:
their cause
 & their cessation.
Such is the teaching of the Tathāgata,
the Great Contemplative.” — [*Mv I.23.5*](#)

Hearing this verse and taking its message inwardly, Sāriputta gained the Dhamma eye. The fact that he could penetrate the gist of the teaching so quickly and effectively was one of the reasons why, after he was ordained under the Buddha and attained full awakening, the Buddha extolled him as foremost among his students in discernment.

Another reason was that, according to the Buddha, Sāriputta was foremost among his students in leading others to gain the Dhamma eye as well ([MN 141](#)).

In light of our discussion so far, it's tempting to ask whether Sāriputta's recommendation for how to introduce the Dhamma to those who have never heard it before—"Our teacher teaches the subduing of desire and passion"—is related to either or both of these other manifestations of his discernment. In other words, when he first heard Assaji say, "Whatever phenomena arise from a cause," did he immediately intuit that desire and passion were the cause? We don't know for sure, but it's an intriguing possibility.

The other possibility is that, as he later taught others the path to stream-entry, he may have found that focusing on the issue of subduing desire and passion was the most effective way of getting his listeners to connect the gist of the Dhamma to their own experience. Three main reasons stand out.

First, the compound "desire-and-passion" (*chanda-rāga*) is accessible. It's used by the Canon to define technical terms in the Buddha's teachings, but it's never defined itself. This means it was considered to be immediately comprehensible, a commonly used expression of the time. The Buddha himself used it to describe the cause of suffering to a layman who had no background in his Dhamma at all ([SN 42:11](#)). So it would have been a term familiar to anybody, one that people could immediately relate to their own experience.

Second, it's rousing. Sāriputta's listeners, knowing their own desires and passions, would be forewarned that the task the Buddha taught—the subduing of desire and passion—would not be an easy one, and that it approached the problem of suffering in a radical way. In challenging his listeners right from the start, Sāriputta was not only instructing them. He was also trying to rouse in them the fighting spirit that he knew the practice of the Dhamma would require.

Third, "desire-and-passion" is comprehensive. As we've come to see, desire and passion lie at the gist of all of the Buddha's main teachings related to right view:

The first noble truth:

- What is suffering? Desire and passion feeding on any of the five aggregates.

The second noble truth:

- What is the cause of suffering? Desire and passion in thirsting for sensuality, becoming, or non-becoming.
- What is the motive force underlying the steps of dependent co-arising that lead to suffering? Desire and passion.

The third noble truth:

- What is the cessation of suffering? The subduing and abandoning of desire and passion.

The fourth noble truth:

- Why practice mindfulness and jhāna? Not for worldly ends, but to aid discernment in subduing desire and passion.
- What is the purpose of applying the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self to the aggregates? To counteract the allure of the aggregates and to abandon any desire and passion for them.

By focusing on the issue of desire and passion, Sāriputta was able to reveal the thread that ties all of the teachings together. Whichever teaching most resonated with a student, Sāriputta was able to clarify it and to show its connections with the rest of the Dhamma by focusing on the role that desire and passion play in understanding it.

At the same time, he showed that the subduing of desire and passion is the gist of these teachings and of the Dhamma as a whole. The word I've translated as "gist" here, *attha*, has other meanings as well: the *meaning* of a word or teaching, and the *goal* or *purpose* of a particular practice. By focusing on the gist, Ven. Sāriputta was able to clarify the meaning of the teachings and to help others train themselves to attain the goal that was the purpose of those teachings to begin with: total freedom and nothing less.

Appendix: Ven. Sāriputta's Answer

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying among the Sakyans at a Sakyan town named Devadaha. Then a large number of monks headed for outlying districts went to the Blessed One and on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As they were sitting there, they said to the Blessed One, “Lord, we want to go to the countryside of the outlying districts and to take up residence there.”

“Have you informed Sāriputta?”

“No, lord, we haven’t informed Ven. Sāriputta.”

“Inform Sāriputta, monks. Sāriputta is wise, a great help to the monks who are his companions in the holy life.”

“As you say, lord,” the monks responded to the Blessed One.

At that time Ven. Sāriputta was sitting under a certain cassia tree not far from the Blessed One. Then the monks, delighting in & approving of the Blessed One’s words, rose from their seats and—bowing down to the Blessed One and circumambulating him, keeping him to their right—went to Ven. Sāriputta. On arrival, they exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, they sat to one side. As they were sitting there, they said to Ven. Sāriputta, “Friend Sāriputta, we want to go to the countryside of the outlying districts and to take up residence there. We have already informed the Teacher.”

“Friends, in foreign lands there are wise nobles & brahmans, householders & contemplatives—for the people there are wise & discriminating—who will question a monk: ‘What is your teacher’s doctrine? What does he teach?’ Have you listened well to the teachings—grasped them well, attended to them well, considered them well, penetrated them well by means of discernment—so that in answering you will speak in line with what the Blessed One has said, will not misrepresent the Blessed One with what is unfactual, will answer in line with the

Dhamma, and no one whose thinking is in line with the Dhamma will have grounds for criticizing you?”

“We would come from a long way away to hear the explication of these words in Ven. Sāriputta’s presence. It would be good if Ven. Sāriputta himself would enlighten us as to their meaning.”

“Then in that case, friends, listen & pay close attention. I will speak.”

“As you say, friend,” the monks responded to him.

Ven. Sāriputta said: “Friends, in foreign lands there are wise nobles & brahmans, householders & contemplatives—for the people there are wise & discriminating—who will question a monk: ‘What is your teacher’s doctrine? What does he teach?’

“Thus asked, you should answer, ‘*Our teacher teaches the subduing of desire & passion.*’

“Having thus been answered, there may be wise noble warriors, wise brahmans, wise householders, & wise contemplatives... who will question you further, ‘And your teacher teaches the subduing of desire & passion for what?’

“Thus asked, you should answer, ‘Our teacher teaches the subduing of desire & passion for form... for feeling... for perception... for fabrications. Our teacher teaches the subduing of desire & passion for consciousness.’

“Having thus been answered, there may be wise noble warriors, wise brahmans, wise householders, & wise contemplatives... who will question you further, ‘And seeing what danger does your teacher teach the subduing of desire & passion for form... for feeling... for perception... for fabrications. Seeing what danger does your teacher teach the subduing of desire & passion for consciousness?’

“Thus asked, you should answer, ‘When one is not free from passion, desire, love, thirst, fever, & craving for form, then from any change & alteration in that form, there arises sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, & despair. When one is not free from passion... for feeling... for perception... for fabrications... When one is not free from passion, desire, love, thirst, fever, & craving for consciousness, then from any change & alteration in that consciousness, there arise sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, & despair. Seeing this danger, our teacher teaches the subduing of desire & passion for form... for feeling... for perception... for fabrications. Seeing this

danger, our teacher teaches the subduing of desire & passion for consciousness.’

“Having thus been answered, there may be wise noble warriors, wise brahmans, wise householders, & wise contemplatives... who will question you further, ‘And seeing what benefit does your teacher teach the subduing of desire & passion for form... for feeling... for perception... for fabrications. Seeing what benefit does your teacher teach the subduing of desire & passion for consciousness?’

“Thus asked, you should answer, ‘When one is free from passion, desire, love, thirst, fever, & craving for form, then with any change & alteration in that form, there does not arise any sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, or despair. When one is free from passion... for feeling... for perception... for fabrications... When one is free from passion, desire, love, thirst, fever, & craving for consciousness, then with any change & alteration in that consciousness, there does not arise any sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, or despair. Seeing this benefit, our teacher teaches the subduing of desire & passion for form... for feeling... for perception... for fabrications. Seeing this benefit, our teacher teaches the subduing of desire & passion for consciousness.’

“Friends, if one who entered & remained in unskillful mental qualities were to have a pleasant abiding in the here & now—unthreatened, undespairing, unfeverish—and on the break-up of the body, after death, could expect a good destination, then the Blessed One would not advocate the abandoning of unskillful mental qualities. But because one who enters & remains in unskillful mental qualities has a stressful abiding in the here & now—threatened, despairing, & feverish—and on the break-up of the body, after death, can expect a bad destination, that is why the Blessed One advocates the abandoning of unskillful mental qualities.

“If one who entered & remained in skillful mental qualities were to have a stressful abiding in the here & now—threatened, despairing, & feverish—and on the break-up of the body, after death, could expect a bad destination, then the Blessed One would not advocate entering into skillful mental qualities. But because one who enters & remains in skillful mental qualities has a pleasant abiding in the here & now—unthreatened, undespairing, unfeverish—and on the break-up of the body, after death,

can expect a good destination, that is why the Blessed One advocates entering into skillful mental qualities.”

That is what Ven. Sāriputta said. Gratified, the monks delighted in Ven. Sāriputta’s words. — [SN 22:2](#)

Glossary

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

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

Bodhisatta: “A being (striving) for awakening”: a term used to describe the Buddha before he actually became Buddha, from his first aspiration to Buddhahood until the time of his full awakening. Sanskrit form: *Bodhisattva*.

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

Deva (devatā): Literally, “shining one.” An inhabitant of the terrestrial or heavenly realms higher than the human.

Dhamma: (1) Event; action; (2) a phenomenon in and of itself; (3) mental quality; (4) doctrine, teaching; (5) *nibbāna* (although some passages in the Canon, such as [AN 10:58](#) and [Sn 5:6](#), describe *nibbāna* as the abandoning or ending of all dhammas). Sanskrit form: *Dharma*.

Jhāna: Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration focused on a single sensation or mental notion. This term is derived from the verb *jhāyati*, which means to burn with a still, steady flame.

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

Māra: The personification of temptation and mortality.

Nibbāna: Literally, the “unbinding” of the mind from passion, aversion, and delusion, and from the entire round of death and rebirth. As this term also denotes the extinguishing of a fire, it carries connotations of stilling, cooling, and peace. Sanskrit form: *Nirvāṇa*.

Pali: The name of the earliest extant collection of the Buddha’s teachings and, by extension, of the language in which it was recorded.

Sakya: The Buddha’s family name.

Samaṇa: Contemplative.

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

Sutta: Discourse. Sanskrit form: *Sūtra*.

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

Vinaya: The monastic discipline.

Abbreviations

<i>AN</i>	<i>Aṅguttara Nikāya</i>
<i>Dhp</i>	<i>Dhammapada</i>
<i>DN</i>	<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>
<i>Iti</i>	<i>Itivuttaka</i>
<i>Khp</i>	<i>Khuddakapāṭha</i>
<i>MN</i>	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>
<i>Mv</i>	<i>Mahāvagga</i>
<i>Pr</i>	<i>Pārājika</i>
<i>SN</i>	<i>Saṃyutta Nikāya</i>
<i>Sn</i>	<i>Sutta Nipāta</i>
<i>Thag</i>	<i>Theragāthā</i>
<i>Ud</i>	<i>Udāna</i>

References to DN, Iti, Khp, and MN are to discourse (sutta). Those to Dhp are to verse. The references to Mv are to chapter, section, and sub-section. The reference to Pr is to rule number. References to other texts are to section (saṃyutta, nipāta, or vagga) and discourse.

All translations are based on the printed version of the Royal Thai Edition of the Pali Canon (Bangkok: Mahāmakut Rājavidyālaya, 1982).

In the prose passages translated from the Pali where no speaker is identified, the words in quotation marks are the Buddha's.

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Thānissaro Bhikkhu

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1. Ven. Sāriputta's Answer

There's a dialog in the discourses of the Pali Canon—our oldest extant record of the Dhamma, the Buddha's teachings—in which a group of monks are planning to go to a remote foreign part of India where the Dhamma is still unknown ([SN 22:2](#)). They take their leave of the Buddha, and he tells them to take leave also of Ven. Sāriputta, his foremost disciple in terms of wisdom and discernment.

When they go to Sāriputta, he comments that there are wise people in foreign lands who will ask them, “What does your teacher teach?” He then asks them how they'll respond in a way that doesn't misrepresent the teaching.

The monks reply that they would travel a long distance to hear how Sāriputta himself would answer that question.

He starts with an interesting point of departure. Instead of mentioning the teachings for which the Buddha has long become famous—such as emptiness, nirvāṇa, or the four noble truths—he says, “Our teacher teaches the subduing of desire and passion.”

He then predicts that the wise people in foreign lands may ask, “And your teacher teaches the subduing of desire and passion for what?”

In other words, unlike most people at present, who—on hearing that the Buddha teaches the subduing of desire and passion—would switch to another channel or a more welcoming app, the wise people of the past would be intrigued and want to learn more.

The purpose of this book is to explore the implications of this dialog: Why would Sāriputta begin his explanation of the Dhamma for intelligent newcomers with “the subduing of desire and passion”? What are the implications of beginning at that point, and what insights can be gained into the Dhamma by viewing it from that angle? And given that, in the context of Buddhist history, we in the West are people in a land even more

foreign than a remote part of India, how might we benefit by approaching the Dhamma from the angle Sāriputta recommended?

Sāriputta himself gives some guidance in this direction. After predicting that wise people will ask their follow-up question—“the subduing of desire and passion for what?”—he provides the answer: The Buddha teaches the subduing of desire and passion for five things: form, feeling, perception, thought-fabrications, and consciousness. When we look further in the Canon, we learn that these are the five activities, called the five aggregates, from which we construct our sense of self, of who we are. This gives an idea of how radical the Buddha’s teaching is: He’s asking us to abandon desire and passion for activities with which we identify and to which we’re ordinarily most attached.

But Sāriputta doesn’t expand on that point, at least not here. Instead, he predicts that the wise people in foreign lands will want to know why the Buddha would advocate subduing desire and passion for these activities: What danger is there in desire and passion for them? And what advantage is there in abandoning that desire and passion? The answer: If you haven’t abandoned passion for these five activities, then when they change for the worse, as they inevitably will, you’ll experience pain and sorrow. But if you *have* abandoned passion for them, you’ll experience no pain or sorrow when they change in that way.

This gives an indication of the Buddha’s motive for teaching: compassion. He wants people to learn how to avoid the suffering they’re already causing themselves and might cause in the future. So even though subduing desire and passion would go against the grain and require a great deal of training, the teaching actually offers hope: that by changing your attitudes, you have it within your power to avoid suffering.

That’s where Sāriputta’s imagined dialog with the wise people of foreign lands ends, but he goes on to tell the monks that the Buddha isn’t teaching just how to avoid suffering. He’s also teaching how to find long-term happiness. Sāriputta does this by reminding the monks that if developing unskillful mental qualities—such as greed, aversion, or delusion—led to mental peace in this lifetime and happiness in future lifetimes, the Buddha wouldn’t have advocated abandoning unskillful mental qualities.

But because they lead to mental turmoil now and to suffering in future lifetimes, he advocates abandoning them.

Conversely, if developing skillful mental qualities, such as renunciation, goodwill, and compassion, led to mental turmoil now or suffering in future lifetimes, he wouldn't have advocated developing skillful mental qualities. But because skillful mental qualities lead to mental peace now and happiness in future lifetimes, that's why he advocates developing them.

That's where the discourse ends. As with all the discourses in the Canon, it leaves a lot unsaid and unexplained. For instance, it doesn't define either "desire (*chanda*)" or "passion (*rāga*).” In fact, neither of these terms is defined anywhere in the Canon. Instead, they're used to define other terms in the Buddha's vocabulary, which suggests that they were so widely familiar that the Buddha and his disciples saw no need to explain them.

However, the discourse does establish some important points. At the same time, those points raise some questions that will have to be answered if listeners in foreign lands, such as ourselves, will be motivated to learn more about what the Buddha taught. As we explore the implications of the discourse in the course of this book, we'll uncover the answers to these questions.

- *The first point* is that the Dhamma's main focus is psychological. It views events in the mind as having primary importance over events in the world, both inside and out. As the Buddha says in the first verse of the Dhammapada—the most famous collection of his verses—the mind is the forerunner of all the things you experience.

Phenomena are preceded by the mind,
ruled by the mind,
made of the mind. — [*Dhp 1*](#)

If the mind were simply on the receiving end of physical events, or if its workings were totally determined by physical laws, its choice to desire or not desire something would make no difference: If events outside were in charge, they—and not you—would determine whether you suffered or not. But here the Buddha is saying that the choice to abandon desire and passion for form, feelings, etc., will be enough to put an end to suffering.

The question here is, in what way does the mind create suffering and how do its workings allow it to stop doing that?

- That connects to *the second point* raised by the discourse: The mind has the power of choice. The fact that the Buddha would teach the subduing of desire and passion means that he sees that it's something the mind can choose to do. Even though the mind may have felt desire and passion for such things as feelings and perceptions in the past, and suffered as a result, it doesn't have to continue doing so. Its present actions are not totally determined even by its own past actions. It's free to choose a new course of action at any time.

In fact, the nature of the mind is that it can change direction so quickly that, as the Buddha notes, there's no adequate analogy to illustrate how quickly it can do so ([AN 1:49](#)). This ability can be a source of trouble if its initial direction is skillful and it then starts going in the opposite direction. But when you've been causing suffering for yourself, the mind's ability to change direction quickly can also be the means by which you can stop doing that and take up the path to suffering's end.

Here the question is, how can the mind learn to change its ways and head in the right direction?

- That connects with *the third point*, which is that the Buddha, instead of teaching a world-view, is teaching a course of action. His basic message will be a *how-to* teaching: how to put an end to desire and passion. Now, desire and passion don't easily end on their own. There's a large part of the mind that resists trying to end them and it'll offer resistance in many ways. The mind will have to be trained to overcome that resistance in all its forms.

So the question here is, what kind of training does the Buddha propose? Also, given that his teaching will have to involve a training, how does that fact influence not only *what* he taught, but also *how* he taught it, *why* he taught, *who* he would teach, and what kind of people he would train them to be?

- *Fourth*, Sāriputta makes it clear that these *how-to* instructions are based on a value judgment: that actions should be judged according to

their results, and that actions leading to greater mental well-being now and in the long-term are better than those that leave you open to suffering. Sāriputta's reference to future lifetimes in this context is an indication not only of the power of the mind—consciousness doesn't need to depend on the body for its existence—but also of the mind's range of responsibility: how long-term the consequences of its actions can be.

Here the questions are, what sort of arguments does the Buddha propose on the topic of life after death? And how objective are the standards he uses for judging actions and their results?

- *The fifth point*, though, suggests a paradox: The Buddha teaches the ending of desire and passion, yet when asked why people should follow his teachings—instead of following the desires and passions they currently prefer—he promises desirable results: freedom from suffering, along with long-term happiness. This point falls in line with another verse from the Dhammapada:

If, by forsaking
a limited happiness,
you would see
an abundance of happiness,
the enlightened person
would forsake
the limited happiness
for the sake
of the abundant. — [*Dhp 290*](#)

Obviously, anyone who follows the Buddha's teachings on how to act would have to be motivated by a desire for long-term happiness. Is the Buddha, in encouraging this sort of desire, being inconsistent or is he thinking strategically? And if he's being strategic, what's the strategy?

So Sāriputta, in addition to making some basic points about the Buddha's teachings, is also raising some important questions that will have to be answered. In doing so, he seems to be directing the discussion along lines that he senses will be fruitful—because there were many other teachers in his time who were advocating philosophies based on questions that led in other directions entirely.

In fact, it's useful to start our inquiry by looking at some of those other teachings, to see what the audience in foreign lands would be comparing the Buddha's teachings to. When we do, we'll see that many of those teachings are similar to religions and philosophies still being taught today. By contrasting those teachings with the Buddha's, we can take what was—and is—distinctive about his teachings and throw it into sharper relief.

At the same time, we can begin to understand how an intelligent audience could hear a teaching introduced as “the subduing of desire and passion” and, instead of being repelled, actually find it promising.

9. Desire & Passion Engendering Conflict

A third spot where desire and passion play a role in dependent co-arising is found in one of the non-standard lists of conditions, in [DN 15](#). There, as the discussion goes backward through the sequence, starting from aging-and-death, it arrives at the connection between craving and feeling, and then inserts a brief detour into the ways in which craving leads to conflict in society. Given that the discussion starts with craving, it's basically an expansion of the role of desire and passion in craving and clinging, adding a social dimension to the issue.

This is one of the few descriptions of dependent co-arising in which desire and passion are explicitly mentioned. The passage is this:

“Now, craving is dependent on feeling,
seeking is dependent on craving,
acquisition is dependent on seeking,
ascertainment is dependent on acquisition,
desire & passion are dependent on ascertainment,
attachment is dependent on *desire & passion*,
possessiveness is dependent on attachment,
stinginess is dependent on possessiveness,
defensiveness is dependent on stinginess,
and because of defensiveness, dependent on defensiveness, various
evil, unskillful phenomena come into play: the taking up of sticks &
knives; conflicts, quarrels, & disputes; accusations, divisive speech,
& lies.” – [DN 15](#)

To illustrate this sequence, consider again the act of feeding: You start by being hungry for food, so you search for it. You acquire something and then ascertain that it actually is food. At that point, you feel desire and passion for it—you start clinging to it and eating it. You get attached to it

and feel possessive of it—think of stray dogs growling at anyone who gets near them while they’re wolfing down their food. You refuse to share it, you get defensive when others demand a share, and you end up fighting them off if they try to take it by force.

In this passage, the fact that desire and passion come between ascertaining—checking to see what you’ve found—and attachment to what you’ve found, suggest that desire and passion here are equivalent to clinging. You’ve found your food, you know that it’s food, and you start eating it. The satisfaction you get from eating is why you’re attached.

This passage is basically offering an analysis, in impersonal terms, of one of the main drawbacks that the Buddha saw in sensuality: It leads inevitably to conflict, both on a personal level and between nations ([MN 13](#)). Given that beings are defined by their attachments ([SN 23:2](#)), and that the one thing all beings have in common is that they’re sustained by food ([Khp 4](#)), this analysis points to one of the radical issues we have to face in putting an end to suffering: As long as we take on the identity as a being located in a particular world—as long as we keep on giving rise to the processes that lead to becoming—we’re going to keep getting involved in conflict with other beings in that world. The only way out of that conflict will be to stop identifying ourselves as beings. If you think that identifying yourself as a being is the only way to find happiness, the idea of stopping that identification is a scary thought.

17. Starting Out Right

It's also why, when he began training his own son, Rāhula, he started out with lessons in how best to develop qualities of honesty and powers of observation, focused on one's own actions ([MN 61](#)). These two qualities function as the beginning step in the training in heightened virtue, but then also inform the training in heightened mind and heightened discernment.

First he taught truthfulness. Rāhula had seen the Buddha approaching from afar, so he set out a pot of water and a dipper. When the Buddha arrived, he washed his feet with the water in the pot, leaving a little water in the dipper. Showing the dipper to Rāhula, he asked him: “Do you see how little water there is in this dipper?”

“Yes, sir.”

“That's how little of the quality of a contemplative there is in anyone who tells a deliberate lie with no sense of shame.”

The Buddha then threw the water away, showed Rāhula the empty dipper, and finally turned the dipper upside down, making the point that when you tell a deliberate lie with no sense of shame, your quality of a contemplative is thrown away, empty, and turned upside down.

He then told Rāhula to train himself: “I will not tell a deliberate lie even in jest.”

Having stressed the importance of truthfulness, the Buddha went on to give instructions on how to be observant. Just as you'd use a mirror repeatedly to reflect on your own face, in the same way you should reflect on your own actions again and again.

When planning to do an action in body, speech, or mind, you should reflect on the intention and desire behind it: “This action I want to do—would it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Would it be an unskillful action, with painful consequences, painful

results?” If you anticipate that it would cause harm, you shouldn’t do it. If you anticipate no harm, you can go ahead and do it.

While doing the action, you should reflect on its immediate results: “This action I’m doing—is it leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both?” If you see that it’s causing harm, you should stop then and there. If you see no harm, you can continue with it.

After the action is done, you’re still not done. You should reflect on it again: “This action I’ve done—did it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Was it an unskillful action, with painful consequences, painful results?” If you see that it did cause harm—even though you didn’t anticipate it—then if it was a bodily or verbal action, you should confess it to a fellow practitioner more advanced on the path, to see what advice you can gain on how not to repeat that mistake. Then you try to exercise restraint in the future. If it was a mental action, you should develop a healthy sense of shame around it—seeing that it was beneath you—and exercise future restraint.

But if you see that the action caused no harm at all, then you take joy in that fact and continue training in this way, day and night.

These are basically instructions for how Rāhula should develop his honesty and powers of observation to detect for himself which of his desires, when acted on, would be helpful on the path, and which would get in the way. But the Buddha covers a lot of other issues as well, in particular the other qualities of heart and mind that his son will have to bring to this task.

To begin with, he’s introducing Rāhula to the quality that he said elsewhere is the most important internal quality for achieving your first glimpse of awakening: *appropriate attention*. This is the ability to focus attention on asking the right questions for the sake of overcoming unskillful desires and developing skillful ones. These questions begin with the underlying questions leading to discernment as to which actions are skillful and which actions are not, and culminate in the questions related to the four noble truths: understanding suffering and developing the path that leads to its end. Appropriate attention is what gives proper focus to your powers of observation and your truthfulness. You focus attention on

your actions, beginning with your desires and intentions, and judge them as to whether you expect them to be harmful or not.

This step emphasizes the role of desire as the root of all intentions, and the role of intention—the desire to act—as the beginning of kamma. It also teaches you that, if you really want to learn from your mistakes, you try your best not to make them. When you act only on what you think are good intentions but later find out that actions based on those intentions led to harm, you’ve learned something. If you act on intentions you already know to be unskillful and they end up causing harm, you haven’t learned much.

Once you’ve set yourself on a course of action you think is skillful, then, given that actions can show some of their results in the present moment and some over time, you judge the results of your actions both while you’re doing them and again after they’re done. Here you use the same criteria: Are they causing—did they cause—harm or not? And, of course, you don’t stop with simply judging the results. You refrain from acting on intentions you judge to be potentially harmful, you stop continuing with any action you judge to be immediately harmful, and you resolve not to repeat any actions that turned out to be harmful in the end.

These instructions show the basic pattern for how to train yourself to stick with your determination for awakening. You commit to the path by trying to act in line with it, you reflect on the results of your actions, and then make adjustments wherever you see that you’re lacking, until you finally get things right. This is called success by approximation. As we’ll see, this pattern holds all the way to the end of the practice.

In teaching Rāhula to talk over his mistakes with someone more advanced on the path, the Buddha is introducing him to the most important external quality for achieving his first glimpse of awakening: *admirable friendship*. This is a matter not only of trying to choose admirable people as your friends, but also of emulating their good qualities and asking them about how to develop those qualities in yourself ([AN 8:54](#)). As the Buddha’s instructions to Rāhula make clear, this relationship works best if you’re truthful in reporting your mistakes to your friends so that you can get pertinent advice.

The Buddha is also introducing his son more generally to training in heightened virtue. It’s important to notice that this training takes two

forms: specific do's and don'ts, and qualities of the character.

He starts Rāhula with a don't: "I will not tell a deliberate lie, even in jest." As he points out, this is a rule that Rāhula will have to train himself in. In other words, Rāhula will have to be responsible for voluntarily taking on this rule, for sticking with it, and for detecting times when he's failed to hold to it, so that he can learn what unskillful desires or passions might have made him want to break it.

At the same time, the Buddha is teaching Rāhula virtue in terms of qualities of the character, both explicitly and implicitly. The quality he mentions explicitly is shame—not the unhealthy shame that's the opposite of pride, but the healthy shame that's the opposite of shamelessness. This is the shame that makes you want your behavior to look good in the eyes of people you respect. When you respect the right people—the noble ones—this type of shame can take you far. It goes together with a sense of honor—that giving in to unskillful desires is beneath you.

Other qualities that are more implicit in these instructions include:

heedfulness in that Rāhula should take the results of his actions seriously because they could cause harm if he's not careful;

compassion in that he shouldn't want to do harm to anyone, himself or others;

integrity in taking responsibility for any harm that he's done. (Notice how often the word "I" appears in the questions that Rāhula is supposed to ask himself. He's being taught to acknowledge his agency in deciding which desires to act on and how best to do it.)

Finally, the Buddha is also teaching Rāhula how to develop the four determinations:

- He learns *truthfulness* in his willingness to admit his mistakes.
- He commits himself to *relinquish* any desires that would run counter to this training.
- Note that when Rāhula is able to reflect on his actions and see that they have caused no harm, he is to take joy in that fact. That sense of joy is calming—the *calm* that comes from a life of virtue. This is a pattern that holds throughout the triple training. You don't simply force yourself to become calm and equanimous regardless of events. You first have to find

an inner sense of joy that comes from virtue, concentration, and discernment. That joy keeps your calm from becoming grudging or defeatist. Based on a sense of inner satisfaction, it's a calm that's expansive and strong.

- Above all, Rāhula is learning to develop his *discernment* through a process that, as we've noted, the Buddha calls commitment and reflection. Rāhula is to commit himself to acting as skillfully as he can, at the same time reflecting on:

the desire that motivates each action,
the action itself, and
its immediate and long-term results.

When he sees room for improvement, he commits himself further to making that improvement as best he can, using both his own determination to be skillful and ingenious in thinking up alternates, and the wisdom and compassion of others who can help him attain that aim.

As we noted above, the questions that lie at the basis of discernment are: "What when I do it will lead to my long-term harm and suffering? What when I do it will lead to my long-term well-being and happiness?" In the discourse where the Buddha sets forth these questions ([MN 135](#)), he recommends requesting answers from people who are more advanced on the path. Here, however, Rāhula is also being taught how to begin finding the answers for himself.

This is the basic approach that's required in learning any skill, although here it's applied to an especially high level of skill: putting an end to all suffering and stress. It's the basic framework for all the steps in taking on the triple training. And as we've already noted, it depends on what the Buddha observed about the mind: that it's luminous and has, in the present moment, the power of choice, together with the ability to change direction quickly. The power of choice allows you to commit to a course of action; the luminosity allows you to reflect on the results of following that course, at the same time to check to see whether the mind has switched direction, away from its commitment, while its ability to change course allows you to make adjustments as they seem advisable.

In terms of dependent co-arising, this approach is the way to overcome the ignorance—*avijjā*, which, as we noted, can also mean lack of skill—that

causes your processes of fabrication to lead to suffering. As you observe for yourself which desires work and which don't work, and as your standards for "what works" grow higher as you develop virtue, concentration, and discernment, you weaken ignorant desires and replace them with knowledgeable and skillful ones. In that way, you grow closer and closer to total freedom.

Those are some of the qualities of character that the Buddha taught to Rāhula.

If we want to understand virtue as taught by the Buddha, we have to understand both the rules of behavior he laid down, clearly delineating right and wrong, as well as the qualities of character he praised and tried to inculcate in his students. The rules are there to alert you to specific unskillful desires and passions that could hide behind general principles, as when you claim to be acting on compassion when it's nothing more than an excuse for what's actually unskillful behavior. They teach you that no unskillful desire is too small to merit your attention. After all, big fires come from little ones. At the same time, the qualities of character enable you to deal skillfully with areas calling for integrity that can't properly be covered by rules.

It's in this way that the training in virtue offered by the Buddha is both thorough and all-around.

18. Virtue in Rules

The rules and qualities of character that constitute the Buddha's training in virtue are best seen in his instructions for his monk disciples. This is a point often overlooked in modern Buddhist writings. Given that some exceptional lay people can attain the various levels of awakening, it's sometimes assumed that the training offered to lay people is the standard, whereas the training offered specifically to monks is superfluous. The decision to become a monk is often portrayed as an aesthetic one: The monk's life is a "lovely container" for the practice, an option available for those whose tastes run to incense, chanting, and robes.

The Canon, however, makes clear that the life of the monk is designed for those who want to commit themselves fully to the practice unencumbered by the responsibilities and moral ambiguities of lay life. It's like being trained to run a marathon: It is possible to complete the race if you handicap yourself with extra weights, but it's much easier to do so if you don't unnecessarily weigh yourself down. The monk's life allows you to run the race as lightly as possible.

The image of running a race doesn't come from the Canon, but the Canon does use other images to make the same point. In an image the Buddha often repeated, household life is confining, a dusty path. The life gone forth into the monkhood is the open air ([MN 36](#)). In another image, the Buddha compares the householder to a peacock that can fly only slowly, while a monk is a wild goose that can fly fast and far ([Sn 1:12](#)).

The training in virtue offered to the monks is the Buddha's ideal. Even if you can't follow it, it's good to know the ideal so that you can understand where you're placing restrictions on yourself when you don't or can't follow the ideal.

One of the least understood aspects of the monk's training in virtue is the body of training rules (*sikkhāpada*) contained in the part of the Canon called the Vinaya, the discipline. Yet the Buddha gave so much importance

to this part of his training that he actually called his teaching, not “Buddhism” or even just “Dhamma,” but “this Dhamma-Vinaya.”

The word *vinaya* is related to the verb *vineti*, to subdue. The rules of the Vinaya provide training in subduing the desires and passions expressed in the effluents. Central to these rules is a basic code called the Pāṭimokkha, which the monks listen to every fortnight. The rules contained in the Pāṭimokkha cover a wide range of prohibitions, ranging from rules against murder, theft, and sexual intercourse, to rules governing the proper etiquette in eating your meals and wearing your robes. In addition to the Pāṭimokkha, there are 22 chapters containing hundreds of extra rules governing every aspect of communal life, ranging from, on one extreme, how to use the bathroom and clean your hut, to how to conduct communal business on the other.

The severity of the penalty for breaking a rule varies with how serious it is. The strongest penalty is permanent expulsion from the monkhood. More intermediate is a period of penance. The lightest—and this applies to the vast majority of the rules—is having to confess the offense to another monk.

The rules perform an important function in that they remind you that the battle you take on in your determination to reach awakening isn’t engaged with desire in the abstract. It’s continually engaged with specific unskillful desires, large and small, on a day-to-day basis. Some of the rules are focused on minutia because desires focused on minutia can grow larger if they’re undetected and left unchecked. The rules help to make sure that your general aspiration for skillful behavior is an honest, truthful aspiration, and not just a vague, empty wish.

The practice of holding to the rules also provides a good opportunity for developing qualities of mind that will be useful in the practice of meditation. You need to develop:

- mindfulness* to keep the rules in mind;
- alertness* to make sure that your actions follow in line with the rules; and
- ardency* in stopping yourself whenever you’re tempted to break a rule, and in encouraging yourself to follow the rules as best you can.

These three qualities then help in the practice of right mindfulness, which is the basis for the training of right concentration in heightening the mind.

Holding to rules that you know are in your long-term interest also develops pragmatic *discernment*. As the Buddha notes, your ability to talk yourself into abstaining from a course of action that you like doing but will yield long-term harm is a measure of your discernment. The same holds true with your ability to talk yourself into adopting a course of action that you don't like doing but will yield long-term benefit ([AN 4:115](#)). Taking on the training rules gives you practical experience in the discernment that focuses, not on immediate gratification of your wants, but on the quest for happiness in the long term.

However, the act of following rules can develop your discernment in this way only if the rules are clearly designed to promote your long-term benefit. It's for this reason that the Vinaya introduces the rules in a way that shows how and why the rules serve a good purpose.

Each rule in the Pāṭimokkha is introduced with an origin story. The first part of the story tells of the incident in which a monk behaved in a way that motivated the Buddha to formulate the rule. Some of the stories, as might be expected, are fairly serious, such as the story of a monk killing animals. Others, though, are more humorous—and intentionally so, showing how foolish in an all-too-human way the monk's misbehavior was. This element of humor in the discipline helps the reader to side, not with the misbehaving monk, but with the Buddha for calling out such foolishness.

When the Buddha learns of the monk's misbehavior, he calls the monk into his presence and asks him if he really did misbehave in that way. When the monk confesses that, yes, he did, the Buddha admonishes him. This admonishment is the second part of the origin story, and it's the part that shows the Buddha's reasons for formulating the rule.

Below is an example of one of his stronger rebukes, which he gave to a monk who had had sex with his former wife. What's striking—given our discussion of passion and dispassion so far—is the prominent role that passion and dispassion play from the very beginning of the admonition. The Buddha wanted his followers to examine their behavior in terms of the

overarching goals of the practice: the subduing of passion, and the attainment of the freedom that comes with dispassion.

“Worthless man, [what you did] is unseemly, out of line, unsuitable, and unworthy of a contemplative; improper and not to be done.... Haven’t I taught the Dhamma in many ways for the sake of dispassion and not for passion; for unfettering and not for fettering; for freedom from clinging and not for clinging? Yet here, while I have taught the Dhamma for dispassion, you set your heart on passion; while I have taught the Dhamma for unfettering, you set your heart on being fettered; while I have taught the Dhamma for freedom from clinging, you set your heart on clinging.

“Worthless man, haven’t I taught the Dhamma in many ways for the fading of passion, the sobering of intoxication, the subduing of thirst, the uprooting of attachment, the severing of the round, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, unbinding? ...

“Worthless man, this neither inspires faith in the faithless nor increases the faithful. Rather, it inspires lack of faith in the faithless and wavering in some of the faithful.”

The second part of the rebuke deals in terms of personal qualities: those that a monk practicing discipline is to abandon, and those he is to develop.

Then the Blessed One—having in many ways rebuked Ven. Sudinna, having spoken in dispraise of being burdensome, demanding, arrogant, discontented, entangled, & indolent; in various ways having spoken in praise of being unburdensome, undemanding, modest, content, scrupulous, austere, gracious, self-effacing, & energetic; having given a Dhamma talk on what is seemly & becoming for monks—addressed the monks.

This was when the Buddha formulated the training rule, after first stating his reasons for doing so.

“In that case, monks, I will formulate a training rule for the monks with ten aims in mind: the excellence of the Community, the comfort of the Community, the curbing of the impudent, the comfort of well-behaved monks, the restraint of effluents related to the present life,

the prevention of effluents related to the next life, the arousing of faith in the faithless, the increase of the faithful, the establishment of the true Dhamma, and the fostering of discipline.” – *Pr 1*

These reasons fall into three main types. The first two are external: (1) to ensure peace and well-being within the Community itself, and (2) to foster and protect faith among the laity, on whom the monks depend for their support. (The origin stories depict the laity as being very quick to generalize. One monk misbehaves, and they complain, “How can these monks do that?”) The third type of reason, though, is internal: (3) The rule is to help restrain and prevent mental effluents within the individual monks. In this way, the rules aim not only at the external well-being of the Community but also at the internal well-being of the individual.

Knowing the reasons for the rule, a monk can use them to convince himself that it is in his best interest to abide by the rule. In this way, he’s borrowing the Buddha’s discernment to develop his own. At the same time, he’s showing compassion for himself, for his fellow monks, and for the Community as a whole, now and into the future.

38. The Gist

Ven. Sāriputta first encountered the Dhamma when he was a wanderer studying under another teacher. One morning he happened to see one of the Buddha's first five arahant disciples, Ven. Assaji, going for alms in the city of Rājagaha. Inspired by Assaji's comportment—"gracious in the way he approached and departed, looked ahead and behind, drew in and stretched out his arm; his eyes downcast, his every movement consummate"—he followed Assaji outside of the city and asked him who his teacher was, and what Dhamma that teacher taught. Assaji replied that he was a student of the Great Contemplative from the Sakyan clan. Modestly, he added that he was still new in that teacher's Dhamma and so couldn't explain it in detail, but he could give the gist.

Sāriputta replied,

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

Assaji then said,

“Whatever phenomena arise from cause:
their cause
 & their cessation.
Such is the teaching of the Tathāgata,
the Great Contemplative.” — [*Mv I.23.5*](#)

Hearing this verse and taking its message inwardly, Sāriputta gained the Dhamma eye. The fact that he could penetrate the gist of the teaching so quickly and effectively was one of the reasons why, after he was ordained under the Buddha and attained full awakening, the Buddha extolled him as foremost among his students in discernment.

Another reason was that, according to the Buddha, Sāriputta was foremost among his students in leading others to gain the Dhamma eye as well ([MN 141](#)).

In light of our discussion so far, it's tempting to ask whether Sāriputta's recommendation for how to introduce the Dhamma to those who have never heard it before—"Our teacher teaches the subduing of desire and passion"—is related to either or both of these other manifestations of his discernment. In other words, when he first heard Assaji say, "Whatever phenomena arise from a cause," did he immediately intuit that desire and passion were the cause? We don't know for sure, but it's an intriguing possibility.

The other possibility is that, as he later taught others the path to stream-entry, he may have found that focusing on the issue of subduing desire and passion was the most effective way of getting his listeners to connect the gist of the Dhamma to their own experience. Three main reasons stand out.

First, the compound "desire-and-passion" (*chanda-rāga*) is accessible. It's used by the Canon to define technical terms in the Buddha's teachings, but it's never defined itself. This means it was considered to be immediately comprehensible, a commonly used expression of the time. The Buddha himself used it to describe the cause of suffering to a layman who had no background in his Dhamma at all ([SN 42:11](#)). So it would have been a term familiar to anybody, one that people could immediately relate to their own experience.

Second, it's rousing. Sāriputta's listeners, knowing their own desires and passions, would be forewarned that the task the Buddha taught—the subduing of desire and passion—would not be an easy one, and that it approached the problem of suffering in a radical way. In challenging his listeners right from the start, Sāriputta was not only instructing them. He was also trying to rouse in them the fighting spirit that he knew the practice of the Dhamma would require.

Third, "desire-and-passion" is comprehensive. As we've come to see, desire and passion lie at the gist of all of the Buddha's main teachings related to right view:

The first noble truth:

- What is suffering? Desire and passion feeding on any of the five aggregates.

The second noble truth:

- What is the cause of suffering? Desire and passion in thirsting for sensuality, becoming, or non-becoming.
- What is the motive force underlying the steps of dependent co-arising that lead to suffering? Desire and passion.

The third noble truth:

- What is the cessation of suffering? The subduing and abandoning of desire and passion.

The fourth noble truth:

- Why practice mindfulness and jhāna? Not for worldly ends, but to aid discernment in subduing desire and passion.
- What is the purpose of applying the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self to the aggregates? To counteract the allure of the aggregates and to abandon any desire and passion for them.

By focusing on the issue of desire and passion, Sāriputta was able to reveal the thread that ties all of the teachings together. Whichever teaching most resonated with a student, Sāriputta was able to clarify it and to show its connections with the rest of the Dhamma by focusing on the role that desire and passion play in understanding it.

At the same time, he showed that the subduing of desire and passion is the gist of these teachings and of the Dhamma as a whole. The word I've translated as "gist" here, *attha*, has other meanings as well: the *meaning* of a word or teaching, and the *goal* or *purpose* of a particular practice. By focusing on the gist, Ven. Sāriputta was able to clarify the meaning of the teachings and to help others train themselves to attain the goal that was the purpose of those teachings to begin with: total freedom and nothing less.

Glossary

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

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

Bodhisatta: “A being (striving) for awakening”: a term used to describe the Buddha before he actually became Buddha, from his first aspiration to Buddhahood until the time of his full awakening. Sanskrit form: *Bodhisattva*.

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

Deva (devatā): Literally, “shining one.” An inhabitant of the terrestrial or heavenly realms higher than the human.

Dhamma: (1) Event; action; (2) a phenomenon in and of itself; (3) mental quality; (4) doctrine, teaching; (5) *nibbāna* (although some passages in the Canon, such as [AN 10:58](#) and [Sn 5:6](#), describe *nibbāna* as the abandoning or ending of all dhammas). Sanskrit form: *Dharma*.

Jhāna: Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration focused on a single sensation or mental notion. This term is derived from the verb *jhāyati*, which means to burn with a still, steady flame.

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

Māra: The personification of temptation and mortality.

Nibbāna: Literally, the “unbinding” of the mind from passion, aversion, and delusion, and from the entire round of death and rebirth. As this term also denotes the extinguishing of a fire, it carries connotations of stilling, cooling, and peace. Sanskrit form: *Nirvāṇa*.

Pali: The name of the earliest extant collection of the Buddha’s teachings and, by extension, of the language in which it was recorded.

Sakya: The Buddha’s family name.

Samaṇa: Contemplative.

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

Sutta: Discourse. Sanskrit form: *Sūtra*.

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

Vinaya: The monastic discipline.

Beyond Desire & Passion

The Buddha's Training
for Freedom

Thānissaro Bhikkhu

(Geoffrey DeGraff)

3. Proactive People with Proactive Minds

One of the striking features of the early Buddhist dialogs is the extent to which the Buddha took a personal interest in his listeners. He responded to their questions in a way that showed respect for the fact that they were agents: individuals already acting on their desires for happiness, influencing events within them and around them. Although those desires, in his eyes, were often misguided, he saw that the basic desire for long-term happiness, if it was sincere, should be honored and encouraged. His role as a teacher was to teach his listeners better ways to satisfy that desire.

The second dialog in the discourse collection ([DN 2](#)) makes this point in a very pointed way. A king approaches the Buddha with a question: What are the visible fruits of the contemplative life? Before the Buddha answers, the king tells of how he had posed the same question to teachers of other schools, and all had responded, not by addressing the question, but by giving the king a canned version of their doctrines. As he commented, it was as if he had asked about a mango, and they had answered with a jackfruit.

The Buddha then gives a long and thorough answer to the king's question, so convincingly that the king declares himself a follower of the Buddha from that day forward, for life.

And it wasn't only with kings that the Buddha exercised such care and attention. The discourses tell of laborers, lepers, and outcastes to whom he gave the same level of attention with even better results, leading them to awakening.

It's important to underline the personal attention that the Buddha gave to his listeners and their sincere desires. Often there is so much emphasis on the impersonal nature of some of his teachings that it seems as if he didn't see people as really real, and that his mission was to persuade them

that they didn't exist. His criticisms of craving are often presented in a way that portrays him as an enemy of desire in all its forms.

Both of these interpretations miss an important point: The Buddha saw that people were suffering from confused desires and passions—in fact, they were *defined* by their desires and passions—and that their sufferings were real ([SN 23:2](#); [SN 56:27](#)). In response, he felt compassion for them. He realized that one of the best ways to solve the immediate problem of their confusion and sufferings was to teach them to regard events in their own minds in impersonal terms. That way, they could get enough distance from even their most cherished desires to see how confused and counterproductive they were. From that point of view, they could more easily abandon them and replace them with desires more conducive to genuine happiness.

So the Buddha never treated his listeners as ciphers or as passive recipients of his teachings. He saw them as people in action. Their sufferings were genuine and had them bewildered, and they were searching for someone to help them put an end both to their bewilderment and to their sufferings ([AN 6:63](#)). So he was dealing with people who were already proactively involved in a search, and he wanted to help them find what they were looking for.

When he explained the nature of the search for the end of suffering, using both personal and impersonal terms, he would always start with the proactive nature of the mind. This means that when Sāriputta opened his explanation of the Buddha's teachings with a mental action—the subduing of desire and passion—he wasn't engaging in a mere rhetorical ploy. He was going straight to the heart of the matter: The power of mental action is the central fact of the Buddha's teachings.

That's why the Dhammapada begins by establishing the principle that the state of mind with which you act determines whether you will meet with pleasure or pain. This is the Buddha's distinctive teaching of the principle of *karma*—*kamma* in the language of the Canon, *action* in English. Although he recognized three types of *kamma*—bodily, verbal, and mental—he identified intention, the mental act that aims at doing something, as the determining element in all three. Actions based on unskillful intentions—greed, aversion, or delusion—lead to unpleasant results. Now, this doesn't mean that they result in no pleasure at all. The

Buddha himself cites cases where people get rewarded for killing, stealing, or lying, etc. ([SN 42:13](#)). But, he would add, the greed, aversion, and delusion underlying these actions are, in and of themselves, unpleasant, and their long-term consequences are going to be painful.

On the other hand, actions based on skillful intentions—devoid of greed, aversion, and delusion—lead to pleasant results. Here again, skillful actions might lead to pain in the short-term—think of people who are punished for telling the truth—but the fact that you’re acting on skillful intentions is, in and of itself, a pleasant source of self-esteem, and the long-term consequences will be good.

Note, though, that this doesn’t mean that good intentions necessarily lead to good results. After all, well-meaning intentions can often be based on delusion, which explains the famous observation that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. But that road is never paved with skillful ones. Skillful intentions are both good and devoid of delusion.

Intentional actions play such a large role in shaping our experience that all six of our senses—the five physical senses plus the mind’s ability to sense ideas—are the result of old kamma ([SN 35:145](#)). However, old kamma doesn’t entirely shape our experience of the present moment. If it did, the Buddha noted, there would be no room for choice in the present moment. We’d be powerless to restrain ourselves from doing unskillful things if old kamma pushed us in that direction. The idea that something should or shouldn’t be done would be meaningless. People would simply do what they were predetermined to do ([AN 3:62](#)). But as the Buddha affirmed, the mind can create new kamma by choosing to act skillfully or unskillfully right now, regardless of what’s coming in through the senses, which is why ideas of “should” and “should not” have meaning. It’s also why it’s possible to follow a path of practice that can lead to the end of suffering.

So the mind as a recipient of sense data is subject to past kamma, but the mind as agent, deciding what to do with each moment, isn’t necessarily so. It’s free to make skillful choices, to act on those choices, and for those choices to make a difference.

It’s in this way that the Buddha avoids the powerlessness of the two extremes of total determinism and total chaos. His view of causality allows for causal relationships and for freedom within those relationships to

understand and master causality to direct events to where you want them to go. The Buddha never explains where this freedom comes from, but he does encourage us to take advantage of it for the sake of our long-term welfare and happiness.

24. Herding Your Thoughts (1)

Those concentration attainments, in fact, lie at the heart of the second phase in the training to subdue desire and passion: training in the heightened mind.

In one of the Buddha's autobiographical accounts ([MN 19](#)), he relates how he brought his mind to concentration by first dividing his thoughts into two sorts—based, not on whether he liked them or not, but on the results they would lead to. On the one side were thoughts imbued with sensuality, ill will, or harmfulness. On the other, thoughts imbued with renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness. Thoughts of the first sort, he saw, would lead either to his own affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both. They would obstruct discernment and not lead to unbinding. Thoughts of the second sort, though, would lead to affliction for no one. They would promote discernment and lead to unbinding.

So he resolved on holding thoughts of the first sort in check, but would allow thoughts of the second sort to roam free. He compared himself to a cowherd. During the rainy season, when rice is growing in the fields, the cowherd has to keep beating his cows away from the rice fields so that they don't damage the crops. That's how the Buddha had to treat his unskillful thoughts and desires: He would "abandon them, destroy them, dispel them, and wipe them out of existence."

At the end of the dry season, though, the rice has been harvested, so there's no danger of the cows' damaging the crops. At that time of the year, the cowherd "while resting under the shade of a tree or out in the open, simply keeps himself mindful of 'those cows.'" That's how the Buddha could treat his skillful thoughts, simply being mindful of their existence.

He noted that he could think skillful thoughts for a whole day or night without causing any danger aside from the fact that thinking a lot tires the body. When the body is tired, the mind is disturbed and far from

concentration. So to keep his mind undisturbed, he steadied it within and brought it into right concentration.

The Buddha's account here teaches two important lessons. First, it shows how his lessons to Rāhula in how to grow in the Dhamma through commitment and reflection—commitment to the practice of skillfulness and reflection on the results of your commitment—lead directly to the practice of concentration. The Buddha judged his thoughts by their results, abandoning those that led to affliction, promoting those that avoided it. Then he further refined his standards so that he would act in ways that would avoid not only affliction, but also mental disturbance.

The second lesson is that the practice of concentration has to carry on the battle between your determination for awakening on the one hand, and your unruly desires and passions on the other. This is reflected in the many martial metaphors the Canon applies to the entire path, from the beginning all the way through the practice of concentration and discernment, to victory at awakening ([SN 45:4](#); [Iti 57](#), 62, 82). However, it's worth noting that when moving from the discussion of virtue to concentration, the Buddha supplements martial metaphors with metaphors based on people developing skills—such as cooks or archers in training—apparently to indicate that the work of avoiding unskillful actions and promoting skillful ones in their place continues but gets more refined.

The need to overcome many unskillful desires before you can enter right concentration is shown throughout the Canon in two facts: (1) Discussions of the stages of the practice mention that the five hindrances, including sensual desire and the desires of ill will, have to be overcome first before entering the first jhāna. (2) The definition of the first jhāna, or level of mental absorption, starts by saying that the meditator is “secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities.” [SN 45:22](#) defines unskillful qualities as wrong versions of the factors of the noble eightfold path, from wrong view through wrong concentration.

This is why right effort and right mindfulness are part of training in the heightened mind. They do the work of eliminating unskillful mental states.

[AN 8:30](#), the discourse that describes the mental qualities that make you worthy of the Dhamma, defines persistence, which is equivalent to right effort, as follows:

“There is the case where a monk keeps his persistence aroused for abandoning unskillful mental qualities and taking on skillful mental qualities. He is steadfast, solid in his effort, not shirking his duties with regard to skillful mental qualities.”

Desire plays two main roles in developing this sort of persistence. The first role is implicit in discussions of right effort and relates to the prime duty of effort and persistence in the larger context of the four noble truths. Because the path as a whole is designed to attack the problem of suffering at its causes—unskillful desires and passions—those are the things that right effort has to attack. As the Buddha notes, these causes fall into two sorts: those for which you can develop dispassion simply by looking at them with equanimity, and those for which you can develop dispassion only when you exert fabrications against them ([MN 101](#)). “Fabrications” here apparently means the three fabrications listed in dependent co-arising: bodily, verbal, and mental.

Causes of suffering that fall into the first sort can be abandoned with minimal effort. However, it’s not the case that this requires no desire or effort at all. After all, even equanimity is a fabricated state of mind, which means that you have to *want* to be equanimous toward causes of this sort if you’re going to get past them. It’s simply that the strategy in dealing with them is fairly straightforward. You talk yourself into looking at them steadily, and they wither away in the steadiness of your gaze.

Causes of the second sort, though, don’t. When you stare at them, they stare right back. To get rid of them, you have to think strategically, using concerted determination and desire to foster the proper types of fabrication to do battle with them.

To help with both strategies, the Buddha’s teachings in the discourses are full of guidelines for how to develop skillful fabrications of all three types: how to breathe, how to talk to yourself, and what images/perceptions to hold in mind to develop dispassion for the causes of suffering, whatever the sort. *In fact, you could say that all of his teachings are guidelines for how to apply knowledge to fostering skillful versions of these three types of fabrication so as to turn them into the path.*

The second role for desire in persistence is explicitly mentioned in the standard definition for right effort, which emphasizes the need to generate desire to motivate your efforts:

“There is the case where a monk generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the sake of the non-arising of evil, unskillful qualities that have not yet arisen... for the sake of the abandoning of evil, unskillful qualities that have arisen... for the sake of the arising of skillful qualities that have not yet arisen... [and] for the maintenance, non-confusion, increase, plenitude, development, & culmination of skillful qualities that have arisen. This, monks, is called right effort.” – [SN 45:8](#)

All three fabrications play a role in generating the desire to practice, and the Buddha provides examples of how to skillfully employ all three.

Skillful ways of breathing will be discussed under the topic of breath meditation, below.

As for the other two types of fabrication:

The Canon recommends many similes to be used as perceptions—mental fabrications—to motivate your efforts. One we’ve already noted above: Persistence is like the soldiers defending a fortress on the edge of a frontier ([AN 7:63](#)). Another is that if you stick with your efforts all the way to awakening, you’re like a person searching for heartwood who doesn’t let himself rest content with the easier-to-attain leaves, bark, or softwood. He keeps on searching until he finds the heartwood that can best serve his true purpose ([MN 29](#)).

The Canon also recommends many ways of talking to yourself—exerting verbal fabrications—to generate skillful desires to stick with the path in general, and with the practice of concentration in particular. The primary desires it recommends are those connected with heedfulness. You see the dangers that come from not training the mind, and how they can be avoided if you do train the mind, so you want to exert right effort right now.

“There is the case where a monk living in the wilderness reminds himself of this: ‘I’m now living alone in the wilderness. While I’m living alone in the wilderness, a snake might bite me, a scorpion might sting me, a centipede might bite me. That would be how my death would come about. That would be an obstruction for me. So let me make an effort for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the

reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized.’” – [AN 5:77](#)

“There is the case where a monk reminds himself of this: ‘At present, I’m young, black-haired, endowed with the blessings of youth in the first stage of life. The time will come, though, when aging touches this body. When one is overcome with old age & decay, it’s not easy to pay attention to the Buddha’s teachings. It’s not easy to reside in isolated forest or wilderness dwellings. Before this unwelcome, disagreeable, displeasing thing happens, let me first arouse persistence for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized, so that—endowed with that Dhamma—I will live in peace even when old.’...

“And further, the monk reminds himself of this: ‘At present, I’m free from illness & discomfort, endowed with good digestion: not too cold, not too hot, of medium strength & tolerance. The time will come, though, when illness touches this body. When one is overcome with illness, it’s not easy to pay attention to the Buddha’s teachings. It’s not easy to reside in isolated forest or wilderness dwellings. Before this unwelcome, disagreeable, displeasing thing happens, let me first arouse persistence for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized, so that—endowed with that Dhamma—I will live in peace even when ill.’...

“And further, the monk reminds himself of this: ‘At present, food is plentiful, alms are easy to come by. It’s easy to maintain oneself by gleanings & patronage. The time will come, though, when there is famine: Food is scarce, alms are hard to come by, and it’s not easy to maintain oneself by gleanings & patronage. When there’s famine, people will congregate where food is plentiful. There they will live packed & crowded together. When one is living packed & crowded together, it’s not easy to pay attention to the Buddha’s teachings. It’s not easy to reside in isolated forest or wilderness dwellings. Before this unwelcome, disagreeable, displeasing thing happens, let me first arouse persistence for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-

unrealized, so that—endowed with that Dhamma—I will live in peace even when there is famine.’...

“And further, the monk reminds himself of this: ‘At present, people are in harmony, on friendly terms, without quarreling, like milk mixed with water, viewing one another with eyes of affection. The time will come, though, when there is danger & an invasion of savage tribes. Taking power, they will surround the countryside. When there is danger, people will congregate where it is safe. There they will live packed & crowded together. When one is living packed & crowded together, it’s not easy to pay attention to the Buddha’s teachings. It’s not easy to reside in isolated forest or wilderness dwellings. Before this unwelcome, disagreeable, displeasing thing happens, let me first arouse persistence for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized, so that—endowed with that Dhamma—I will live in peace even when there is danger.’...

“And further, the monk reminds himself of this: ‘At present, the Saṅgha—in harmony, on friendly terms, without quarreling—lives in comfort with a single recitation. The time will come, though, when the Saṅgha splits. When the Saṅgha is split, it’s not easy to pay attention to the Buddha’s teachings. It’s not easy to reside in isolated forest or wilderness dwellings. Before this unwelcome, disagreeable, displeasing thing happens, let me first arouse persistence for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized, so that—endowed with that Dhamma—I will live in peace even when the Saṅgha is split.’” — [AN 5:78](#)

Other ways of generating skillful desires recommended in the Canon include developing—

goodwill with the thought that you and others will suffer less if you have trained your mind to be free of defilements, and—if you’ve attained any of the noble attainments—the gifts given to you will bear great fruit for the donors ([MN 6](#); [MN 39](#));

shame with the thought that when you’re on your deathbed and your fellow monks ask you if you’ve gained any superior attainments, you don’t

want to suffer the embarrassment of having to say you have none ([AN 10:48](#));

inspiration, thinking of the great meditators of the past who were able to train their minds in spite of hardships, and letting that thought rouse you to follow their example ([Thag 5:8](#)).

The Canon even shows how to skillfully use craving and conceit when talking to yourself to motivate your efforts to overcome any craving and conceit that would get in the way of following the path:

Ven. Ānanda [speaking to a nun]: “‘This body comes into being through craving. And yet it is by relying on craving that craving is to be abandoned.’ Thus it was said. And in reference to what was it said? There is the case, sister, where a monk hears, ‘The monk named such-&-such, they say, through the ending of the effluents, has entered & remains in the effluent-free awareness-release & discernment-release, having known & realized them for himself right in the here & now.’ The thought occurs to him, ‘I hope that I, too, will—through the ending of the effluents—enter & remain in the effluent-free awareness-release & discernment-release, having directly known & realized them for myself right in the here & now.’ Then, at a later time, he abandons craving, having relied on craving....

“‘This body comes into being through conceit. And yet it is by relying on conceit that conceit is to be abandoned.’ Thus it was said. And in reference to what was it said? There is the case, sister, where a monk hears, ‘The monk named such-&-such, they say, through the ending of the effluents, has entered & remains in the effluent-free awareness-release & discernment-release, having directly known & realized them for himself right in the here & now.’ The thought occurs to him, ‘The monk named such-&-such, they say, through the ending of the effluents, has entered & remains in the effluent-free awareness-release & discernment-release, having directly known & realized them for himself right in the here & now. Then why not me?’ Then, at a later time, he abandons conceit, having relied on conceit.” — [AN 4:159](#)

And—contrary to those who hold that the desire to attain the goal should be dropped because there's pain when you realize that you haven't arrived there yet—the Buddha actually recommends cultivating what he calls renunciation-based distress as motivation for doing the practice so that you can arrive at the happiness of liberating insight. In the following passage, he provides an example of how to employ verbal fabrication to induce the mental fabrication of this skillful feeling of distress:

“And what are the six kinds of house-based distress? The distress that arises when one regards as a non-acquisition the non-acquisition of forms cognizable by the eye—agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, connected with worldly baits—or when one recalls the previous non-acquisition of such forms after they have passed, ceased, & changed: That is called house-based distress.

[Similarly with sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, & ideas.]

“And what are the six kinds of renunciation-based distress? The distress coming from the longing that arises in one who is filled with longing for the unexcelled liberations when—experiencing the inconstancy of those very forms, their change, fading, & cessation—he sees with right discernment as it has come to be that all forms, both before and now, are inconstant, stressful, subject to change, and he is filled with this longing: ‘O when will I enter & remain in the dimension that the noble ones now enter & remain in?’ This is called renunciation-based distress. [Similarly with sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, & ideas.] ...

“By depending & relying on the six kinds of renunciation-based distress, abandon & transcend the six kinds of house-based distress. Such is their abandoning, such is their transcending.” – [*MN 137*](#)

As we'll see, on the higher levels of the path, the desire to gain awakening can sometimes get in the way of awakening, but before you reach that stage of the practice, you need that desire to keep you going in your efforts to abandon unskillful mental qualities and to develop skillful ones in their place.

The ability to motivate yourself to practice right effort requires that you be able to read your mind, to detect what sort of motivation will work at any particular time. As we noted above, one of the measures of

discernment is your ability to talk yourself into abstaining from a course of action that you like to do but will yield long-term harm, or to talk yourself into adopting a course of action that you don't like doing but will yield long-term benefit. In this way, your determination on discernment and truthfulness work together to relinquish what has to be abandoned to bring the mind to calm.

25. Herding Your Thoughts (2)

The main work of right effort in fostering right concentration is to get rid of distracting thoughts that would pull you away from the object of your concentration. The Canon lists five ways to do this:

attending to another theme,
scrutinizing the drawbacks of those thoughts,
paying no mind and no attention to those thoughts,
attending to the relaxing of thought-fabrication with regard to
those thoughts, and
beating down, constraining, and crushing your mind with your
awareness.

It describes these five strategies in detail, along with analogies for each: perceptions that help you to fabricate the right attitude that wants to pull out of your distractions.

“Just as a dexterous carpenter or his apprentice would use a small peg to knock out, drive out, & pull out a large one; in the same way, if evil, unskillful thoughts—connected with desire, aversion, or delusion—arise in a monk while he is referring to and attending to a particular theme, he should attend to another theme, apart from that one, connected with what is skillful. When he is attending to this other theme, apart from that one, connected with what is skillful, then those evil, unskillful thoughts—connected with desire, aversion, or delusion—are abandoned and subside. With their abandoning, he steadies his mind right within, settles it, unifies it, & concentrates it....

“Just as a young woman—or man—fond of adornment, would be horrified, humiliated, & disgusted if the carcass of a snake or a dog or a human being were hung from her neck; in the same way, if evil, unskillful thoughts—connected with desire, aversion, or delusion—

still arise in the monk while he is attending to this other theme, connected with what is skillful, he should scrutinize the drawbacks of those thoughts: ‘Really, these thoughts of mine are unskillful, these thoughts of mine are blameworthy, these thoughts of mine result in stress.’...

“Just as a man with good eyes, not wanting to see forms that had come into range, would close his eyes or look away; in the same way, if evil, unskillful thoughts—connected with desire, aversion, or delusion—still arise in the monk while he is scrutinizing the drawbacks of those thoughts, he should pay no mind and pay no attention to those thoughts....

“Just as the thought would occur to a man walking quickly, ‘Why am I walking quickly? Why don’t I walk slowly?’ So he walks slowly. The thought occurs to him, ‘Why am I walking slowly? Why don’t I stand?’ So he stands. The thought occurs to him, ‘Why am I standing? Why don’t I sit down?’ So he sits down. The thought occurs to him, ‘Why am I sitting? Why don’t I lie down?’ So he lies down. In this way, giving up the grosser posture, he takes up the more refined one. In the same way, if evil, unskillful thoughts—connected with desire, aversion, or delusion—still arise in the monk while he is paying no mind and paying no attention to those thoughts, he should attend to the relaxing of thought-fabrication with regard to those thoughts....

“Just as a strong man, seizing a weaker man by the head or the throat or the shoulders, would beat him down, constrain, & crush him; in the same way, if evil, unskillful thoughts—connected with desire, aversion, or delusion—still arise in the monk while he is attending to the relaxing of thought-fabrication with regard to those thoughts, then—with his teeth clenched and his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth—he should beat down, constrain, & crush his mind with his awareness. As—with his teeth clenched and his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth—he is beating down, constraining, & crushing his mind with his awareness, those evil, unskillful thoughts are abandoned & subside. With their abandoning, he steadies his mind right within, settles it, unifies it, and concentrates it.” — [MN 20](#)

31. Mindfulness, Concentration, & Discernment at the Breath

The Buddha calls his sixteen steps for breath meditation both a mindfulness practice and a concentration practice ([SN 54:8](#)). The way these two aspects of the practice overlap can be shown by how the sixteen steps map both onto the standard formula for right mindfulness and onto the standard formula for right concentration, or the four jhānas.

First, **mindfulness**: [MN 118](#), in describing how the four tetrads map onto the four establishing of mindfulness, shows that the first three tetrads form a set, in that the breath forms the focal point for all three.

In the first tetrad, the act of focusing on the breath counts as keeping track of the body. That's because, in the Buddha's way of classifying physical phenomena, the in-and-out breath counts as part of the wind property in the body ([MN 28](#)). In other words, if we were to classify it under the factors of dependent co-arising, it's an aspect of form, in name and form, rather than an object of the bodily sense medium. So when the Buddha tells you to focus on the breath, he's not telling you to focus on the tactile sensation of air flowing in and out the nose. Instead, he's having you focus on the flow of energy in the body, as felt from within, that allows the air to come in and out.

Now, as we noted when quoting the sixteen steps, when you move to the second tetrad, you don't change your focus away from the breath to feelings; when moving to the third, you don't change your focus from the breath to the mind. Instead, you stay with the breath and notice that, in paying close attention to the breath, you're creating feelings; in order to stay with the breath, you need mind states of mindfulness and alertness. Wherever there's the sensation of breath in the body, feelings are right there. Mind states are right there. In this way, the first three tetrads promote the essential quality of concentration: having a single gathering place for the mind.

At the same time, they work together in performing the first duty of right mindfulness—keeping track of body, feelings, and mind, in and of themselves, all at once. In terms of the determination underlying the path, the first three tetrads promote desires that fall in line with the determination for calm.

The fourth tetrad, though, focuses on the second duty of right mindfulness: subduing greed and distress with reference to the world. However, because this tetrad involves understanding inconstancy to the point of giving rise to dispassion, you do more than simply pacify distracting thoughts, as you would in Ariṭṭha's method. You actually abandon and relinquish them through discernment.

Here, in terms of determination, you're using discernment to truly relinquish any desires that would run counter to your determination for awakening, and in so doing, you bring the mind to calm. In other words, you're employing all four determinations at once.

As for how the sixteen steps of breath meditation relate to the practice of right **concentration** or the four jhānas: Here again, it's important to notice that the practice is aimed, not just at calming the mind, but also at developing discernment.

As we just noted, because the first three tetrads form a set, they provide a single gathering place for the mind, which is the defining feature of concentration. They bring together the three things that characterize any of the four jhānas: the sensation of the body as felt from within, a feeling-tone, and an alert, mindful state of mind.

This fact has two practical applications. The first is that if you have trouble getting the mind to settle down with a sense of ease in the breath, you can look to see which of the tetrads is lacking: Is the problem with the breath, with the feeling-tone, or with the mind? Then you can look to see which of the steps in which tetrad are deficient, so that you can make up the lack.

The second practical application is that, when you read the three tetrads as parallel instructions, you'll notice that one tetrad can fill in details missing from the others. Even though the sixteen steps are the Buddha's most complete meditation instructions, when we compare the tetrads with one another and with other passages in the Canon that describe

meditation, we can see that some details are missing. The Buddha may have chosen the format of sixteen steps—four tetrads of four steps each—for ease of memorization, and expected his students to fill in the implicit steps when teaching their own students.

For instance, the first tetrad makes only one explicit reference to fabrication—calming bodily fabrication—but the standard formula for the factors of awakening says that before the body and mind are calmed, they should first be energized ([MN 118](#)). The second tetrad makes a similar point: You should breathe in a way that allows you to sense rapture and pleasure—here the rapture would be energizing—before you calm mental fabrication. So there would be nothing wrong with filling in two steps in the first tetrad: Before calming bodily fabrication, you sensitize yourself to it and then you use it to energize the body with feelings of rapture and pleasure.

Here’s how the tetrads map onto the jhānas:

The first tetrad—discerning the breath as long or short, training yourself to be sensitive to the entire body, and to calm bodily fabrication—describes the progress of breath meditation up through the fourth jhāna. You start by maintaining focus on the breath and then, as you enter the first jhāna, develop a full-body awareness ([DN 2](#)). The breath grows progressively more refined and calm as you move through the jhānas until you reach the fourth, at which stage in-and-out breathing stops ([SN 36:11](#); [AN 10:20](#); [AN 10:72](#)).

The second tetrad—training yourself to be sensitive to rapture, to be sensitive to pleasure, to be sensitive to mental fabrication (perception and feeling), and to calm mental fabrication—describes the progress from the early stages of meditation up through the cessation of perception and feeling. Rapture is present in the first two jhānas; pleasure, in the first three. Perception plays a role in all the meditative attainments up through the dimension of nothingness ([AN 9:36](#)); as you go through these levels, the underlying perception grows more refined ([MN 121](#)). Similarly with feelings: From the rapture and pleasure of the first two jhānas, feelings become more refined through the equanimous pleasure of the third, and then to the pure equanimity of the fourth, which forms a foundation for the next four formless attainments ([MN 140](#)). Finally, the total calming of

perception and feeling occurs with the cessation of perception and feeling, the ninth attainment.

The question arises, if verbal fabrication ceases with the second jhāna, and the breath with the fourth, how can any of the sixteen steps apply to those attainments or to any of the higher levels of concentration? After all, all of the steps are done in conjunction with breathing, and steps 3 through 16 employ verbal fabrication in the act of training.

The answer is that even though these forms of fabrication are not present in the higher levels of concentration, the mind will sometimes have to make a deliberate choice when moving from one attainment to the next ([MN 121](#); [AN 9:34](#); [AN 9:41](#)). This will require a moment of reflection in which you step back from your full focus before plunging in again. [AN 5:28](#) illustrates this process with the image of a person standing and watching a person sitting down; or a person sitting and watching a person lying down. Verbal and bodily fabrication will resume during those moments of choice, which means that any of the sixteen steps could also be applied at those times.

The third tetrad—training yourself to be sensitive to the mind, to gladden it, to concentrate it, and to release it—covers all the stages of training the mind. You start by simply observing it, and then you train it in the proper direction in any of the following ways through exerting skillful fabrications: bodily, verbal, and mental.

Gladdening begins with the preliminary practices of practicing generosity, observing the precepts, and abandoning the hindrances, practices that give rise to a sense of well-being and joy that can induce the mind to settle down in concentration. The gladdening grows more refined as the mind progresses through the first three jhānas, where you experience rapture and pleasure. It culminates in the joy that accompanies the attainment of the goal ([MN 137](#)).

Concentrating the mind is also a process of progressive refinement up through the cessation of perception and feeling. Although each level of jhāna and each formless attainment grows increasingly steady as you go up the series, only the levels beginning with the fourth jhāna are said to be imperturbable ([MN 106](#)).

Likewise, releasing the mind is a progressive process: You release the mind at least temporarily from the affliction of attending to perceptions of

sensuality on entering the first jhāna, from the affliction of attending to perceptions of directed thought on entering the second jhāna, and so on up through the cessation of perception and feeling. Finally, release from affliction becomes total on reaching unbinding ([AN 9:34](#)).

The fourth tetrad—training yourself to remain focused on inconstancy, dispassion, cessation, and relinquishing—goes into more detail on how the last step in the third tetrad, releasing the mind, is carried out.

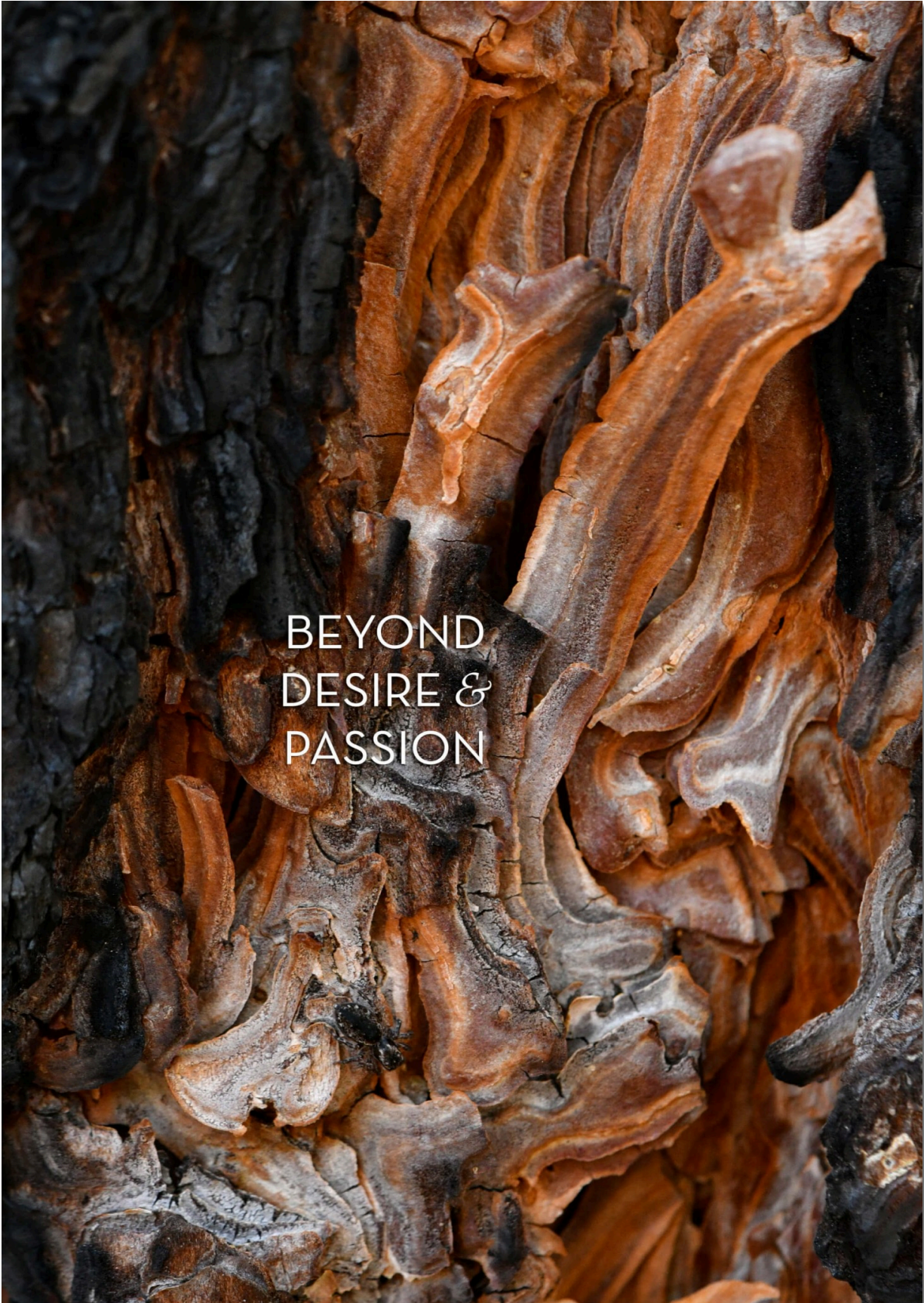
This release, as we just noted, develops through progressive levels of refinement while mastering concentration. But then it goes beyond refinement with the attainment of total unbinding.

In the beginning stages, when you're trying to master concentration, you direct the four steps of this fourth tetrad to any object that would distract you from your theme. In other words, you focus these contemplations on anything that would provoke greed and distress with reference to the world outside of your concentration, seeing the distraction as composed of events (*dhammas*) that are inherently unworthy of attachment. In this way, you wean the mind from the distraction and from the desires and passions underlying it.

When concentration is fully mastered, you then turn these same contemplations onto the internal world of becoming created around the concentration itself. You see that it, too, is composed of dhammas that are inconstant—even though the inconstancy is very subtle—and from that insight you develop dispassion for the process of continuing to fabricate anything at all, even the most refined states of concentration. This dispassion puts an end to the passion that fuels fabrication, so all fabrications cease. At that point, everything—even passion for the deathless—is relinquished, and total unbinding occurs ([AN 9:36](#)).

These are some of the ways in which the four tetrads of the sixteen steps, when developed and pursued, bear great fruit. They start with mindfulness and concentration, and then lead through discernment to dispassion and total release.

However, even though the fourth tetrad gives more detail than the third in explaining how the mind is released, it's still just a bare outline. The Canon has many more useful things to say on the topic.



4. Intimate Causality

After this encouragement, the Buddha would then move the discussion of the power of action from personal to impersonal terms—looking at actions and events in and of themselves, without paying attention to who was doing them or where they were happening. When he did this, his explanations followed the same general outlines as his more personal discussions of actions: The present moment is shaped to some extent by past actions, and to some extent by present actions that have at least the potential to be freely chosen.

The difference was that in some cases he framed his more impersonal explanations in terms of general principles, and in others he went in the other direction, going more into the details.

The general principles establish the overall framework for how causality works in such a way that it's possible, on the one hand, for actions to have long-term consequences and, on the other, for actions in the present moment to be free from past influences. Only in such a causal system can problems arising from causes be solved by attacking the causes here and now.

The more detailed explanations show precisely how desire and passion play a role in giving rise to suffering, and how they can be used to put an end to it. In fact, one of these explanations—called dependent co-arising—will provide the framework for the remainder of this book. As we explore it, we'll see:

- the places in the causal system where intentional action plays a role in giving rise to suffering;
- the places where desire and passion also play a role, both as conditions for the ignorance that's key to the creation of suffering, and as its results; and
- the ways in which the knowledge that overcomes ignorance allows for intentional actions to fall in line with the triple training that leads to

the end of suffering.

Exploring both of the Buddha's main impersonal teachings—the general causal principle and its detailed application—allows us to understand the *what* and *why* of his teachings. Exploring the ways in which these teachings shape the training that puts an end to suffering helps to explain not only what he taught his listeners to do, but also *who* he chose to teach and *how* he trained them.

The most important of the Buddha's general formulations of his impersonal explanations of action is a causal principle called *this/that conditionality*. This principle gets its name from the fact that all the causal factors it describes are events and actions immediately present to your awareness: “this right here,” “that right there.” Instead of pointing to causal factors behind the scenes, it says, in effect, that all you need to know about the causes of suffering for the sake of putting an end to it are things that you can point to in your direct experience as “this” or “that.”

Keep this fact in mind. When the Buddha describes things in impersonal terms, he's not talking about faraway abstractions. He's focusing on events and actions that can be intimately known—so intimately that they're often overlooked. He's telling you to look closely at what's happening and what you're doing in your immediate experience. As we'll see, these actions and events are even more intimate than the sense of you and your world that you build out of them.

The Buddha describes this/that conditionality with four statements that sound very simple on the surface.

“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*](#)

At first glance, these statements seem to say nothing more than that there are causes that lead to effects, and that every effect coming from a cause that can pass away will also have to pass away. But when you look at the statements more carefully, taking the connected statements in pairs,

you see that there are actually two slightly different principles interacting. This is what makes this/that conditionality complex.

The first pair is this: “When this is, that is.... When this isn’t, that isn’t.” This pair describes causality in the present moment. The result appears at the same time that the cause appears. When the cause disappears, the result immediately disappears as well.

The second pair describes causality over time: “From the arising of this, comes the arising of that.... From the cessation of this, comes the cessation of that.” The cause may appear and disappear in one time period, but the effect can come and go either right away or much later.

An example of the first kind of causality would be putting your finger in a flame. You don’t have to wait until your next lifetime to get the result. It burns right away. When you pull it out of the flame, it stops burning. Similarly, if you spit into the wind, it’s going to come right back at you and then stop.

An example of the second type of causality: You put your finger into a fire and then pull it out, but even though it’s out of the fire, it still has the marks of a burn that will take time to heal but ultimately will go away. Another example would be planting a tree seed in a forest. You won’t get a mature tree right away. It’ll take time, long after you stopped the action of planting the seed. And the tree may live for a very long time. But then, because the seed is impermanent, the tree will eventually have to die.

The fact that these two principles are always acting together means that at any one moment in time, you will experience a combination of three things:

- 1) the results of various actions that happened in the past, some in the far distant past, others more recently;
- 2) your present actions;
- 3) some of the results of those present actions.

From the point of view of kamma, this means that your experience is shaped to some extent by past actions, but not totally. It’s also shaped by present actions. In fact, as we’ll see in the next chapter, without present actions, there can be no experience of the results of past actions.

At all.

The principle of the mind's proactive nature extends that far.

Now,

(1) because the mind that acts can also be aware of its actions and any immediate results of its actions, and

(2) because all the causes and effects you need to know are immediately present to your awareness, then

the fact that some causes lead to immediate results allows for some very quick feedback loops in the process. In other words, you see the immediate results of your actions and, if they're good, you decide to continue with those actions. If they're bad, you can stop what you're doing. If you put your finger in a fire then, unless your senses are impaired, you'll feel the pain and immediately pull your finger away. Or if, while meditating, you sense that the way you choose to breathe is making you uncomfortable, you can change mid-breath.

However, there are many reasons why we might respond inappropriately to the results of our own actions, making mistakes in interpreting what's causing what.

—We might be insensitive to what we're doing, or we might not make the connection between an immediate cause and its immediate effect.

—At the same time, the results of actions, in terms of sights, sounds, etc., don't come with labels indicating which actions they come from, whether present, past, or far-distant past. In fact, because kamma seeds don't all sprout at the same rate, it's often the case in any given moment that we're experiencing the results of present actions and past actions that come from many different times and places. This means that many different feedback loops between action, result, awareness, and new actions might all be happening at the same time. This is how this/that conditionality can get complex and confusing. As a result, we might misread a moment of suffering in the present, thinking that it's coming from something we did in the past, when actually it's a result of something we're doing right now—or vice versa. In either case, we can easily respond inappropriately.

—Another reason for not seeing the connections between our actions and their results is that our views might prevent us from doing so. We

might believe either that no past actions can affect our present experience, or that no present actions can have an effect right now. An example in the Canon is of a group of sectarians who believe that all pleasures and pains come from past actions. They practice severe austerities and, because of their beliefs, think that the pain they're feeling comes from burning off old unskillful kamma, when actually it comes from the austerities themselves ([MN 101](#)).

—And as I noted earlier, some unskillful actions can lead to pleasant sights, sounds, etc., right now, to the point where we desensitize ourselves to the fact that the actions in and of themselves come from uncomfortable mind-states.

So even though this/that conditionality focuses on intimate parts of our experience, the fact that we can be ignorant of our most intimate relations—with events in our own minds—means that we can often abuse those relationships. Every action we make is for the sake of happiness, but many of those actions often end up causing suffering for ourselves and for those around us.

14. The Names of Unbinding

More generally, though, the Buddha pointed out the desirable features of unbinding through the many names he gave to it. In a series of discourses, he listed 33 names in all, and even that list isn't exhaustive ([SN 43](#)).

Linguistically, most of the names fall into three general sorts: those that describe a limitation that doesn't exist in unbinding, those that describe a positive quality, and those that are metaphorical. Examples of the first sort would include *unborn*, *unmade*, *deathless*, *undeceptive*. Examples of the second would include *truth*, *permanence*, and *the ultimate*. Examples of the third would include *harbor*, *shelter*, and *refuge*.

In terms of the characteristics of unbinding that these names indicate, they fall into five classes:

1. Unbinding is experienced as a type of *consciousness*. This consciousness is said to be “unrestricted,” “without surface,” and “unestablished,” meaning that it makes contact with no object at all, not even consciousness itself ([MN 49](#) ; [AN 10:81](#) ; [Ud 8:1](#)). The Buddha illustrates these terms with a simile: a beam of light that lands on no surface anywhere, causing nothing to reflect it ([SN 12:64](#)). That's why it's said to be without surface. Still, even this simile is inadequate, because a light beam moves in only one direction, whereas this consciousness lies beyond all directions, in that it exists outside of space and time.

This is why it doesn't fall under the consciousness aggregate, which is limited to acts of consciousness within the coordinates of near and far, past, present, and future ([SN 22:59](#)). As the Buddha says, unestablished consciousness contains no coming nor going nor staying in place, as these activities would assume time; it has no here nor there nor between-the-two, as these concepts assume space ([Ud 1:10](#)). Existing outside of space and time, this consciousness is without end.

This consciousness is also unlike the consciousness aggregate, even in the meditative state of the infinitude of consciousness, in that it isn't known through the six senses. This is why unbinding is said to be *subtle* and *hard-to-see*. Yet because this consciousness is a form of knowing, the Buddha states that it's a mistake to say that fully awakened people do not know or see ([DN 15](#)). In other words, awakening is not a blanking out. If it were, the Buddha wouldn't have called it awakening to begin with ([SN 1:7–8](#)). He would have called it the Big Sleep. Actually, people who are fully awakened know and see to such a heightened extent that they're beyond even the need for conviction in what the Buddha taught ([SN 48:44](#); [Dhp 97](#)).

2. The second aspect of unbinding is its *truth*. Because it's *unfabricated*, *unborn*, *unmade*, it's not dependent on conditions, so it can't change into anything else. Ever. As the Buddha said, whatever is unfabricated has three characteristics: No arising is discernible, no passing away is discernible, no alteration while staying is discernible ([AN 3:48](#)). After all, it's outside of time. This is why he calls unbinding *ageless*, *undecaying*, *deathless*, *undeceptive*, *unwavering*, *permanence*, *unbent* (i.e., not tending in any direction), and *true*.

This truth also has a moral dimension: It's *purity*.

Because unbinding is a state (*pada*) rather than a being (*satta*), it doesn't have to be defined by attachment, so the Canon doesn't hesitate to say that it unequivocally *exists* ([Ud 8:1](#); [Ud 8:3](#)). And as I've noted, there's even one passage where the Buddha calls it the highest noble truth ([MN 140](#)).

3. The third positive aspect of unbinding is that it's the ultimate *sukha*—a term that can be translated as pleasure, happiness, ease, or bliss. Unbinding, as experienced in this lifetime, is invariably described as pleasurable: It's *bliss*, *the exquisite*, and *the unafflicted*. Just as consciousness without surface is totally apart from the consciousness aggregate, the bliss of unbinding is totally apart from the pleasure that comes under the feeling aggregate ([SN 36:19](#)).

Given that unbinding is unfabricated, it has no need for nutriment, which means that its bliss has nothing lacking. So the fully awakened person is said to be *hunger-free*. And because this bliss is known independently of the six sense media, it's not affected even by that

person's death ([MN 49](#); [Iti 44](#)), which is why the Buddha calls unbinding *peace, rest, the secure, security, island, shelter, harbor, and refuge*.

4. However, even though unbinding is pleasant, fully awakened people don't cling to this pleasure, so they're not limited by it. They're said to be beyond both pleasure and pain ([Ud 1:10](#)), and also free: free from the slightest disturbance or limitation, free from fabrication, free from the fires of passion, aversion, and delusion, free from passion for dispassion ([Sn 4:4](#)), and—as we've noted many times—free even from the confines of space and time. Because locations come from the desire and passion of craving, and because unbinding is free of craving, it doesn't count as a “place” at all. For this reason, those who fully attain it are said to be *everywhere released* and *everywhere independent* ([Dhp 348](#); [Sn 4:6](#)). Like the light beam that doesn't reflect off of anything, they can't even be located.

For these reasons, the fourth positive aspect of unbinding—and the one most emphasized in the Canon—is that it's total *freedom*.

This freedom is indicated in a general sense by the Buddha's two most common epithets for unbinding: the term *unbinding* itself, and *release*. Because, in line with the underlying metaphor of the extinguishing of fire, freedom comes from letting go, the remaining epithets for this freedom focus on the fact that unbinding is free from all the clinging defilements that cause suffering and stress: It's *attachment-free, free from longing, the ending of craving, and dispassion*. And as the Buddha indicates, the freedom of a person whose mind is released is no different from the freedom of the Buddha himself ([SN 22:58](#)).

5. In all the above aspects—consciousness, truth, bliss, and freedom—unbinding excels everything that there is, so its fifth aspect is its *excellence*. There's nothing to equal it, much less to exceed or surpass it. The Buddha calls it *the amazing, the astounding, the ultimate, and the beyond*.

Of these five aspects of unbinding, the fourth—total freedom—is the one the Buddha most frequently associates with dispassion. To wean his listeners away from their ordinary infatuation with their desires and passions, he frequently refers to desire and passion as fetters, and to dispassion as being free from fetters or confinement of any sort ([SN 35:63](#)). To illustrate this point, Ven. Sāriputta provides a simile:

Ven. Sāriputta: “Suppose that a black ox and a white ox were joined with a single collar or yoke. If someone were to say, ‘The black ox is the fetter of the white ox, the white ox is the fetter of the black’—speaking this way, would he be speaking rightly?”

Ven. Mahā Koṭṭhita: “No, my friend. The black ox isn’t the fetter of the white ox, nor is the white ox the fetter of the black. The single collar or yoke by which they are joined: That’s the fetter there.”

Ven. Sāriputta: “In the same way, the eye isn’t the fetter of forms, nor are forms the fetter of the eye. Whatever desire & passion arises in dependence on the two of them: That’s the fetter there.

[Similarly with the remaining senses.] ...

“Now, there is an eye in the Blessed One [the Buddha]. The Blessed One sees forms with the eye. There is no desire or passion in the Blessed One. The Blessed One is well-released in mind.

“There is an ear in the Blessed One...

“There is a nose in the Blessed One...

“There is a tongue in the Blessed One...

“There is a body in the Blessed One...

“There is an intellect in the Blessed One. The Blessed One knows ideas with the intellect. There is no desire or passion in the Blessed One. The Blessed One is well-released in mind.” — [*SN 35:191*](#)

21. Virtue as Attitudes (1)

In addition to the rules of the Vinaya, a monk's training in virtue is also expressed in terms of attitudes he should adopt and qualities of character he should develop. There are many lists of these qualities in the Canon—we've already encountered one list in the Buddha's rebuke to Ven. Sudinna—but here we'll focus on three that seem most basic.

The first is a list that connects virtue with the quality of heart and mind called conviction—which in this context, means conviction in three things: that the Buddha was truly awakened, that he taught the Dhamma rightly in line with that awakening, and that the Saṅgha of his noble disciples has practiced rightly in line with that Dhamma and, at the very least, have gained a glimpse of that awakening as well ([AN 10:92](#)). These three objects of conviction boil down essentially to one: The Buddha's awakening was true.

The standard accounts of the Buddha's awakening state that he gained knowledge of three things:

1) Rebirth is a fact. At death, as long as there is still craving and clinging—desire and passion—you will be reborn in a new state of becoming, which can be either more pleasant or less pleasant than your current state. The Buddha never addresses the question of *what* gets reborn, but his teaching on dependent co-arising is a thorough discussion of *how* the process happens. And that's what matters: You're not responsible for the what, but you can do something about the how.

2) The type of becoming in which you take birth is determined by your actions. Skillful actions—intentions based on right view concerning action and rebirth—will lead to pleasant states of becoming. Unskillful intentions—based on wrong views that deny the power of action—will lead to painful states of becoming. This means that what you do now will have an impact not only in this lifetime, but also in lives to come. However, because these future states of becoming are based on causes that don't last forever, they,

too, will have to come to an end, as craving and clinging will lead to further becoming.

3) The process of further becoming can be brought to an end by putting an end to craving and clinging ([MN 19](#)), which is the same as subduing desire and passion. As a result of this knowledge, the Buddha was unbound.

Conviction in the Buddha's awakening means conviction in the truth of these three knowledges and the resulting unbinding. The fundamental need for this conviction when you take on the training is underlined by the fact that when the Buddha announced his decision to teach, conviction was the first thing he asked of his listeners:

Open are the doors to the deathless.

Let those with ears show their conviction. — [MN 26](#)

Conviction in the Buddha's awakening connects directly with the practice of virtue in that if you don't want to create suffering for yourself, you'll want to act in a way that causes no one any harm. This is the principle that underlies the Buddha's teachings to his son, and all his teachings on the topic of virtue.

The Buddha knew that he couldn't provide empirical proofs for the truths of action and rebirth to other people. Only when they had gained a first glimpse of awakening themselves would their confidence in these teachings be verified. So his challenge was to get his listeners to see that this confidence and conviction were desirable qualities to develop.

In some cases, the obvious force of his character was enough to convince some of his listeners. For others who were more skeptical, though, he would provide pragmatic proofs: If you consider how you'd behave if you took these knowledges as working hypotheses, you'll realize that you'd tend to behave in a more skillful way than if you didn't. Then if it turned out that the Buddha's knowledges were true, you would have made yourself safe. At the very least, you would have created the conditions for a good rebirth. If it turned out that his knowledges weren't true, you would still benefit. In one version of the argument, the Buddha describes this last benefit as being able to rest assured that you haven't created hostility, ill will, or trouble for yourself ([AN 3:66](#)). In another

version, the benefit is the consolation that your views and behavior would be praised by the wise ([MN 60](#)).

Obviously, these last arguments would be convincing only for certain people: those who want to avoid hostility and who care about the opinion of the wise—in other words, people who are willing to step back from their immediate desires to reflect objectively on the results of acting on them and who have a healthy sense of honor and shame. Given that the Buddha was teaching a course of training that involves both listening to the instructions of others and reflecting on your own actions, it follows that these are the people he would want to teach. You can take advantage of admirable friendship, the primary *external* factor leading to the first glimpse of awakening, only if you have a sense of shame toward those who are wise. You can develop appropriate attention, the primary *internal* factor leading to the first glimpse of awakening, only if you're willing to reflect objectively on your actions and their results, with an aim to being harmless. If you couldn't muster these two attitudes, the training wouldn't work. You would lie outside of the range of the Buddha's instructions.

This is why, even though the Buddha is said to be the teacher of human and divine beings, he wasn't the teacher of everyone. The standard description of the Buddha's qualities is careful to state that he's the unexcelled leader of *those fit to be tamed*. If you're not fit to be tamed, he wouldn't try to teach you. But if you can learn to develop the proper sense of objectivity and healthy shame, you can make yourself worthy of the Buddha's course of training.

That's why conviction often comes first in many lists of virtuous attitudes. It's the foundation post of the fortress of the practice ([AN 7:63](#)).

35. Relinquishing the Path

The Canon stresses again and again that to put an end to suffering and stress, desire and passion have to be brought to an end in a thoroughgoing way. This may be why, when the Buddha introduced his son to the path, he used the image of a mirror: You have to reflect and examine your mind thoroughly to make sure there's no trace of blemish ([MN 61](#)).

For instance, we've just seen that the Buddha recommended reflecting not only on present fabrications in the here and now, but also on all fabrications past, present, and future, near and far. And in our discussions of concentration, we've noted frequently that you have to reflect on the drawbacks of concentration, after having mastered it if you want to gain total freedom.

However, this reflection has to apply not only to right concentration, but also to all other aspects of the triple training and the noble eightfold path as well.

This fact is shown by the final use of the Buddha's five-step program: to induce dispassion for the five faculties, which are an expanded expression of the triple training. The five faculties are conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. The faculty of conviction is developed through the training in heightened virtue; the faculties of persistence, mindfulness, and concentration through the training in the heightened mind; and the faculty of discernment through the training in heightened discernment. [SN 48:3](#) states that when you investigate these five faculties using all five steps of the program—discerning their origination, their passing away, their allure, their drawbacks, and the escape from them—you arrive at the first level of awakening: stream-entry. [SN 48:4](#) states that when your mind is released from all clinging—all desire and passion—on discerning these five aspects of the faculties, you attain full awakening.

We've discussed many examples of how to subdue desire and passion for right concentration. Here, to round out the picture, we can cite two examples of how to subdue desire and passion for right effort and right view.

Both examples are conversations. In the conversation concerning *right effort*, a devatā comes to the Buddha and asks him how he crossed over the flood—in other words, how he crossed over the flood of becoming and ignorance to get to the deathless on the other side.

Then a certain devatā, in the far extreme of the night, her extreme radiance lighting up the entirety of Jeta's Grove, went to the Blessed One. On arrival, having bowed down to him, she stood to one side. As she was standing there, she said to him, "Tell me, dear sir, how you crossed over the flood."

"I crossed over the flood without pushing forward, without staying in place."

"But how, dear sir, did you cross over the flood without pushing forward, without staying in place?"

"When I pushed forward, I was whirled about. When I stayed in place, I sank. And so I crossed over the flood without pushing forward, without staying in place."

The devatā:

"At long last I see
a brahman, totally unbound,
who without pushing forward,
 without staying in place,
has crossed over
 the entanglements
 of the world." — [*SN 1:1*](#)

The conversation ends there, with the Buddha not really answering the devatā's question of *how* he neither pushed forward nor stayed in place. He only tells her *why*. Perhaps he sensed that the devatā wouldn't have understood; perhaps he knew she—along with all other meditators—would have to explore the issue herself. But we

can gain a sense of what he's talking about by referring to other passages in the Canon.

As we've noted, all phenomena are rooted in desire. The definition of the four noble truths takes this general statement and makes it more specific. Each process of becoming, both on the small scale and on the large, coalesces around a nucleus of desire, the act of craving that relishes "now here, now there" ([SN 56:11](#)). In fact, this act of craving is what creates the "here" and "there," both for the world of becoming and for your identity within it.

As you develop the path, a sense of location is necessary for centering the mind and developing all the other skillful qualities of the path around that center, so on this level of right effort there is a need for a "here" and a "there." For instance, as [AN 9:41](#) shows, there are times when you want the mind to stay *here* in concentration, and not go *there* into afflictive distractions; there are other times when you want it to go from this state of concentration here to that better state of concentration there. The allure of right effort in cases like this is that it enables you to get the mind to go where you want it to, in line with the determination to keep training for calm.

But when the path has been fully developed, there's no longer any need for that sense of location. You see it as a disturbance, and your determination on calm allows you to see the drawbacks of right effort in that it keeps you stuck in the here and there of space and time.

This determination leads to one last manifestation of desire and effort prior to awakening, as—in the words of [AN 9:36](#)—you *turn your mind away* from the aggregates you've been creating through right effort in the practice of jhāna, and you *incline it* to the property of deathlessness:

“This is peace, this is exquisite—the pacification of all fabrications; the relinquishment of all acquisitions; the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; unbinding.”

If the dispassion at this point is total, it subdues desire and passion for all phenomena, all desires and determinations, skillful or

unskillful, even the sense of “here” and “there” within the mind. As was the case in the Buddha’s questionnaire in [SN 22:59](#), you drop the parameters of space entirely. With no here and there, there’s no need to choose between staying in place here and pushing forward to there. In fact, there’s nothing to do—nothing the mind *can* do—so there’s no fabrication, even the fabrication of the intention not to fabricate. When even these basic orientations in the world can be abandoned, right effort loses its orientation, and the mind is freed from the worlds of becoming entirely.

As [Ud 8:1](#) states, in the dimension of unbinding there is neither coming nor going, and that’s because, as [Ud 8:4](#) adds, that dimension has neither a here nor a there nor a between-the-two from which you could come or to which you could go. The total subduing of desire and passion for right effort, in abandoning all sense of here and there, is directly connected to that dimension.

As for seeing the allure, drawbacks, and escape from *right view*: One of the distinctive features of right view is that it contains the seeds for its own transcendence. That’s because it gives you insight into the fact of fabrication and also the value of fabrication. After it has helped you to see the allure, drawbacks, and escape from wrong views and all other forms of fabrication, if your reflective gaze is all around and you’re truly training for calm, you can’t help but notice that right view itself is an instance of fabrication, so it must have the same drawbacks as well. You see that its allure lies in the fact that it has freed you from many fetters, but its drawbacks lie in that, as a fabrication, it can’t, in itself, provide you with total calm. If you hold to it, you’re clinging to inconstancy and stress. This realization allows you to find the escape in subduing desire and passion for right view.

We’ve already seen this dynamic at work in the case of the teaching, “All phenomena are not-self” ([MN 35](#); [Dhp 277–279](#)). A more extended example comes from a conversation between Anāthapiṇḍika, one of the Buddha’s lay students, and a group of wanderers. The conversation begins with the wanderers’ asking Anāthapiṇḍika to tell them the Buddha’s views. He, even though he has had his first glimpse of awakening, responds that he doesn’t

know the entirety of the Buddha's views, nor of the views of the Buddha's fully awakened disciples.

The wanderers sneer at his response and ask him his own views. He replies that he'd be happy to tell them his views, but first he'd like to hear theirs.

They reply with the standard hot issues of the day: whether the world is eternal or not, infinite or not; whether the soul is the same as the body or something separate; whether a fully awakened being, after death, could be described as existing, not existing, both, or neither.

When this had been said, Anāthapiṇḍika the householder said to the wanderers, "As for the venerable one who says, '*The cosmos is eternal. Only this is true; anything otherwise is worthless.* This is the sort of view I have,' his view arises from his own inappropriate attention or in dependence on the words of another. Now, this view has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen. Whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen: That is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stressful. This venerable one thus adheres to that very stress, submits himself to that very stress." [Similarly for the nine other view-standpoints expounded by the wanderers.]

When this had been said, the wanderers said to Anāthapiṇḍika the householder, "We have each & every one expounded to you in line with our own view-standpoints. Now tell us what views you have."

"Whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen: That is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stressful. Whatever is stressful is not me, is not what I am, is not my self. This is the sort of view I have."

"So, householder, whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen: That is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stressful. You thus adhere to that very stress, submit yourself to that very stress."

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

When this was said, the wanderers fell silent, abashed, sitting with their shoulders drooping, their heads down, brooding, at a loss for words. — [AN 10:93](#)

Right view allows Anāthapiṇḍika to see the escape from right view because it regards all views, not so much in terms of their content, but in terms of their fabricated nature: They’re brought into being, willed, and dependently co-arisen. When you focus on the fact of their fabrication, you get a clear view of their value.

In the case of wrong views, you see that they’re not worth the effort. The worst among them can induce you to do many unskillful things that lead to miserable destinations. Even the best among them, if you cling to them, entail stress.

But if your training in commitment and reflection is really all-around, you can’t help but turn the analysis onto the fabricated nature of right view itself. You see that the value of right view is that it frees you from the suffering inherent in wrong views. The pleasure that comes with that freedom is its allure. Its drawback, though, is the same as that of right effort and right concentration: It’s fabricated, like all other views. The fact that, ultimately, right view points you to this value judgment is what makes it right. It directs you to the escape from itself: Seeing that it’s not worth claiming as you or yours, it induces you to subdue desire and passion for it and for everything else so that you can gain all-around release.

37. To Summarize

We noted at the beginning of this book that when Ven. Sāriputta introduced the Buddha's teachings as the subduing of desire and passion, he was making five implicit assertions:

1) *The mind is not simply on the receiving end of experiences.* It can influence events both inside and out. In fact, it's the primary source of your experiences. If this were not the case, very little would be accomplished by subduing mental acts of desire and passion. There would have been no reason for the Buddha to focus his teachings on this or any other mental action. But because the mind is the primary agent shaping experience, and because desire is the root of all its actions, this is the right place to start.

2) *The mind has the power of choice and can change directions quickly.* Its experience of the present moment is not totally determined by forces coming from outside or from its own past. If it didn't have the power to change its ways and choose to subdue desire and passion here and now, again, there would have been no reason for the Buddha to teach.

3) *The Buddha's teaching is essentially a how-to teaching:* one that gives instructions, not only on what to believe, but also, and more importantly, on what to *do* so as to enjoy the rewards of subduing desire and passion.

4) *That how-to teaching is based on a value judgment:* Your actions should be judged by their results, and the best actions are those that release you from the fetter of desire and passion, and from suffering as a whole.

5) *There is a paradoxical element in the teachings* in that the Buddha had to rouse in his listeners the desire and passion to want to subdue desire and passion. In this way, he had to be operating strategically, or else he'd be trapped in an inconsistency.

We also noted that, in making these implicit assertions, Sāriputta was raising a number of questions, so as to guide his listeners in their further inquiry into the practice of the Buddha's teachings. The purpose of this book has been to provide some extended answers to those questions. By way of summary, though, here are some short answers.

1) The first question, based on the assumption that the mind plays a creative role in shaping its experience: In what way does it create suffering and how do its workings allow it to stop doing that?

Suffering isn't something the mind simply receives. It's something it does. The suffering itself is the act of feeding, through desire and passion, on the aggregates. It wants a happiness out of the aggregates that the aggregates can provide only in small measure, not enough to give any real satisfaction.

But the fault doesn't lie with the aggregates. The fault lies with the desire and passion. Those are the things that need to be abandoned.

That's because the mind doesn't experience the aggregates ready-made. Through its desires and passions, it plays a role in shaping the aggregates. The three types of fabrication in the present moment—bodily, verbal, and mental—take the potentials for the aggregates resulting from past actions and turn them into actual fabricated aggregates. They do this for the sake of a purpose rooted in desire. In effect, the mind is fixing its own food, but because the desires and passions that provided the raw ingredients and those that drive the fabrications that fix food from those ingredients are inconstant and stressful, the resulting food is inconstant and stressful as well.

This means that the present moment isn't composed of static facts. It's composed of purposeful actions, driven by an aim for results. It's done *for the sake of* having aggregates to experience, and those aggregates are done *for the sake of* happiness. All of these actions are based on desire coming from a value judgment: that the happiness resulting from the act of fabricating aggregates is worth the effort that goes into it.

Because each moment is created for the sake of results, the mind's relationship to every moment contains two assumptions: One, the mind is able to choose its actions, to at least some extent, to get the results it wants; and, two, it's luminous enough that it can observe its actions so as

to judge whether those actions got the desired results, or if something should be changed.

Suffering comes when our powers of observation—and the resulting value judgments—are distorted by ignorance. It's because of this ignorance that even though experience is shaped by intentions, it doesn't necessarily turn out the way those intentions intended it to be.

Ignorance means both a lack of knowledge and a lack of skill. In terms of knowledge, we may be blinded by our desires and passions so that we can't see the connections between our actions and their results. We want the actions we like to yield results we like, and we refuse to admit when those actions actually cause harm. We either deny the harm or deny that it was connected to our actions in any way at all. As a result, we often end up denying responsibility for the harm we've caused. This type of ignorance comes from a failure—sometimes willful, sometimes not—in our powers of observation.

In terms of skill, our ignorance comes from limitations in our skill set: We know only a small range of actions, and can't imagine other ways of acting or the results they could yield. So we've limited ourselves to choices that all turn out unsatisfactorily. This type of ignorance comes from a failure in imagination in exploring our powers of choice.

From the Buddha's point of view, the most serious form of ignorance comes from a failure both in observation and in skill: We're ignorant of the fact that there is a path of action that can lead to a deathless happiness, one that provides complete satisfaction. So we keep trying to satisfy ourselves with the lesser pleasures provided by the aggregates, putting up with whatever failures—moral or cognitive—they entail. We're blind to the fact that there's something infinitely better.

What needs to be done is to have conviction, as a working hypothesis, in the possibility of a path to a deathless happiness. Based on that hypothesis, we can learn to exercise our powers of choice, observation, and judgment so as to get on that path and follow it to the end.

2) How can the mind learn to change its ways and head in the right direction?

Simply trying to stop desire and passion won't work, and you can't just wish your desires and passions away. You need to take on a course of

training, pitting the overarching desire for awakening against all the various desires that would get in the way. This overarching desire takes four forms: the determinations on discernment, truth, relinquishment, and calm. You're determined to discern which actions actually lead to long-term happiness, you're truthful in admitting your own mistakes, and you relinquish whatever desires and passions get in the way of the calm that can come only with total freedom.

These determinations, in turn, are motivated by the thoughts and perceptions—the verbal and mental fabrications—motivated by the view that the subduing of those contrary desires and passions will lead to freedom from all things that limit and constrain the mind. This is why the Buddha frequently associated passion with being fettered, and dispassion with being unfettered: He wanted his listeners to make the same association and to act on it.

This battle between skillful and unskillful desires will be won through discernment, as it learns to detect the *fact* of fabrication and can arrive at a true judgment of the *value* of fabrication. But, on its own, discernment of general principles won't be enough to win the battle. Desire and passion are not monolithic, nor do they function in the abstract. Your discernment will have to become pragmatic and strategic in order to deal with specific desires and passions that have many different strategies of their own. To do this, it'll have to be helped by a complete training of your thoughts, words, and deeds.

3) What kind of training does the Buddha propose? Also, given that his teaching will have to involve a training, how does that influence not only what he taught, but also how he taught it, why he taught, who he would teach, and what kind of people he wanted to train them to be?

The Buddha proposes a course of training that develops

—your powers of truth and choice as you *commit* to a path of practice aimed at the subduing of desire and passion, and

—your powers of honest observation, based on the luminosity of the mind, as you *reflect* on the results of that commitment, to see where it could be improved to be more in line with that overarching aim.

This training starts with instructions from others, which is the first reason that the Buddha asked for honesty and conviction in those he was

going to train. If you don't have conviction in those who are training you, and are not honest in reporting what's going on in your mind, the student-teacher relationship won't work.

Over time, the training evolves into self-training, as you educate yourself: another reason why the Buddha asked for conviction and honesty, plus good powers of self-observation. To learn from your own actions, you have to be honest with yourself about what you're doing and about the results that come from what you're doing and have done.

To embark on this self-training, you need to develop a healthy sense of self that manifests in three functions: a sense of yourself as an agent capable of committing to the training, a sense of yourself as the enjoyer who will benefit from the training, and a sense of yourself as the inner commentator who can reflect on how well the training is going and can offer suggestions on how to keep it on course.

Eventually, the training will require that you put aside all sense of self, but only after you have mastered these three functions and they have done all the work that needs to be done to develop the path.

The training itself covers three skills: training in heightened virtue, the heightened mind, and heightened discernment. These qualities become heightened as they strengthen one another through continual commitment and repeated reflection.

As you commit to the training in virtue, you overcome the gross unskillful desires that would cause you to harm yourself or others. As you reflect on what you learn as you do battle with the desires that run counter to your precepts—sometimes winning, sometimes losing—you become more sensitive to the intentions behind your actions. This sensitivity will help your concentration and discernment in forcing you to be scrupulously honest and truthful with yourself.

In particular, virtue makes you sensitive to the mental qualities you bring to each action, and to the fact that events in the mind prior to outward actions—such as perception and intention—actually play a crucial role in shaping your experience. You see the fact of fabrication more clearly. And you realize that it's only through honesty that your powers of observation can actually yield good results.

When you commit to the training in the heightened mind, the process of developing concentration helps your discernment in that it brings the

mind to a state of calm where it can see subtle events within it more clearly, with a minimum of background mental noise. As you reflect on how you get the mind into concentration and keep it there, you become sensitized to the workings of the mind, both as you see how it falls under the influence of the hindrances and as you learn to overcome those hindrances and successfully fashion states of concentration out of the three types of fabrication.

Discernment becomes heightened as you commit to the triple training (or, in its expanded form, to the five faculties) by bringing the four determinations to that commitment, and then again as you bring those determinations to the five-step program of reflection that takes direct aim at subduing desire and passion. You begin by applying this program to the desires and passions that go against the training. Ultimately, you apply it to the desires and passions underlying the training itself. In this way, the training takes you beyond itself to the freedom of a dispassion that's truly thorough and all-around.

That's *what* the Buddha taught. As for *how* he taught: Because he had to inspire in his listeners the desire to take on the training, he didn't limit his teachings to providing information. In addition to instructing his listeners, he also urged, roused, and encouraged them. Examples we've seen of his urging them include his recommendations to the monks to practice mindfulness immersed in the body as a basis for sense restraint, and to Rāhula to refrain from telling falsehoods even in jest. Examples of rousing his listeners include the similes that compare the good meditator to elephants who can steel themselves in battle and to a warrior who comes out of a battle victorious. Examples of encouraging them include the passages where he talks of the all-too-human difficulties he himself faced and overcame in conquering his fears and finding the right way, the message being that if he could do it, so can you.

The images the Buddha used in this way point to another aspect of how he taught: Just as he was teaching his listeners to replace their unskillful desires with new, more skillful ones, he also gave them examples of how to engage in the three types of fabrication in skillful ways as part of the path. As dependent co-arising shows, these fabrications, if done in ignorance, lead to suffering. But as the Buddha's teaching methods show, if they're done with knowledge, they can lead to suffering's end. They're

the fabrications that can induce dispassion for the causes of suffering that won't go away when you simply watch their comings and goings with equanimity.

His many similes, for instance, are examples of skillful perceptions, or mental fabrications. He gives you many examples of how to use skillful verbal fabrications as you talk to yourself, as when he taught Rāhula to train himself: "I will not tell a deliberate lie even in jest" or when he taught the monks in general how to talk to themselves to generate right effort and to develop qualities like restraint of the senses, contentment, and concentration. He even teaches you how to breathe in a way that's conducive to awakening.

As for *why* he taught: As we come to appreciate the Buddha's course of training, we can see that he wasn't interested in teaching others simply for the sake of gaining their assent, for winning debates, or for exerting power over his listeners. He wanted to train people in how to stop causing themselves to suffer. As he saw it, people were bewildered by their sufferings and were seeking someone who might show them how to put an end to those sufferings ([AN 6:63](#)). He offered them an effective answer to their search. He asked for nothing in return but that they practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, putting his teachings into practice to gain the freedom that comes from disenchantment with fabrications and from total dispassion ([DN 16](#); [SN 12:67](#)). In short, he was motivated by pure compassion.

As for *who* the Buddha would teach, we've already noted the qualities he looked for in a potential student: someone who was honest and observant, willing to act on conviction in what he taught. He would train this person to use these qualities in the direction of becoming virtuous, exercising restraint of the senses, becoming wakeful, and knowing moderation in eating. He also noted that, to be worthy of the Dhamma, you have to be content with few material possessions, modest, reclusive, persistent, mindful, concentrated, and discerning. You also have to learn to delight in non-objectification: freeing the mind from thoughts that lead to conflict. That's the kind of person he would train you to be.

When you become fully awakened, you no longer have any need for conviction, because conviction in the Buddha's awakening has now been replaced by knowledge. As for the other qualities developed on the path,

you're no longer "made" of them—in other words, you no longer need to create a sense of self around them to perfect them—but they're still available for you to use in the work of teaching others and in maintaining a comfortable abiding for the mind until it's totally released at death.

4) What sort of arguments does the Buddha propose on the topic of life after death? And how objective are the standards he uses for judging actions and their results?

The Buddha knew he couldn't prove the fact of rebirth to others, and that they would have to come to know it for themselves through the practice. However, he saw that belief in rebirth was a useful working hypothesis along the way, so he would encourage you to adopt that hypothesis because it would give you good reason to be skillful and heedful in all your actions. Even if it turned out that the teachings on kamma and rebirth were not true, at the very least you would have lived your life in a way that created no hostility and would be praised by the wise.

These reasons, the Buddha knew, would be convincing to people who were willing to step back from their desires and passions so as to judge their results objectively, and who had enough of a healthy sense of honor and shame to care about how wise people would view their actions. However, if you couldn't muster these qualities and accept the Buddha's reasons, you wouldn't be ready for the training anyhow, so he wouldn't be interested in teaching you. Yet if you're weak in these qualities but willing to develop them, then you can make yourself worthy to be his student.

As for the objectivity of his standards, that came from the fact that, in stepping outside of space and time, he had come to a knowledge that wasn't influenced by the conditions that shape knowledge within space and time: the factors of dependent co-arising that come prior to sensory contact, such as perception, intention, and attention. Stepping outside of these conditions and from all influences from the past, he was stepping outside of the ordinary conditions that prevent knowledge from being genuinely objective.

5) Was the Buddha, in encouraging desire along the path, being inconsistent, or was he thinking strategically? And if he was being

strategic, what's the strategy?

In answering the preceding questions, we've shown clearly that the Buddha was being strategic in using desire and passion to overcome desire and passion—and in encouraging his listeners to use desire and passion strategically as well. Examples include the role of skillful forms of clinging in fashioning the path, the role of the four types of determination in motivating and guiding the path, along with the skillful desires of right effort, right resolve, and the bases of power. This strategic use of desire and passion is simply one aspect of the strategic nature of the Buddha's teachings as a whole: His teachings were aimed at a purpose outside of themselves: total freedom. He taught by means of fabrications, and the purpose of those fabrications was to get *you* to engage in fabrications that, when they've done their work, would encourage you to let them go so that you can arrive at the unfabricated.

But there is one aspect of how the Buddha used desire strategically that deserves special notice.

In teaching the subduing of desire and passion, he wasn't teaching his listeners to subdue their desire for unalloyed happiness, or to lower their sights and to content themselves with the pleasures of fabrication as they already knew them. Instead, he taught them to raise their sights. He showed them how to abandon the desires and passions that lead to suffering and to replace them with desires and passions that lead to something beyond what they could fabricate: the deathless, a happiness so totally satisfying and unrestricted that there's no more need for any further desire or passion for anything else ever again.

10. Implications

The issue gets even more unsettling when you step back to reflect on the dual role of desire and passion in relationship to the aggregates, both after and prior to the factors of fabrication, consciousness, and name-and-form, the main section of dependent co-arising where all the aggregates are found.

Looking at desire and passion in their role as craving and clinging, we can see that the craving and clinging focus on aggregates already in existence. We come along, thirsting for them, finding them, deciding that we want them, and then feeding on them. To subdue desire and passion here would mean that we learn how not to feel hunger and thirst for them even as they still exist.

Even this much, of course, goes against the grain. We often associate feeding with pleasure, yet here the Buddha is saying that feeding is suffering because we feel a lack and are trying to arrive at a state of fullness. This places us in an unstable state of dependency. What's more, given the inconstant nature of the aggregates, the aggregates we take as food can never provide a fullness that lasts. Whatever satisfaction they give us is only fleeting. The sense of lack will always be there. We always need to keep looking for more food and protecting our food sources from others who want to take that food for themselves. Even when we succeed, we have to keep feeding over and over again.

But there's more. We have to keep bringing more and more aggregates into existence so that we can feed on them. This points to desire and passion in a second role: that of giving rise to the whole process of dependent co-arising, including the fabrication of the aggregates to begin with. This means that we don't simply play the role of hunters and gatherers, searching for aggregates already in existence. We're farmers and producers, growing and manufacturing our food. Our desires and passions are what give rise to the aggregates to begin with.

The Canon illustrates this point with another analogy: building houses. It likens the process of going from one birth to another to going from one house to another, with each house standing for each person's identity as a being ([DN 2](#)). However, it also states that our desire and passion are what build the houses to which we go ([Dhp 153–154](#)). In fact, the desire and passion of craving are what create locations. Wherever there's desire and passion for creating more aggregates, that's where each person's identity as a being will settle as long as those aggregates are still being produced.

This means that if we abandon desire and passion for the aggregates, we stop producing them ([SN 22:25](#)). Further, it means that, in subduing desire and passion for the aggregates, we're not just learning to live peacefully in our houses. We're putting an end to the process of building houses and creating the raw materials from which they're built. We've found a freedom so secure—that's one of the Buddha's names for unbinding, the Secure ([SN 43](#))—that we have no need for the makeshift protection of houses ever again.

To return to the feeding analogy, we're not just learning to be at peace with our old food sources. We're so free from hunger that we can stop producing the food supply from which we create our sense of ourselves and of the world around us. We're dismantling our sense of who and where we are.

These facts show that two common interpretations of the Buddha's teachings are actually misinterpretations. The first is that the subduing of desire and passion means simply accepting the way things are—that if we can stop desiring for things to be different from what they are, we can live peacefully in the world. But simple acceptance doesn't put an end to hunger. It merely represses it, and repressed hunger refuses to stay repressed for long. It finds other sources of food and ways to feed, even if it has to sneak off and eat garbage. Given that the Buddha promises long-term happiness from subduing desire and passion, he also has to promise a way that satisfies the hunger for happiness so thoroughly that the mind is never hungry again. This will require more than acceptance.

The second misinterpretation is that the Buddha is teaching a path back to our original nature. Given that our sense of ourselves—what we are, along with what the world is around us—is fabricated from desire and passion along with ignorance, and given that the Buddha states that

ignorance has no discernable beginning point ([SN 22:99](#)), the knowledge that subdues desire and passion will totally undo what we've been all along.

Which means that there's no good reason to want to go back there, and we won't be able to go back there anyhow—ideally, because we don't need to. So again, when the Buddha promises a long-term happiness from subduing desire and passion, he'll have to promise something so total that you won't even care to ask the question of who is enjoying that happiness or where.

This is the happiness that the Buddha promises through the realization of the third noble truth. That's "through," rather than "in" the realization, because the act of realizing the third noble truth involves a series of mental actions through which the happiness of unbinding is attained. Unbinding itself, however, is beyond actions of any sort. Once it's been fully realized, there's no need to do anything more to bring mental suffering to an end, because it's been ended for good. Although the realization of unbinding is an action, the ultimate happiness of unbinding is free from any need to act.

20. Training Rules for All

The Buddha didn't expect lay people to follow the monks' rules, but he did recommend that they adopt five training rules as a constant practice. These rules are found in the Vinaya for monastics as well. The five are to refrain from:

killing any living being,
stealing what belongs to others,
engaging in sexual misconduct,
telling a deliberate lie, and
taking intoxicants that cause heedlessness.

With regard to the first training rule, "living being" covers human beings and all other animals large enough to see with the naked eye.

With regard to the second, stealing is defined as "taking what is not given," and covers all situations in which you know that an object has an owner, and the owner would not be pleased with your taking the object into your possession, but you take it anyhow. This rule does not cover cases where you borrow an object with the intention of returning it to its owner.

With regard to the third training rule, "sexual misconduct," for monks, means any sexual intercourse at all. For lay people, it means sexual intercourse with minors, with those who are married to someone else, with those who have taken a vow of celibacy, and even with those "going steady" with someone else ([MN 41](#)).

As for the fourth training rule, a deliberate lie is defined as any knowing misrepresentation of the truth, regardless of whether the intention is to deceive or to entertain with the falsehood, and regardless of whether your intentions toward your listener are compassionate or not. This training rule, the Buddha emphasized, was the most serious of the five. If you kill people or steal their belongings, the damage you do to them lasts only as long as this lifetime. But if you misrepresent the truth,

the misunderstanding you create in your listeners might lead them to do or think things that could have a detrimental effect for lifetimes to come.

As for the fifth training rule, “intoxicants” covers substances that make you lose mindfulness and heedfulness. Other substances that are addictive but don’t have this effect, such as caffeine or tobacco, wouldn’t come under this rule.

To train under these rules means that you not only refrain from breaking them yourself, but you also don’t get others to break them, and you don’t condone their behavior if they do ([Sn 2:14](#)). When you follow these training rules, you work for your own benefit. When you get others to follow them, you work for theirs ([AN 4:99](#)).

In [AN 8:39](#), the Buddha says that when you follow these rules in all situations, you’re giving safety to all beings, and you gain a portion of that universal safety as well. You possess what he calls the treasure of virtue ([AN 7:6](#)).

These five training rules are said to be the rudiments of the holy life. Monks who gain any of the noble attainments may still break other rules in the Vinaya, but they would never intentionally break these. Lay people who stick by these training rules in all situations are said to be like heavenly beings ([AN 4:53](#)). If they gain any of the noble attainments, they, too, would never intentionally break these rules.

If you’re a lay person, the inner rewards for following these five training rules are the same as those for the monks: You develop mindfulness, alertness, and ardency, the qualities needed for training in concentration. And because your behavior is harmless, you have no reason for remorse. That lack of remorse is a source of joy that calms the mind and nourishes you in the higher training of the mind. When you reflect on your virtue, you gain confidence in your ability to pursue the path deeper inside.

23. Virtue as Attitudes (3)

Another discourse in the Canon—[AN 8:30](#)—lists eight qualities that, when you develop them, make you worthy of the Dhamma. Three of the qualities correspond to the training in heightened mind, or concentration, and two to the training in heightened discernment. We'll discuss them when we get to those parts of the training.

The three remaining qualities are part of the training in heightened virtue: being reclusive rather than entangled; being modest rather than self-aggrandizing; and being content rather than discontent.

These three qualities appear as a set in many other lists of qualities that the Buddha encouraged as well, probably because they're mutually supportive. Being reclusive—seeking solitude—is the quality most prized as a prerequisite for developing concentration and discernment. The other two qualities serve to support solitude, but the support goes the other way as well. Living in solitude means that your material needs are less than they would be if you had a family, so you can be content with less. It also makes it easier to be modest.

But in addition to supporting solitude, contentment and modesty also perform other functions, too. In training yourself to be modest, you learn to curb your sense of self. In training yourself to be content with few material possessions, you make yourself less of a burden on others, which is an expression of compassion.

All three of these qualities are expressions of two determinations: relinquishment and calm. In this way, they prepare the mind for concentration practice.

The Buddha notes that not all his disciples are ready to go find seclusion in the forest. Only when they've received proper training can they handle the hardships of seclusion. This is why a new monk has to live for at least five years under the guidance of a mentor, in order to take advantage of the benefits that can come from admirable friendship. Even

the Rhinoceros Sutta, the Canon's strongest statement of the values of seclusion, praises admirable friendship:

If you gain an astute companion,
a fellow traveler, right-living, enlightened,
overcoming all troubles,
go with him, gratified,
mindful. — [Sn 1:3](#)

The duty of a mentor is not only to teach the new monk the Dhamma, but also to train him in the qualities needed to make the most of seclusion. Without that training, a new monk could “sink to the bottom or float away”:

“Imagine, Upāli, a great freshwater lake. Then there would come a great bull elephant, seven or seven and a half cubits tall. The thought would occur to him, ‘What if I were to plunge into this freshwater lake, to playfully squirt water into my ears and along my back, and then—having playfully squirted water into my ears and along my back, having bathed & drunk & come back out—to go off as I please?’ So, having plunged into the freshwater lake, he would playfully squirt water into his ears and along his back, and then—having playfully squirted water into his ears and along his back, having bathed & drunk & come back out—he would go off as he pleased. Why is that? Because his large body finds a footing in the depth.

“Then a rabbit or a cat would come along. The thought would occur to it, ‘What’s the difference between me and a bull elephant? What if I were to plunge into this freshwater lake, to playfully squirt water into my ears and along my back, and then—having playfully squirted water into my ears and along my back, having bathed & drunk & come back out—to go off as I please?’ So, without reflecting, he jumps rashly into the freshwater lake, and of him it can be expected that he will either sink to the bottom or float away. Why is that? Because his small body doesn’t find a footing in the depth.

“In the same way, whoever would say, ‘I, without having gained concentration, will spend time in isolated wilderness & forest lodgings,’ of him it can be expected that he will sink to the bottom or float away.” – [AN 10:99](#)

This fact presents a practical problem: As we’ll see, the ability to progress in concentration requires that you have some time in seclusion, and yet here the Buddha is saying that living in a forest can plunder the state of your mind if you haven’t already gained concentration. This would seem to create an impasse, but there are three ways around the impasse.

1) A young monk, even when living in dependence on his mentor, is encouraged to spend temporary periods alone in the forest, to grow accustomed to the challenges presented by that environment. As long as his meditation is going well, he’s allowed to stay there alone.

2) There are other ways of finding seclusion beside going into the forest. The texts mention living in an empty dwelling as an alternative that allows you to be alone but without having to face the dangers of forest life.

3) One of the main challenges in staying in the forest is the tendency for your inner conversation to run wild. We’ve already noted that training in restraint of the senses is one way to gain some control over the ways in which you talk to yourself. As we’ll see, training in contentment and modesty offer good training in this area as well.

Contentment is defined as follows:

“There is the case where a monk is content with any old robe cloth at all, any old almsfood, any old lodging, any old medicinal requisites for curing sickness at all.” – [AN 8:30](#)

The Buddha’s standards for what counts as adequate food, clothing, and shelter for a monk are quite bare. Every new monk is told, at the end of his ordination ceremony, that his supports in the holy life will be almsfood, robes made from thrown-away cloth, the roots of a tree as his dwelling, and smelly urine medicine for treating disease. There’s a lot of disagreement as to what that last support is, but what’s obvious in all four cases is that the monk should learn to be happy with the barest minimum in terms of material requisites. Anything finer than that is to be regarded a superfluous luxury.

However, the Buddha was wise enough to know that desires related to greed are not the only defilements you have to deal with when trying to be content with little. As you get used to living with the bare minimum, you can also give rise to desires related to pride and conceit over the fact that you have greater powers of endurance than those who live more luxuriously. The dangers of pride and conceit are that they can make you heedless, blinding you to subtler defilements inside. That's why he encouraged his monks to adopt a noble attitude toward their contentment:

“There is the case where a monk is content with any old robe cloth at all. He speaks in praise of being content with any old robe cloth at all. He doesn’t, for the sake of robe cloth, do anything unseemly or inappropriate. Not getting cloth, he isn’t agitated. Getting cloth, he uses it unattached to it, uninfatuated, guiltless, seeing the drawbacks [of attachment to it], and discerning the escape from them. He doesn’t, on account of his contentment with any old robe cloth at all, exalt himself or disparage others. Any monk who is diligent, deft, alert, & mindful in this is said to be a monk standing firm in the ancient, original traditions of the noble ones.

“[Similarly with food and lodging.]” – [AN 4:28](#)

Contentment requires equanimity.

Not in hopes of material gain
does he take on the training;
when without material gain
he isn't upset. — [Sn 4:10](#)

When gaining food & drink,
 staples & cloth,
 he should not make a hoard.
 Nor should he be upset
 when receiving no gains. — *[Sn 4:14](#)*

Contentment also requires developing powers of endurance.

An enlightened monk,

living circumscribed,
mindful,
shouldn't fear the five fears:
of horseflies, mosquitoes, snakes,
human contact, four-footed beings...

Touched
by the touch
of disease, hunger,
he should endure cold
& inordinate heat.
He with no home,
in many ways touched by these things,
striving, should make firm his persistence. — [*Sn 4:16*](#)

All of the Buddha's teachings, and the poems in particular, count as advice on how to train your inner conversation. But it's particularly interesting to see him give specific advice on how to talk to yourself to strengthen your contentment—an example of how to use skillful verbal fabrication on the path:

Deferring to discernment
enraptured with what's admirable,
he should overcome these dangers,
should conquer discontent
 in his isolated spot,
should conquer these four
 thoughts of lament:

“What will I eat,
or where will I eat?
How badly I slept.
Tonight where will I sleep?”

These lamenting thoughts
he should subdue—

one under training,
wandering without home. – [Sn 4:16](#)

Having gone to the village,
the sage shouldn't go
forcing his way among families.
Cutting off chatter,
he shouldn't utter a scheming word.

“I got something.
That's fine.
I got nothing.
That, too, is good.” – [Sn 3:11](#)

Here it's important to note that the Buddha encouraged contentment only for material things. As long as you hadn't gained full awakening, he did not encourage contentment with the state of your mind. This can be seen in the fact that his description of the original traditions of the noble ones ends, not with instructions on how to be content with medicine, the fourth requisite, but on how to find delight in developing and abandoning –i.e., developing skillful qualities and abandoning unskillful ones. Even more strongly, he attributed his own awakening to the fact that he didn't let himself rest content with the level of skill he had attained prior to his total release.

“Monks, I have known two qualities through experience: discontent with regard to skillful qualities and unrelenting exertion. Relentlessly I exerted myself, (thinking,) ‘Gladly would I let the flesh & blood in my body dry up, leaving just the skin, tendons, & bones, but if I have not attained what can be reached through manly firmness, manly persistence, manly striving, there will be no relaxing my persistence.’ From this heedfulness of mine was attained awakening. From this heedfulness of mine was attained the unexcelled freedom from bondage.” – [AN 2:5](#)

This means that the Buddha taught contentment, not as a blanket denial of your desires, but as a way of establishing priorities among them. You curb your desires for unnecessary material comforts so that they don't

get in the way of your most important desire and determination: to attain awakening.

Modesty is defined as not wanting people to know of the good qualities you've developed. It's an antidote to the desires that come from vanity and conceit.

“There is the case where a monk, being modest, doesn't want it to be known that 'He is modest.' Being content, he doesn't want it to be known that 'He is content.' Being reclusive, he doesn't want it to be known that 'He is reclusive.' His persistence being aroused, he doesn't want it to be known that 'His persistence is aroused.' His mindfulness being established, he doesn't want it to be known that 'His mindfulness is established.' His mind being concentrated, he doesn't want it to be known that 'His mind is concentrated.' Being endowed with discernment, he doesn't want it to be known that 'He is endowed with discernment.' Enjoying non-objectification, he doesn't want it to be known that 'He is enjoying non-objectification.'” – [AN 8:30](#)

Whoever boasts to others, unasked,
of his practices, habits,
is, say the skilled,
ignoble by nature—
 he who speaks of himself
 of his own accord.

But a monk at peace,
 fully unbound in himself,
 not boasting of his habits,
 "That's how I am":
He, say the skilled,
is noble by nature—
 he with no vanity
 anywhere in the world. – [Sn 4:3](#)

Modesty is also a way of making yourself content when you receive meager gifts from others.

Wandering with his bowl in hand
—not dumb,
but seemingly dumb—
he shouldn't despise a piddling gift
nor disparage the giver. — [Sn 3:11](#)

Modesty also allows you to avoid needless arguments and debates. When you feel no need to show off your knowledge, you free yourself from entanglements of that sort. In this way, your modesty helps you to maintain seclusion and to avoid the conceit that motivates, and is aggravated by, a desire to shine in debate.

These debates have arisen among contemplatives.

In them are elation,
dejection.

Seeing this, one should abstain from debates,
for they have no other goal
than the gaining of praise.

While he who is praised there
for expounding his doctrine
in the midst of the assembly,
laughs on that account & grows haughty,
attaining his heart's desire.

That haughtiness will be grounds for his damage,
for he'll speak in pride & conceit.

Seeing this, one should abstain from debates.

No purity is attained by them, say the skilled. — [Sn 4:8](#)

Above all, modesty is a sign of honor and integrity. You practice goodness for its own sake, and not to look good in the eyes of others. You can keep reminding yourself that the good things in the practice are so good that there's no point in telling anyone else that you have them.

Know from the rivers
in clefts & in crevices:
Those in small channels flow

noisily,
the great
flow silent.
Whatever's deficient
makes noise.
Whatever is full
is quiet.
The fool is like a half-empty pot;
one who is wise, a full lake.
A contemplative who speaks a great deal
endowed with meaning:
Knowing, he teaches the Dhamma;
knowing, he speaks a great deal.
But he who,
knowing, is restrained,
knowing, doesn't speak a great deal:
He is a sage
worthy of sagehood.
He is a sage,
his sagehood attained. — [Sn 3:11](#)

For the monk who has left
all kamma
behind,
shaking off the dust of the past,
steady, unpossessive,
Such:
There's no point in telling
anyone else. — [Ud 3:1](#)

Being reclusive doesn't mean that you totally avoid human contact. After all, a monk has to go for alms every day if he wants to eat, and he should teach Dhamma to those who request it. Still, he should teach them, not with the aim of forming friendships or networks of supporters, but with the aim of giving them satisfactory answers to their questions and then letting them go.

“There is the case where a monk, when living reclusively, is visited by monks, nuns, lay men, lay women, kings, royal ministers, sectarians & their disciples. With his mind bent on seclusion, tending toward seclusion, inclined toward seclusion, aiming at seclusion, relishing renunciation, he converses with them only as much is necessary for them to take their leave.” — [AN 8:30](#)

Because desire and passion for loving relationships is the biggest enemy to seclusion, the Canon tells many stories of the sufferings that come from having partners, families, and intimate friends. For instance, after seeing a married wanderer suffering greatly in trying to care for his pregnant wife, the Buddha exclaimed:

How blissful it is, for one who has nothing.
Attainers-of-wisdom
are people with nothing.
See him suffering, one who has something,
a person bound in mind
with people. — [Ud 2:6](#)

Once, Lady Visākhā, one of the Buddha’s most prominent supporters, came to see him after she had lost a grandchild. He asked her if she wanted more grandchildren—as many as there were people in the city of Sāvattthī—and she at first said, “Yes.” Then he reminded her that a day didn’t pass without a death in Sāvattthī. If she had that many grandchildren, a day wouldn’t pass without her going to a funeral.

She agreed that her original wish was foolish, so he exclaimed:

The sorrows, lamentations,
the many kinds of suffering in the world,
exist dependent on something dear.
They don’t exist
when there’s nothing dear.
And thus blissful & sorrowless
are those for whom nothing
in the world is anywhere dear.
So one who aspires

to the stainless & sorrowless
shouldn't make anything
dear
in the world
anywhere. — [*Ud 8:8*](#)

This attitude may sound heartless, but we should remember that the monk is also enjoined to develop an attitude of goodwill for all. Instead of keeping his heart narrow, partial to some and indifferent to others, he must broaden his heart to wish for the happiness of all beings.

Another challenge when living alone, especially in the wilderness, is having to deal with fear. The Buddha advises you, when living in the forest, to console yourself with the knowledge that if your mind is well-trained, there's no reason to give in to unskillful fears. He provides a checklist of qualities that can provide you with confidence. The list includes: purity of virtue in terms of your thoughts, words, and deeds; purity in terms of your livelihood; being free of sensual passion and the other hindrances; being modest and content; being persistent, mindful, alert, concentrated, and discerning. The Buddha also gives encouragement by discussing how he himself dealt with fear and terror when living in the wilderness prior to his awakening:

“The thought occurred to me: ‘What if—on recognized, designated nights such as the eighth, fourteenth, & fifteenth of the lunar fortnight—I were to stay in the sorts of places that are awe-inspiring and make your hair stand on end, such as park-shrines, forest-shrines, & tree-shrines? Perhaps I would get to see that fear & terror.’ So at a later time—on recognized, designated nights such as the eighth, fourteenth, & fifteenth of the lunar fortnight—I stayed in the sorts of places that are awe-inspiring and make your hair stand on end, such as park-shrines, forest-shrines, & tree-shrines. And while I was staying there, a wild animal would come, or a bird would drop a twig, or wind would rustle the fallen leaves. The thought would occur to me: ‘Is this that fear & terror coming?’ Then the thought occurred to me: ‘Why do I just keep waiting for fear? What if I were to subdue fear & terror in whatever state they come?’

“So when fear & terror came while I was walking back & forth, I would not stand or sit or lie down. I would keep walking back & forth until I had subdued that fear & terror. When fear & terror came while I was standing, I would not walk or sit or lie down. I would keep standing until I had subdued that fear & terror. When fear & terror came while I was sitting, I would not lie down or stand up or walk. I would keep sitting until I had subdued that fear & terror. When fear & terror came while I was lying down, I would not sit up or stand or walk. I would keep lying down until I had subdued that fear & terror.” — [*MN 4*](#)

The positive virtue of reclusiveness and seclusion is that they allow you to devote full time to training the mind.

“There’s no way
that one delighting in company
can touch even momentary release.”
Heeding the words
of the Kinsman of the Sun [the Buddha],
wander alone
like a rhinoceros....

At the right time consorting
with the release through goodwill,
compassion,
empathetic joy,
equanimity,
unobstructed by all the world,
any world,
wander alone
like a rhinoceros. — *Sn 1:3*

Turning your back on pleasure & pain,
as earlier with sorrow & joy,
attaining pure equanimity,
tranquility,

wander alone
like a rhinoceros.

With persistence aroused
for the highest goal's attainment,
with mind unsmeared, not lazy in action,
firm in effort, with steadfastness & strength arisen,
wander alone
like a rhinoceros.

Not neglecting seclusion, jhāna,
constantly living the Dhamma
 in line with the Dhamma,
comprehending the danger
in states of becoming,
wander alone
like a rhinoceros. — [*Sn 1:3*](#)

Solitude
is called
sagacity.
Alone, you truly delight
 & shine in the ten directions. — [*Sn 3:11*](#)

The delight you can find in getting the mind concentrated while in seclusion can more than compensate for the hardships that come from living alone.

“When elephants & cow-elephants & calf-elephants & baby elephants go ahead of a wilderness tusker foraging for food and break off the tips of the grasses, the wilderness tusker feels irritated, upset, & disgusted. When elephants & cow-elephants & calf-elephants & baby elephants devour the wilderness tusker's bunches of branches, he feels irritated, upset, & disgusted. When elephants & cow-elephants & calf-elephants & baby elephants go ahead of the wilderness tusker on his way down to his bath and stir up the mud in the water with their trunks, he feels irritated, upset, & disgusted.

When cow-elephants go along as the wilderness tusker is bathing and bang up against his body, he feels irritated, upset, & disgusted.

“Then the thought occurs to the wilderness tusker, ‘I now live hemmed in by elephants & cow-elephants & calf-elephants & baby elephants. I feed off grass with broken-off tips. My bunches of branches are devoured. I drink muddied water. Even when I bathe, cow-elephants go along and bang up against my body. What if I were to live alone, apart from the crowd?’

“So at a later time he lives alone, apart from the crowd. He feeds off grass with unbroken tips. His bunches of branches are undevooured. He drinks unmuddied water. When he bathes, cow-elephants don’t go along and bang up against his body. The thought occurs to him, ‘Before, I lived hemmed in by elephants & cow-elephants & calf-elephants & baby elephants.... But now I live alone, apart from the crowd....’ Breaking off a branch with his trunk and scratching his body with it, gratified, he allays his itch.

In the same way, when a monk lives hemmed in with monks, nuns, male & female lay followers, kings, royal ministers, sectarians, & their disciples, the thought occurs to him, ‘I now live hemmed in by monks, nuns, male & female lay followers, kings, royal ministers, sectarians, & their disciples. What if I were to live alone, apart from the crowd?’

“So he seeks out a secluded dwelling: a wilderness, the shade of a tree, a mountain, a glen, a hillside cave, a charnel ground, a forest grove, the open air, a heap of straw. He, having gone to the wilderness, to the shade of a tree, or to an empty building, sits down, crosses his legs, holds his body erect, and brings mindfulness to the fore....

“Having abandoned these five hindrances—corruptions of awareness that weaken discernment—then quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities, he enters & remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. Gratified, he allays his itch.

“[And so on with the remaining concentration attainments.]” — [AN 9:40](#)

33. The Skilled Archer

The Buddha's instructions for how to train the mind in liberating discernment by using the second method—observing and evaluating a state of jhāna while you're still in it—show that here, too, the contemplation has to focus on discerning the *fact* of fabrication in the jhāna and on arriving at a *value judgment* that inclines the mind to the unfabricated. In this case, the imagery is less that of a battle than of a person perfecting his skill—although the skill in question would be useful if he's ever called into battle.

“I tell you, the ending of the effluents depends on the first jhāna... the second jhāna... the third... the fourth... the dimension of the infinitude of space... the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness... the dimension of nothingness. I tell you, the ending of the effluents depends on the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception....

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

the relinquishment of all acquisitions; the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; unbinding.’

“Staying right there, he reaches the ending of the effluents. Or, if not, then—through this very Dhamma-passion, this Dhamma-delight, and from the total ending of the five lower fetters [self-identification views, grasping at habits & practices, doubt, sensual passion, and irritation]—he is due to arise spontaneously (in the Pure Abodes), there to be totally unbound, never again to return from that world.

“[Similarly with the remaining stages of concentration.]” – [AN 9:36](#)

There are several points worth noticing here. First, in terms of the contemplation of the state of jhāna, you have to engage in enough commitment to the jhāna to be skilled at it before contemplating it further. If you try analyzing it when the mind is still not securely in place, your concentration would simply fall apart. But when you *have* achieved some mastery, then the next step is to look for the fact of fabrication, here expressed in the fact that the jhāna is composed of the five aggregates.

To see how that’s so, we can take as an example the first jhāna as attained through breath meditation. Form would be the object of the concentration, the in-and-out breath. Feeling would be the feelings of pleasure experienced through being continually attentive to the breath. Perception would be the perception of the breath and the pleasure permeating the whole body. Fabrication would be the intention to stay with the breath, plus the directed thought and evaluation that allow the pleasure of the breath to spread throughout the whole body. Consciousness would be aware of all these activities.

Once you’ve seen the fact of these fabrications in the state of jhāna, the next step is to arrive at a value judgment of them. Here the Buddha recommends using skillful mental fabrications—perceptions—to induce dispassion for the fabrications of concentration. He lists eleven perceptions in all, which would fall under the three perceptions he most often uses for persuading his listeners to see the drawbacks of the aggregates and to develop dispassion for them:

Inconstancy: inconstant, a disintegration;

Stress: stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction;

Not-self: not-self, alien, an emptiness.

These perceptions are designed to develop an attitude of dispassion for all things fabricated, and to incline the mind to seeing dispassion as a good thing.

Here again, the approach of commitment and reflection arrives at a liberating value judgment by focusing on the drawbacks of where you are in concentration, and then the rewards of abandoning passion for it. The main difference here is that the contemplation focuses, not just on the rewards of a higher level of concentration, but on the rewards of going straight to the unfabricated.

This liberating appreciation of the unfabricated is identical with the eighth and final quality that makes you worthy of the Dhamma: delighting in non-objectification.

“There is the case where a monk’s mind leaps up, grows confident, steadfast, & released in the cessation of objectification. ‘This Dhamma is for one who enjoys non-objectification, who delights in non-objectification, not for one who enjoys & delights in objectification.’ Thus was it said. And with reference to this was it said.” – [AN 8:30](#)

Non-objectification is one of the Buddha’s epithets for unbinding. It’s based on his technical definition of the word “objectification”—*papañca*—as a type of thinking that begins with the perception “I am the thinker” ([Sn 4:14](#)). As you objectify yourself with this perception, you develop other perceptions based on it, until you identify yourself as a being with a need to feed. Because of that need, you inevitably come into conflict with other beings who have been objectifying themselves and need to feed as well. Non-objectification comes from digging out the root of that original perception, and so liberates the mind from all conflict. To delight in non-objectification is to delight in the prospect of being totally free from conflict and, once that freedom is attained, to enjoy that freedom.

One last thing to notice about this approach to dispassion given in [AN 9:36](#) is that it is possible, on discerning the deathless as a result of this contemplation, to feel passion both for the deathless and for the verbal and mental fabrications of discernment that opened the way to it. This

passion comes from a blind spot in your all-around reflection at that moment: You haven't fully reflected on what's left to be abandoned. The passion in this blind spot would prevent you from gaining full awakening.

It's because of this possibility that the Buddha, in many places throughout the Canon, recommends applying the perception of not-self not only to fabrications, but even to the unfabricated ([MN 35](#); [Dhp 277–279](#)): All phenomena are not-self. Of course, once you've developed dispassion for the unfabricated, you have to drop this last instance of fabricated discernment—the perception that all phenomena are not-self—for your release to be all-around. Because the perception itself is a phenomenon, if you reflect thoroughly on it in an all-around way, you see that it contains the seeds for its own transcendence.

Appendix: Ven. Sāriputta's Answer

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying among the Sakyans at a Sakyan town named Devadaha. Then a large number of monks headed for outlying districts went to the Blessed One and on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As they were sitting there, they said to the Blessed One, “Lord, we want to go to the countryside of the outlying districts and to take up residence there.”

“Have you informed Sāriputta?”

“No, lord, we haven’t informed Ven. Sāriputta.”

“Inform Sāriputta, monks. Sāriputta is wise, a great help to the monks who are his companions in the holy life.”

“As you say, lord,” the monks responded to the Blessed One.

At that time Ven. Sāriputta was sitting under a certain cassia tree not far from the Blessed One. Then the monks, delighting in & approving of the Blessed One’s words, rose from their seats and—bowing down to the Blessed One and circumambulating him, keeping him to their right—went to Ven. Sāriputta. On arrival, they exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, they sat to one side. As they were sitting there, they said to Ven. Sāriputta, “Friend Sāriputta, we want to go to the countryside of the outlying districts and to take up residence there. We have already informed the Teacher.”

“Friends, in foreign lands there are wise nobles & brahmans, householders & contemplatives—for the people there are wise & discriminating—who will question a monk: ‘What is your teacher’s doctrine? What does he teach?’ Have you listened well to the teachings—grasped them well, attended to them well, considered them well, penetrated them well by means of discernment—so that in answering you will speak in line with what the Blessed One has said, will not misrepresent the Blessed One with what is unfactual, will answer in line with the

Dhamma, and no one whose thinking is in line with the Dhamma will have grounds for criticizing you?”

“We would come from a long way away to hear the explication of these words in Ven. Sāriputta’s presence. It would be good if Ven. Sāriputta himself would enlighten us as to their meaning.”

“Then in that case, friends, listen & pay close attention. I will speak.”

“As you say, friend,” the monks responded to him.

Ven. Sāriputta said: “Friends, in foreign lands there are wise nobles & brahmans, householders & contemplatives—for the people there are wise & discriminating—who will question a monk: ‘What is your teacher’s doctrine? What does he teach?’

“Thus asked, you should answer, ‘*Our teacher teaches the subduing of desire & passion.*’

“Having thus been answered, there may be wise noble warriors, wise brahmans, wise householders, & wise contemplatives... who will question you further, ‘And your teacher teaches the subduing of desire & passion for what?’

“Thus asked, you should answer, ‘Our teacher teaches the subduing of desire & passion for form... for feeling... for perception... for fabrications. Our teacher teaches the subduing of desire & passion for consciousness.’

“Having thus been answered, there may be wise noble warriors, wise brahmans, wise householders, & wise contemplatives... who will question you further, ‘And seeing what danger does your teacher teach the subduing of desire & passion for form... for feeling... for perception... for fabrications. Seeing what danger does your teacher teach the subduing of desire & passion for consciousness?’

“Thus asked, you should answer, ‘When one is not free from passion, desire, love, thirst, fever, & craving for form, then from any change & alteration in that form, there arises sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, & despair. When one is not free from passion... for feeling... for perception... for fabrications... When one is not free from passion, desire, love, thirst, fever, & craving for consciousness, then from any change & alteration in that consciousness, there arise sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, & despair. Seeing this danger, our teacher teaches the subduing of desire & passion for form... for feeling... for perception... for fabrications. Seeing this

danger, our teacher teaches the subduing of desire & passion for consciousness.’

“Having thus been answered, there may be wise noble warriors, wise brahmans, wise householders, & wise contemplatives... who will question you further, ‘And seeing what benefit does your teacher teach the subduing of desire & passion for form... for feeling... for perception... for fabrications. Seeing what benefit does your teacher teach the subduing of desire & passion for consciousness?’

“Thus asked, you should answer, ‘When one is free from passion, desire, love, thirst, fever, & craving for form, then with any change & alteration in that form, there does not arise any sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, or despair. When one is free from passion... for feeling... for perception... for fabrications... When one is free from passion, desire, love, thirst, fever, & craving for consciousness, then with any change & alteration in that consciousness, there does not arise any sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, or despair. Seeing this benefit, our teacher teaches the subduing of desire & passion for form... for feeling... for perception... for fabrications. Seeing this benefit, our teacher teaches the subduing of desire & passion for consciousness.’

“Friends, if one who entered & remained in unskillful mental qualities were to have a pleasant abiding in the here & now—unthreatened, undespairing, unfeverish—and on the break-up of the body, after death, could expect a good destination, then the Blessed One would not advocate the abandoning of unskillful mental qualities. But because one who enters & remains in unskillful mental qualities has a stressful abiding in the here & now—threatened, despairing, & feverish—and on the break-up of the body, after death, can expect a bad destination, that is why the Blessed One advocates the abandoning of unskillful mental qualities.

“If one who entered & remained in skillful mental qualities were to have a stressful abiding in the here & now—threatened, despairing, & feverish—and on the break-up of the body, after death, could expect a bad destination, then the Blessed One would not advocate entering into skillful mental qualities. But because one who enters & remains in skillful mental qualities has a pleasant abiding in the here & now—unthreatened, undespairing, unfeverish—and on the break-up of the body, after death,

can expect a good destination, that is why the Blessed One advocates entering into skillful mental qualities.”

That is what Ven. Sāriputta said. Gratified, the monks delighted in Ven. Sāriputta’s words. — [SN 22:2](#)

Abbreviations

<i>AN</i>	<i>Aṅguttara Nikāya</i>
<i>Dhp</i>	<i>Dhammapada</i>
<i>DN</i>	<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>
<i>Iti</i>	<i>Itivuttaka</i>
<i>Khp</i>	<i>Khuddakapāṭha</i>
<i>MN</i>	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>
<i>Mv</i>	<i>Mahāvagga</i>
<i>Pr</i>	<i>Pārājika</i>
<i>SN</i>	<i>Saṃyutta Nikāya</i>
<i>Sn</i>	<i>Sutta Nipāta</i>
<i>Thag</i>	<i>Theragāthā</i>
<i>Ud</i>	<i>Udāna</i>

References to DN, Iti, Khp, and MN are to discourse (sutta). Those to Dhp are to verse. The references to Mv are to chapter, section, and sub-section. The reference to Pr is to rule number. References to other texts are to section (saṃyutta, nipāta, or vagga) and discourse.

All translations are based on the printed version of the Royal Thai Edition of the Pali Canon (Bangkok: Mahāmakut Rājavidyālaya, 1982).

In the prose passages translated from the Pali where no speaker is identified, the words in quotation marks are the Buddha's.

7. The Causes of Ignorance

As the Buddha notes in [AN 10:61](#), it's impossible to trace back into the past to find a point in time when ignorance began. But it is possible to look into the present moment to see what mental qualities sustain it. There we discover how desire and passion play their beginning role in the processes leading to suffering.

The Canon contains two lists of factors that sustain ignorance.

The first list is composed of what are called the five hindrances:

sensual desire,
ill will,
sloth & drowsiness,
restlessness & anxiety, and
doubt.

Of these hindrances, sensual desire and ill will are the strongest, and also the two most clearly related to desire and passion. Sensual desire is a passion for sensual plans and fantasies. Ill will is the desire to see someone suffer, either yourself or somebody else.

When the mind is obstructed by these two hindrances, it can't see clearly what's in its own best interest and what's not. For this reason, these hindrances can keep you from wanting to know that you're actually causing yourself to suffer by engaging in them, as you're more focused on other goals. Even if you know the four noble truths and their duties, you don't really pay attention to them because you don't believe them, your defilements tell you that you're incapable of understanding them, or you don't care what the truths say. You have other agendas.

A similar principle applies to the second list of factors that sustain ignorance. These are the three effluents. The Pali word for "effluent" here—*āsava*—literally means, "flowing out." Idiomatically, it's also applied to wine: Fruit wine is fruit-*āsava*. So the implications of the term are that

these effluents are qualities that flow out of the mind and keep it intoxicated. The three effluents are:

sensuality,
becoming, and
ignorance.

Here again ignorance can be caused by misinformation or misunderstanding: You don't know, for example, what causes suffering or you have wrong ideas about how it's caused. Or ignorance can be willed: You simply don't want to know what the Buddha says about suffering and its causes because you have other desires, for sensuality or becoming, that get in the way.

These effluents lie deeper in the mind than the hindrances. The preliminary levels of awakening can eliminate the hindrances, but only full awakening can eradicate the effluents. The hindrances are simply obstacles to concentration. The effluents are the motor forces that sustain all the steps in the sequence of dependent co-arising through repeated rebirths in spite of the suffering it causes, all because of the desire and passion to have the pleasures of sensuality or the desire simply to be a being in a world where passions can be followed and pleasures found.

The Canon notes that these effluents that sustain ignorance are, in turn, sustained *by* ignorance: darkness leading to darkness—not knowing and not wanting to know, feeding on each other in repeated feedback loops. It's only when you sense that you've suffered enough that you look for a light in the darkness. This may be why, when people who were receptive to the Buddha's message when they first heard it, compared his teaching to the act of bringing a lamp into the dark, so that those with eyes could see the objects that otherwise had been obscured.

So the first spot in dependent co-arising where desire and passion play a role is prior to ignorance. In this sense, they underlie the whole process leading to suffering. This is why the Buddha equates the subduing of desire and passion with the unfettered freedom of release.

22. Virtue as Attitudes (2)

The second list of virtuous attitudes comes in a discourse that describes four qualities that keep you from regressing in the practice and that bring you into the presence of unbinding. The four are: scrupulousness, restraint of the senses, moderation in eating, and wakefulness ([AN 4:37](#)). The first quality is an expression of truthfulness in holding your actions to a high standard. The remaining three foster relinquishment in that they're aimed at subduing the basic desires and passions that tend to run people's lives: for sensual pleasures in general, for food, and for sleep.

[AN 4:37](#) gives basic definitions for each of these qualities and attitudes. Other passages in the Canon flesh out the definitions, explaining in more detail how these qualities are embodied in day-to-day practice. They also show how the Buddha would use poetry, stories, and similes to “urge, rouse, and encourage” his disciples to develop these qualities. Especially striking are the similes he uses: They give examples in how to use the mental fabrication of perception as a tool in developing the path.

Scrupulousness is defined as follows:

“There is the case where a monk is virtuous. He dwells restrained in accordance with the Pāṭimokkha, consummate in his behavior & sphere of activity. He trains himself, having undertaken the training rules, seeing danger in the slightest faults.” – [AN 4:37](#)

A humorous story from the Canon shows that this habit of seeing danger in the slightest fault applies not only to the rules, but also to any activity that suggests passion within the mind.

I have heard that on one occasion a certain monk was staying among the Kosalans in a forest grove. Now at that time, after his meal, returning from his almsround, he went down to a lotus pond and sniffed a red lotus.

Then the devatā inhabiting the forest grove, feeling sympathy for the monk, desiring his benefit, desiring to bring him to his senses, approached him and addressed him with this verse:

“You sniff this water-born flower
that hasn’t been given to you.
This, dear sir, is a factor of stealing.
You are the thief of a scent.”

The monk:

“I don’t take, don’t damage.
I sniff at the lotus
from far away.
So why do you call me
a thief of a scent?
One who
digs up the stalks,
damages flowers,
one of such ruthless behavior:
Why don’t you say it of him?”

The devatā:

“A person ruthless & grasping,
smeared like a nursing diaper:
To him
I have nothing to say.
It’s you
to whom I should speak.
To a person unblemished,
constantly searching for purity,
a hair-tip’s worth of evil
seems as large
as a cloud.”

The monk:

“Yes, spirit, you understand me
and show me sympathy.
Warn me again, spirit,
whenever again
you see something like this.”

The devatā:

“I don’t depend on you
for my living
nor am I
your hired hand.
You, monk,
you yourself should know
how to go to the good destination.”

The monk, chastened by the devatā, came to his senses. — [SN 9:14](#)

Restraint of the senses is defined as not focusing on any aspects of a sense impression that would give rise to unskillful qualities in the mind:

“And how does a monk guard the doors to his sense faculties? There is the case where a monk, on seeing a form with the eye, doesn’t grasp at any theme or variations by which—if he were to dwell without restraint over the faculty of the eye—evil, unskillful qualities such as greed or distress might assail him. He practices with restraint. He guards the faculty of the eye. He achieves restraint with regard to the faculty of the eye.

“[Similarly with the faculties of the ear, nose, tongue, body, and intellect.]” — [AN 4:37](#)

Now, sense restraint doesn’t mean going around with blinders on your eyes or plugs in your ears. You’re basically examining your engagement with the senses as part of a cause-and-effect process: which mental attitudes are motivating you to look, listen, etc., and which mind states

result when you allow those attitudes to take charge. You see your engagement with the senses as an active rather than a purely passive process. Then you use that perspective to take charge of how you deal with sights, sounds, etc. Instead of simply looking for pleasure from the senses, you treat them as lessons in how not to provoke unskillful states of mind.

As the Buddha points out, the first stage in restraint is to use mindfulness like a dam to hold the mind back from allowing sensory contact to provoke unskillful states of mind. However, you need discernment to cut through the source of the stream that you've been trying to keep dammed ([Sn 5:1](#)). The second process, though, depends on the first. As you keep the mind in check, you become sensitive to the factors of dependent co-arising that precede and condition sensory contact, and to the desire and passion that fetter the mind to sensory impressions both before and after contact happens. Think of what it's like when you build a dam across a river: You learn about strong currents in the water that don't show on the surface. In the same way, when you exercise restraint of the senses, you learn about strong currents in the mind that you otherwise wouldn't detect.

To urge and encourage his monks in restraint, the Buddha tells a story containing an analogy to show how not to engage with the sense of touch:

“Just as if a māluvā creeper pod were to burst open in the last month of the hot season, and a māluvā creeper seed were to fall at the foot of a Sal tree. The deva living in the tree would become frightened, apprehensive, & anxious. Her friends & companions, relatives & kin—garden devas, forest devas, tree devas, devas living in herbs, grass, & forest monarchs—would gather together to console her: ‘Have no fear, have no fear. In all likelihood a peacock is sure to swallow this māluvā creeper seed, or a deer will eat it, or a brush fire will burn it up, or woodsmen will pick it up, or termites will carry it off, and anyway it probably isn't really a seed.’

“And then no peacock swallowed it, no deer ate it, no brush fire burned it up, no woodsmen picked it up, no termites carried it off, and it really was a seed. Watered by a rain-laden cloud, it sprouted properly and curled its soft, tender, downy tendril around the Sal tree.

“The thought occurred to the deva living in the Sal tree: ‘Now what future danger did my friends & companions, relatives & kin—garden devas, forest devas, tree devas, devas living in herbs, grass, & forest monarchs—foresee in that māluvā creeper seed that they gathered together to console me: “Have no fear, have no fear. In all likelihood a peacock is sure to swallow this māluvā creeper seed, or a deer will eat it, or a brush fire will burn it up, or woodsmen will pick it up, or termites will carry it off, and anyway it probably isn’t really a seed.” It’s pleasant, the touch of this māluvā creeper’s soft, tender, downy tendril.’

“Then the creeper, having enwrapped the Sal tree, having made a canopy over it, & cascading down around it, caused the massive limbs of the Sal tree to come crashing down. The thought occurred to the deva living in the tree: ‘This was the future danger my friends... foresaw in that māluvā creeper seed, that they gathered together to console me.... It’s because of that māluvā creeper seed that I’m now experiencing sharp, burning pains.’

“In the same way, monks, there are some contemplatives & brahmans who hold to a doctrine, a view like this: ‘There is no harm in sensual pleasures.’ Thus they meet with their downfall through sensual pleasures. They consort with women wanderers who wear their hair coiled in a topknot.

“The thought occurs to them: ‘Now, what future danger do those (other) contemplatives & brahmans foresee that they speak of the abandoning of sensual pleasures and describe the comprehension of sensual pleasures? It’s pleasant, the touch of this woman wanderer’s soft, tender, downy arm.’

Thus they meet with their downfall through sensual pleasures. Then, having met with their downfall through sensual pleasures, with the break-up of the body, after death, they reappear in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell. There they experience sharp, burning pains. They say: ‘This was the future danger concerning sensual pleasures those contemplatives & brahmans foresaw that they spoke of the abandoning of sensual pleasures and described the comprehension of sensual pleasures. It’s

because of sensual pleasures, as a result of sensual pleasures, that we're now experiencing these sharp, burning pains.'

"This is called the taking on of a practice that is pleasant in the present but yields pain in the future." — [MN 45](#)

As this passage shows, the way you talk to yourself about sensual pleasures—or, to use terms derived from dependent co-arising, the way you engage in verbal fabrication—can easily provoke sensual desires. So to help make your inner conversation more skillful, the Buddha provides a large number mental fabrications in the form of analogies to help abort unskillful passions and desires. A few examples: Sensuality is like a dog trying to appease its hunger by chewing on a chain of bones without any flesh. It's like being thrown into a pit of burning embers; like a hawk carrying off a piece of flesh and being attacked by other hawks; like a person waking from a beautiful dream and seeing all the beautiful things in the dream disappear ([MN 54](#)).

The Buddha also uses a martial metaphor to rouse his monks, showing that restraint of the senses, instead of being a weakness, is a form of valor and strength.

"Now, a king's elephant endowed with five qualities is worthy of a king, is a king's asset, counts as a very limb of his king. Which five? There is the case where a king's elephant is resilient to sights, resilient to sounds, resilient to aromas, resilient to flavors, resilient to tactile sensations.

"And how is a king's elephant resilient to sights? There is the case where a king's elephant, having gone into battle, sees a troop of elephants, a troop of cavalry, a troop of chariots, a troop of foot soldiers, but he doesn't falter or faint. He steels himself and engages in the battle. This is how a king's elephant is resilient to sights.

"And how is a king's elephant resilient to sounds? There is the case where a king's elephant, having gone into battle, hears the sound of elephants, the sound of cavalry, the sound of chariots, the sound of foot soldiers, the resounding din of drums, cymbals, conchs, & tom-toms, but he doesn't falter or faint. He steels himself and engages in the battle. This is how a king's elephant is resilient to sounds.

“And how is a king’s elephant resilient to aromas? There is the case where a king’s elephant, having gone into battle, smells the stench of the urine & feces of those pedigreed royal elephants who are at home in the battlefield, but he doesn’t falter or faint. He steels himself and engages in the battle. This is how a king’s elephant is resilient to aromas.

“And how is a king’s elephant resilient to flavors? There is the case where a king’s elephant, having gone into battle, goes without his ration of grass & water for one day, two days, three days, four days, five, but he doesn’t falter or faint. He steels himself and engages in the battle. This is how a king’s elephant is resilient to flavors.

“And how is a king’s elephant resilient to tactile sensations? There is the case where a king’s elephant, having gone into battle, is pierced by a flight of arrows, two flights, three flights, four flights, five flights of arrows, but he doesn’t falter or faint. He steels himself and engages in the battle. This is how a king’s elephant is resilient to tactile sensations.

“Endowed with these five qualities, monks, a king’s elephant is worthy of a king, is a king’s asset, counts as a very limb of his king.

“In the same way, a monk endowed with five qualities is deserving of gifts, deserving of hospitality, deserving of offerings, deserving of respect, an unexcelled field of merit for the world. Which five? There is the case where a monk is resilient to sights, resilient to sounds, resilient to aromas, resilient to flavors, resilient to tactile sensations.

“And how is a monk resilient to sights? There is the case where a monk, on seeing a sight with the eye, feels no passion for a sight that incites passion and can center his mind. This is how a monk is resilient to sights.

“[Similarly with the remaining senses.]” – [*AN 5:139*](#)

The Buddha used another analogy to show how restraint of the senses depends on having a strong foundation of mindfulness based in the body. If that mindfulness is based on the breath—as we’ll discuss below—it feeds the mind with a sense of pleasure so that it’s not hungry for the unhealthy food of sensory contacts. If it’s based on a contemplation of the

unattractiveness of the body, it serves to remind you of what's inside any outside body you might find attractive.

Notice in this passage how the Buddha provides you with an example of a good image or perception—a mental fabrication—to help with this practice, ending with an example of a verbal fabrication with which you can urge yourself to stick with it.

“And what is restraint? There is the case where a monk, seeing a form with the eye, is not set on pleasing forms, is not repelled by unpleasing forms, and remains with body-mindfulness established, with immeasurable awareness. He discerns, as it has come to be, the awareness-release, the discernment-release, where all evil, unskillful mental qualities that have arisen utterly cease without remainder.

“[Similarly when hearing a sound with the ear, smelling an aroma with the nose, tasting a flavor with the tongue, touching a tactile sensation with the body, or cognizing an idea with the intellect.]

“Just as if a person, catching six animals of different ranges, of different habitats, were to bind them with a strong rope. Catching a snake, he would bind it with a strong rope. Catching a crocodile... a bird... a dog... a hyena... a monkey, he would bind it with a strong rope. Binding them all with a strong rope, he would tether them to a strong post or stake.

“Then those six animals, of different ranges, of different habitats, would each pull toward its own range & habitat. The snake would pull, thinking, ‘I’ll go into the anthill.’ The crocodile would pull, thinking, ‘I’ll go into the water.’ The bird would pull, thinking, ‘I’ll fly up into the air.’ The dog would pull, thinking, ‘I’ll go into the village.’ The hyena would pull, thinking, ‘I’ll go into the charnel ground.’ The monkey would pull, thinking, ‘I’ll go into the forest.’ And when these six animals became internally exhausted, they would stand, sit, or lie down right there next to the post or stake.

“In the same way, in any monk whose mindfulness immersed in the body is developed & pursued, the eye doesn’t pull toward pleasing forms, and unpleasing forms are not repellent. The ear doesn’t pull toward pleasing sounds... The nose doesn’t pull toward pleasing aromas... The tongue doesn’t pull toward pleasing flavors... The body

doesn't pull toward pleasing tactile sensations... The intellect doesn't pull toward pleasing ideas, and unpleasing ideas are not repellent. This, monks, is restraint.

"The 'strong post or stake' is a synonym for mindfulness immersed in the body.

"Thus you should train yourselves: 'We will develop mindfulness immersed in the body. We will pursue it, give it a means of transport, give it a grounding. We will steady it, consolidate it, and set about it properly.' That's how you should train yourselves." – [SN 35:206](#)

Moderation in eating is defined both in terms of the amount of food you eat and in terms of your motivation for eating.

"And how does a monk know moderation in eating? There is the case where a monk, considering it appropriately, takes his food not playfully, nor for intoxication, nor for putting on bulk, nor for beautification, but simply for the survival & continuance of this body, for ending its afflictions, for the support of the holy life, thinking, 'I will destroy old feelings (of hunger) & not create new feelings (from overeating). Thus I will maintain myself, be blameless, & live in comfort.' This is how a monk knows moderation in eating." – [AN 4:37](#)

This definition is repeated several times in the Canon, but with no further explanation. However, the fact that the Buddha included the following verse in his description of the path to the highest sagacity shows that he regarded your attitude toward food as an important part of the training.

Stomach not full,
moderate in food,
modest,
not being greedy,
always not hungering for wants:
One without hunger
is one who's unbound. – [Sn 3:11](#)

The Canon also contains a gruesome story to illustrate the appropriate attitude toward comprehending food. If you fully comprehend food, you arrive at the third and penultimate level of awakening, non-return. That shows how important it is to develop the right attitude toward eating.

“And how is physical food to be regarded? Suppose a couple, husband & wife, taking meager provisions, were to travel through a desert. With them would be their only baby son, dear & appealing. Then the meager provisions of the couple going through the desert would be used up & depleted while there was still a stretch of the desert yet to be crossed. The thought would occur to them, ‘Our meager provisions are used up & depleted while there is still a stretch of this desert yet to be crossed. What if we were to kill this only baby son of ours, dear & appealing, and make dried meat & jerky? That way—chewing on the flesh of our son—at least the two of us would make it through this desert. Otherwise, all three of us would perish.’

“So they would kill their only baby son, dear & appealing, and make dried meat & jerky. Chewing on the flesh of their son, they would make it through the desert. While eating the flesh of their only son, they would beat their breasts, (crying,) ‘Where have you gone, our only baby son? Where have you gone, our only baby son?’ Now what do you think, monks? Would that couple eat that food playfully or for intoxication, or for putting on bulk, or for beautification?”

“No, lord.”

“Wouldn’t they eat that food simply for the sake of making it through that desert?”

“Yes, lord.”

“In the same way, I tell you, is the nutriment of physical food to be regarded. When physical food is comprehended, passion for the five strings of sensuality is comprehended. When passion for the five strings of sensuality is comprehended, there is no fetter bound by which a disciple of the noble ones would come back again to this world.” — [SN 12:63](#)

Wakefulness is defined both as a matter of making do with little sleep and of developing heedfulness during your waking hours. It lays the groundwork for the qualities needed in mindfulness and concentration practice: ardency, alertness, and mindfulness itself.

“And how is a monk committed to wakefulness? There is the case where a monk during the day, sitting & pacing back & forth, cleanses his mind of any qualities that would hold the mind in check. During the first watch of the night [dusk to 10 p.m.], sitting & pacing back & forth, he cleanses his mind of any qualities that would hold the mind in check. During the second watch of the night [10 p.m. to 2 a.m.], reclining on his right side, he takes up the lion’s posture, one foot placed on top of the other, mindful, alert, with his mind set on getting up [either as soon as he awakens or at a particular time]. During the last watch of the night [2 a.m. to dawn], sitting & pacing back & forth, he cleanses his mind of any qualities that would hold the mind in check. This is how a monk is committed to wakefulness.” – [AN 4:37](#)

Ven. Sona Poṭiriyaputta:

It’s not for sleeping,
the night garlanded
with zodiac stars.
The night, for one who knows,
is for staying awake. – [Thag 2:37](#)

28. Other Maps of Concentration

Many discourses, when discussing the levels of right concentration, list not only four jhānas but also five additional attainments that the suttas call the “formlessnesses beyond forms.” Modern discussions call these the “formless jhānas.” Because some discourses show how the discernment that leads to awakening can be gained based on any of these formless attainments, these attainments count as right concentration, too. [MN 140](#) explains that these attainments are simply applications of the equanimity found in the fourth jhāna to formless themes.

The standard description of these five levels is this:

“With the complete transcending of perceptions of (physical) form, with the disappearance of perceptions of resistance, and not attending to perceptions of multiplicity, (perceiving,) ‘Infinite space,’ one enters & remains in the dimension of the infinitude of space.

“With the complete transcending of the dimension of the infinitude of space, (perceiving,) ‘Infinite consciousness,’ one enters & remains in the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness.

“With the complete transcending of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, (perceiving,) ‘There is nothing,’ one enters & remains in the dimension of nothingness.

“With the complete transcending of the dimension of nothingness, he enters and remains in the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception.

“With the complete transcending of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception, one enters & remains in the cessation of perception and feeling.” — [AN 9:32](#)

Notice that the differences among the four jhānas relate to different ways of relating to the same object: with or without pleasure or rapture, with or without directed thought and evaluation. With the first two

formless states, though, the object—the perception—changes, but the way the mind relates to the perception stays the same: You hold to the oneness provided by the perception in a state of equanimity. With the third state, the oneness that has characterized all the concentration attainments beginning with the second jhāna falls away and is replaced by a perception of nothingness. In the fourth, perception becomes so attenuated that it can't rightly be called perception or devoid of perception. In the fifth, all perceptions and feelings—all mental fabrications—cease.

As for the ways in which you can attain the formless states, the Canon lists four.

The most standard way is through the four jhānas, which offer practice in seeing how the mind fabricates the different levels.

An alternative map lists five levels of jhāna, adding an intermediate level between the first and the second, in which there is no directed thought but there is still a modicum of evaluation ([AN 8:70](#)). None of the discourses explain this variant, but apparently it simply reflects the fact that the mind can settle down in a variety of ways.

Two other maps are even more different from the standard definition of the four jhānas. They apply to people whose meditative experience focuses less on the body and more on perceptions of light and forms that appear to the mind's eye.

In one of these maps, which emphasizes light, there are two steps prior to the infinitude of space:

the property of light
the property of beauty ([SN 14:11](#)).

In the other map, which emphasizes the perception of forms, the steps prior to the infinitude of space are three:

Possessed of form, one sees forms.
Not percipient of form internally, one sees forms externally.
One is intent only on the beautiful ([DN 15](#)).

[MN 128](#) gives an indication of how these steps relate to the practice of jhāna. There the Buddha discusses how, to master the perception of forms and light, he had to investigate what caused either of those perceptions to vanish against his will. Engaging in a process of commitment and

reflection, he came up with the following list of causes: doubt, inattention, sloth-~~ft~~-drowsiness, panic, excitement, boredom, excess persistence, slack persistence, a perception of multiplicity (focusing on sense objects), and excessive absorption in forms. By fine-tuning his focus to avoid these defilements, he was able to bring his concentration into a state of balanced calm and alertness.

Then he followed the five-stage map of the jhānas and was able to attain full awakening.

This suggests that concentration focused on light and forms can be a good way to improve the focus and steadiness of your concentration if your mind tends toward visual experiences while it settles down, but that the practice of the jhānas is what provides direct insight into the processes of fabrication: bodily, verbal, and mental. For that reason, it's the ideal foundation for liberating insight to arise.

This point becomes especially clear when we consider the topic of mindfulness and concentration that the Buddha taught most extensively, and that he himself used on the night of his awakening: mindfulness of in-and-out breathing (*ānāpānasati*)—breath meditation for short.

29. More than Just Calm

The Buddha once addressed a group of monks, telling them that they should practice breath meditation. One of the monks, Ven. Ariṭṭha, who didn't have a particularly good reputation in the Community, responded that he already practiced breath meditation. The Buddha asked him what kind of breath meditation he practiced, and Ariṭṭha replied,

“Having abandoned sensual desire for past sensualities, having done away with sensual desire for future sensualities, and having thoroughly subdued perceptions of resistance with regard to internal & external events, I breathe in mindfully and breathe out mindfully.”
– [SN 54:6](#)

The Buddha commented that there did exist that sort of breath meditation, he didn't deny it, but that it wasn't the sort that would give complete results. He then described his own sixteen-step formula for the practice of breath meditation that would bear great fruit.

Before we look at the Buddha's formula, we can stop and ask what was wrong with Ariṭṭha's. The main problem appears to be that his formula promotes calm but without much discernment. It does try to do away with unskillful desires, and to that extent involves some discernment, but it replaces them simply with equanimity. It doesn't dig down into what ignorant desires might lie buried in the present moment under the equanimity.

As we've already noted, there are two sorts of causes of suffering: those for which you can develop dispassion simply by looking at them with equanimity, and those for which you can develop dispassion only when you exert fabrications against them. Ariṭṭha's method would work with the first sort, but not with the second, in that it makes no mention of any skillful fabrications—trained desires—that need to be employed to help skillful determinations prevail over unskillful desires. As we'll see, the

Buddha's formula for breath meditation does precisely that, which means that it can deal with both sorts of causes of suffering.

This relates to another problem with Ariṭṭha's formula: In promoting a blanket attitude of equanimity to the present moment, it doesn't promote insight into the fabricated nature of that moment. For this reason, it doesn't provide any insight into how fabrications have to be used to develop states of right concentration. This creates two problems:

1) It doesn't provide any guidance on how to fabricate any of the jhānas, and so doesn't help you attain them.

2) It doesn't help you gain the deeper insight into the fabricated nature of the jhānas so that you can eventually step back from them and deconstruct them so as to bring the mind to total freedom.

As we'll see, the Buddha's formula for breath meditation highlights the role of fabrication in relating to the breath, and so addresses both of these failings in Ariṭṭha's formula. In this way, it uses discernment into the processes of fabrication to relinquish disturbance, to promote calm, and then to promote further discernment. It takes the step of fabrication in dependent co-arising—which, when functioning in ignorance, creates the conditions of suffering—and brings knowledge to it, so that it can be turned around and used to bring suffering to an end. In doing so, breath meditation employs these three types of determination—discernment, relinquishment, and calm—to overcome unskillful desires and passions in an all-around way.

The Buddha's instructions on breath meditation are repeated many times throughout the discourses. They're even included in the Vinaya. In fact, they're the only meditation instructions contained there, which shows that they were considered especially important: a necessary part of the training for monks who, specializing in memorizing that part of the Canon, might not have had time to memorize any of the discourses.

These instructions come in sixteen steps divided into four sets of four, called tetrads. The tetrads, in order, correspond to the four frames of reference in the establishing of mindfulness: The first tetrad focuses on the body, the second on feelings, the third on the mind, and the fourth on mental qualities.

Note, however, that whereas the steps within the tetrads are followed sequentially, the tetrads themselves are not. In other words, the first three

tetrads are followed simultaneously, in parallel, to create a state of concentration in which the sensation of the whole body, a feeling of pleasure filling the whole body, and an awareness filling the whole body are brought to a state of singleness. Sometimes, in the process of creating this state of singleness, the breath is the main issue standing in the way, sometimes feelings, sometimes the state of the mind, so you switch your attention to the appropriate tetrad in relation to the breath to solve that particular problem. Then you try to consolidate all three into one.

As for the fourth tetrad, it's used—in the beginning stages of meditation—to get rid of distracting thoughts related to the world that would interfere with the concentration being developed through the first three tetrads. You focus on the inconstancy of those thoughts so as to see their drawbacks (this would also involve seeing them as stressful or not-self). This insight into their drawbacks would lead to dispassion for them, followed by their cessation, and then the contemplation of their drawbacks would itself be relinquished.

In the translation below, I've highlighted the steps that explicitly mention fabrication. Hold in mind, though, that every step that counts as a training implicitly involves fabrication as well.

“Now, how is mindfulness of in-&-out breathing developed & pursued so as to be of great fruit, of great benefit?

“There is the case where a monk, having gone to the wilderness, to the shade of a tree, or to an empty building, sits down folding his legs crosswise, holding his body erect, and establishing mindfulness to the fore. Always mindful, he breathes in; mindful he breathes out.

The first tetrad, dealing with the body:

“[1] Breathing in long, he discerns, ‘I am breathing in long’; or breathing out long, he discerns, ‘I am breathing out long.’ [2] Or breathing in short, he discerns, ‘I am breathing in short’; or breathing out short, he discerns, ‘I am breathing out short.’ [3] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to the entire body.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to the entire body.’ [4] *He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in calming bodily fabrication.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out calming bodily fabrication.’*

The second tetrad, dealing with feelings:

“[5] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to rapture.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to rapture.’ [6] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to pleasure.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to pleasure.’ [7] *He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to mental fabrication.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to mental fabrication.’* [8] *He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in calming mental fabrication.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out calming mental fabrication.’*

The third tetrad, dealing with the mind:

“[9] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to the mind.’ [10] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in gladdening the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out gladdening the mind.’ [11] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in concentrating the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out concentrating the mind.’ [12] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in releasing the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out releasing the mind.’

The fourth tetrad, dealing with mental qualities:

“[13] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in focusing on inconstancy.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out focusing on inconstancy.’ [14] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in focusing on dispassion [*or: fading*].’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out focusing on dispassion.’ [15] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in focusing on cessation.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out focusing on cessation.’ [16] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in focusing on relinquishing.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out focusing on relinquishing.’” — [*MN 118*](#)

Notice how the Buddha’s instructions start where Ariṭṭha’s end—breathing in and out mindfully—and then progress from there. Notice, too, how proactive this practice is. Instead of just watching your breath, you discern differences in the breath in the first two steps, and then you train yourself to breathe in and out fostering skillful feelings, mind states, and mental qualities in the remaining steps. As we’ve noted before, training

involves using the desires aligned with the determination for awakening to overcome any desires that would thwart that determination.

Finally, notice how the Buddha calls attention to two types of fabrication in his instructions—bodily and mental—and how the instructions themselves describe how to talk to yourself—how to engage in verbal fabrication—as you do all the steps. By making you sensitive to these three types of fabrication and teaching you how to generate them and calm them at will, the sixteen steps develop insight and calm at the same time: insight in focusing attention on the desires implicit in fabrication, calm in using those desires to pacify body and mind. In calling attention to fabrication in the present moment, the sixteen steps also give you practice in dealing with the causes of suffering against which you have to exert fabrication: how to breathe, how to talk to yourself, and how to fashion perceptions and feelings that will uproot any unskillful desires that may arise.

This emphasis on the processes of fabrication shows how breath meditation won't abandon you at the time of death. Even though the breath will have to fall away, the skills you've gained in mastering verbal and mental fabrications through this meditation won't. They'll help guide you to skillfully handle the cravings and clingings—desires and passions in their roles of hungering and feeding—that can become so strong in the mind when the body can no longer survive.

And as we noted above, in calling attention to how you need to fabricate states of concentration, the Buddha is also providing you with advance warning that these fabricated states, and the desires underlying their fabrication, will eventually have to be abandoned.

11. The Place of Dispassion

Given that desire and passion play such a major and complex role in causing suffering, it should come as no surprise (1) that dispassion plays a prominent role in the Buddha's discussions of the truth of the cessation of suffering, and (2) that he explains the role of dispassion in ending suffering in a wide variety of ways.

Two similes are useful to keep in mind when we look at the Buddha's discussion of dispassion in these contexts. We've already encountered them both: the simile of feeding and the simile of building houses.

In terms of the feeding simile, the cause of suffering is the hunger that makes us want to feed. Suffering itself is the act of feeding on the food of the aggregates.

So one of the ways in which the Buddha describes the actions leading to the end of suffering tells of how meditators can contemplate the aggregates in ways that lead to a sense of disenchantment for them. In the Buddha's time, the Pali word for disenchantment—*nibbidā*—was used in everyday contexts to describe the feeling you have when you've had enough of a certain food and don't want any more. Some translators have translated *nibbidā* as "revulsion," but that's too aversive. *Nibbidā* is more a simple sense that you've had all you want of that food, and the idea of eating any more has no appeal. The main difference, of course, between disenchantment in its everyday sense and disenchantment in the sense the Buddha gives it in his discussions of the end of suffering, is that everyday *nibbidā* can wear away when you get hungry once more. The *nibbidā* leading to unbinding, however, is so thoroughgoing that you'll never want to feed on the aggregates ever again.

In the descriptions following the food analogy, disenchantment with the aggregates is then followed by dispassion, which is then followed by release and the realization that the mind is released ([SN 22:59](#)). It's interesting to note here that, whereas disenchantment is said to have an

object—you're disenchanted with the aggregates—dispassion isn't. In other words, it's not limited to the aggregates.

You may remember that the Buddha taught people to abandon, not the aggregates, but the desire and passion for them. Other discussions in the Canon make the point that dispassion has to be all-around—not only for the aggregates but also for the acts of desire and passion, and for dispassion itself—to lead to full awakening ([AN 9:36](#); [Sn 4:4](#)). If the mind at this point tries to feed on dispassion, for example, its awakening is only partial. This is why there are levels of awakening. In the first three levels, even though there is an experience of dispassion, the deathless, and unbinding ([MN 1](#); [MN 48](#)), there is still passion for these two things. Only at the fourth and total level of awakening is dispassion so total that it applies to the deathless and to dispassion itself. For suffering to cease, you have to reach a point where you're no longer driven by hunger of even the most refined sort.

As for the simile of house-building, two striking passages show how dispassion puts an end to the places that craving creates and where desire and passion take up residence. The first is a pair of verses that, according to tradition, the Buddha exclaimed shortly after his awakening:

Through the round of many births I roamed
without reward,
without rest,
seeking the house-builder.
Painful is birth again
& again.

House-builder, you're seen!
You will not build a house again.
All your rafters broken,
the ridge pole dismantled,
immersed in dismantling, the mind
has attained to the end of craving. — [Dhp 153–154](#)

The “dismantling” here is the process of examining the aggregates out of which two related things—a state of becoming and an identity as a

being in that state—are created. When you see that the raw materials provided by aggregates are unworthy of passion, you feel no craving, either to create more of them or to create any sense of yourself or your world from them. You don’t simply stop living in houses. You dismantle them and, in so doing, bring them to an end.

The second passage lends a humorous touch to the house-building analogy by reducing house-building to a childish game:

“Just as when boys or girls are playing with little sand castles [lit: dirt houses]: As long as they are not free from passion, desire, love, thirst, fever, & craving for those little sand castles, that’s how long they have fun with those sand castles, enjoy them, treasure them, feel possessive of them. But when they become free from passion, desire, love, thirst, fever, & craving for those little sand castles, then they smash them, scatter them, demolish them with their hands or feet, and make them unfit for play.

“In the same way, Rādhā, you too should smash, scatter, & demolish form, and make it unfit for play. Practice for the ending of craving for form.

“[Similarly with the other aggregates.]” – [SN 23:2](#)

As with “dismantling” in the previous passage, “demolishing” in this passage means ending desire and passion for the aggregates by examining them to see how ephemeral and stressful they are. When you feel no craving for them, you don’t simply stop playing with them. You bring them to an end.

These images lie behind another standard way in which the Canon depicts the actions constituting the third noble truth: dispassion is followed by cessation. Because passion was what fueled the fabrication of becomings and identities, and even the aggregates from which they were constructed, thoroughgoing dispassion is enough to bring them all to an end.

Ven. Sāriputta: “If a monk practices for the sake of disenchantment, dispassion, & cessation with regard to aging & death... birth... becoming... clinging/sustenance... craving... feeling... contact... the six sense media... name & form... consciousness... fabrications... ignorance, he deserves to be called a monk who practices the

Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. If—through disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, and lack of clinging/sustenance with regard to aging & death... ignorance—he is released, then he deserves to be called a monk who has attained unbinding in the here-&-now.” — [SN 12:67](#)

12. Aspects of Dispassion

In describing the end of suffering, the Buddha not only includes dispassion in the list of events leading up to the realization of unbinding. He also, in one passage, uses the word “dispassion” to cover the whole range of those events. In this way, he shows that the act of developing dispassion carries with it many implications, both in the mind and in the world of the senses dependent on the mind’s activities. This, of course, is in line with the principle we noted above: that the mind is the forerunner of all experience. Changes from within the mind will have to have an impact not only within you, but also on your experience of the world at large.

Here’s the passage:

“Among whatever phenomena there may be, fabricated or unfabricated, dispassion—the subduing of intoxication, the elimination of thirst, the uprooting of attachment, the breaking of the round, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, the realization of unbinding—is considered supreme.” — [AN 4:34](#)

We can take this passage apart word by word, focusing on the crucial terms.

First, *phenomena (dhamma)*: This term denotes any object of the mind. Because the consciousness of nibbāna itself has no object, it’s said to be the end of phenomena ([AN 10:58](#)), which is why this list of terms coming under dispassion goes only as far as the realization of unbinding, and doesn’t include unbinding itself.

Unfabricated: The above passage in [AN 4:34](#) is followed by a statement that the supreme fabricated dhamma is the noble eightfold path. This implies that dispassion, the highest of all dhammas, whether fabricated or not, is both unfabricated and the highest of all possible objects of awareness. This presents a paradox. Ordinarily, all objects of awareness are conditioned by the factors of dependent co-arising, starting with intention

and fabrication fueled by desire and ignorance. When these factors cease—in terms of kamma, this would mean that there is no present-moment intention—experience at the six senses has to cease as well. This would suggest that dispassion should not be both unfabricated and a dhamma at the same time. The way out of this paradox is to note that the “object” of awareness resulting from dispassion is the act of watching all the processes of dependent co-arising collapse as there are no longer any underlying conditions to support them.

Here it’s important to note that this collapse can’t come about by simply intending for fabrications to stop, because that intention would count as another form of fabrication, and so it would keep the process of dependent co-arising going. Instead, the mind has to be totally devoid of intention in the present moment for fabrications to cease.

The Canon illustrates the paradoxical nature of this event—in which the mind has no intention either to fabricate or to not fabricate—with a simile. A deva once asked the Buddha how he crossed the stream—the image implying that he got over to awakening on the other side—and he responded that he crossed the stream neither by pushing forward nor by staying in place ([SN 1:1](#)). Now, within space and time, staying in place and going someplace else are our only options at any given moment. The Buddha crossed over by not choosing either. In a similar way, dispassion doesn’t choose either to fabricate or not to fabricate. That’s how the unfabricated is experienced.

The sobering of intoxication: The Canon lists three types of intoxication that foster unskillful actions and qualities of the mind: intoxication with youth, with health, and with life ([AN 3:39](#); [AN 5:57](#)). When you’re intoxicated with these things, you feel that aging, illness, and death are far away, so there’s no need to prepare for them anytime soon. You tend to act as you like without fear of the consequences. This heedlessness is what makes it easy to act in harmful and thoughtless ways. The fact that dispassion subdues these sorts of intoxication means that realizing the cessation of suffering has an ethical dimension: It removes the heedlessness that would create the conditions for unskillful behavior. This is why even the lowest level of awakening—the first glimpse of the deathless—is said to perfect your training in virtue ([AN 3:87](#)). There’s no

room in the Buddha's teaching for the idea that awakening puts you above ethical norms.

The Pali word for intoxication, *mada*, can also mean infatuation, as when you're infatuated with pride or childish games. In this sense, the subduing of intoxication would mean not only sobering up, but also growing up. You outgrow your childish pursuits and become an adult.

The subduing of thirst: Although this phrase uses another word for thirst—*pipāsa*—it means the same thing as the ending of craving/thirst: *taṇhā*.

The uprooting of attachment: The word for attachment here, *ālaya*, can also mean “home.” This relates, of course, to the house-building analogy. The mind no longer feels the need to build any more homes in the form of future lives, because its “dwelling” is unfabricated and so cannot change. At the same time, the word *ālaya* also carries connotations of nostalgia, in which case it means you feel no nostalgia for any of your “homes” of the past.

The breaking of the round: This refers to the round of rebirth. Dispassion puts an end to becoming—the process of taking on an identity in a world of experience—and because this internal process is the prerequisite for taking birth in any outside world, it puts an end to the wandering-on from birth to birth, as stated above in [Dhp 153–154](#). Full awakening doesn't necessarily bring with it knowledge of your previous lives, but the act of stepping out of space and time brings with it the knowledge that the round of birth and rebirth has been going on for a long, long time.

The destruction of craving: This doesn't mean the simple ending of an individual act of craving. It means the end of all cravings.

Dispassion: The Pali word for dispassion, *virāga*, can also mean the fading of a color. But because there's no darkness in the deathless dimension ([Ud 1:10](#)), the “fading” here is not fading into darkness. It's more like the fading of colors when a picture is overexposed: They fade into pure light.

Cessation: When there's no passion for fabrications in the present moment, there's nothing to keep them going, so they cease. However, awakening doesn't erase your past kamma. This means that if there's still past kamma that has to be worked out, the awakened person returns to

experience the six senses, but his/her relationship to those senses is now different. The Canon says repeatedly that awakened people experience the senses, the aggregates, and even the objects of meditation “disjoined” from them ([MN 140](#); [SN 47:4](#)). In simple terms, because they’re no longer trying to feed off them, they don’t take them in. That’s how they’re disjoined.

The realization of unbinding: In ordinary Pali usage, the term, “unbinding,” (*nibbāna*) was used to describe the extinguishing of a fire. To understand the implications of this image, though, we have to understand how the Buddha described the physics of how fire worked.

Individual fires, he said, were caused by provoking the fire property, which existed, to a greater or lesser degree, in a calm latent state in all things. When you provoked it—say, by using a fire-starter—it would grab hold and cling to the fuel that would sustain it. (Here, for *fuel*, the Buddha used the word *upādāna*, the same word for clinging/feeding that he used in the definition of suffering in the first noble truth.) As long as the fire burned, it was trapped in a state of heat and agitation. When it went out, it let go of its fuel, grew calm, and was released.

The Buddha used the term “unbinding” for the goal both to indicate that it was a state of freedom and calm, and also to suggest how to get there. Just as fuel doesn’t cling to the fire, it’s not the case that the aggregates cling to you. You’re the one clinging to them. You gain freedom by letting them go, just as a fire goes out and is released when it lets go of its fuel.

The main difference between the *nibbāna* of the fire and the *nibbāna* experienced by the mind is that the fire property can be provoked repeatedly and so give rise to other fires. The full release of the mind, though, is said to be unprovoked ([MN 29](#)). Because this release is uncaused, there’s no reason for it to end. At the same time, nothing can provoke the mind into clinging to anything ever again.

The Buddha also uses the metaphor of an extinguished fire to make the point that the person who has gained release can’t be described. Just as a fire, when it goes out, can’t be described as going east, west, north, or south, in the same way, a person fully released can’t be described as existing, not existing, both, or neither ([MN 72](#); [SN 44:1](#)). That’s because people are measured and defined as beings in terms of their attachments

([SN 22:36](#)). When they have no more attachments, they can't be defined, and so can't be properly described.

This means that when you no longer define yourself as a being through desire and passion, you're not bringing about annihilation. Instead, you're no longer limited by your desires and passions. The simile here is of the ocean: Just as no one can truly measure the amount of water in the ocean because it's so vast, no one can measure the person who's fully awakened ([MN 72](#); [SN 44:1](#); [AN 3:116](#)).

13. Possible, Desirable, Objectively True

Although, strictly speaking, unbinding can't properly be described, the Buddha still had to talk about it in order to convince his listeners that it was a possible goal, desirable and objectively true. In other words, he had to get them to want to follow the path going there. Otherwise, they wouldn't be motivated to subdue their other desires and passions in order to attain it.

Now, in speaking about unbinding, the Buddha couldn't offer proof for what he was saying. Proof for his claims would come only when his listeners followed his instructions and found for themselves that, yes, the path of training he taught did lead to total freedom from suffering ([MN 27](#)).

In the meantime, the Buddha's task was simply to be reasonable in his explanations and inspiring in the force of his personal example.

Here we'll talk about his explanations.

To make the point that unbinding was *possible*—that a fabricated path could lead to an unfabricated experience—the Buddha relied on his explanation of causality. If everything you experienced in the present moment were totally determined by a creator god or by your past actions, you wouldn't be free to practice a path that would lead to the end of suffering. If everything happened without cause, there would be no way to follow a pattern of cause and effect to arrive at any goal at all.

However, given the principles of this/that conditionality, there is a pattern to causes and effects that can be mastered, while there's also freedom within that pattern to direct those causes toward goals of your choosing, and in particular, to a goal that goes beyond the pattern.

Now, those causes can't produce the unfabricated—whatever they produced would have to be fabricated—but they can lead to the threshold where intentions cancel one another out and all fabricated things fall away. This is why the Buddha used the image of the path to describe the

practices that lead to unbinding. A path doesn't cause its goal, but following it can take you to the goal. In the same way, the path of the triple training doesn't cause unbinding, but following it can take you there.

Two of the characteristics that the Buddha noted about the mind explain how it can take advantage of the potential for the qualified freedom available within this/that conditionality here and now.

One of them we've already noted: The mind can change direction more quickly than anything else imaginable. This tendency can cause trouble if you're already on the path, but if you've fallen off the path—or haven't even gotten onto it yet—you can take advantage of the mind's ability to change quickly to get yourself on.

The second point the Buddha notes is that the mind is luminous, and because it's luminous, it can be developed ([AN 1:53](#)). Some people have interpreted this statement as meaning that the mind is already pure by nature, but the context of the statement shows that it means something else. The important word in the context is “developed.” If the mind were already pure, it wouldn't need to be developed. So, taken in context, the statement means that the mind can observe its actions and their results, and that, because of this ability, it can see when it's causing suffering and when it's not. It can then take advantage of that knowledge and of its own changeability to develop skillful qualities and act in new ways that no longer lead to suffering. In fact, the most fundamental approach the Buddha recommends for training yourself—commitment and reflection ([AN 10:73](#))—depends on the mind's ability to choose a direction, to stick with it, and to reflect on that commitment and its results to see, step by step, what changes in course need to be made.

Even though these observations about causality and the mind don't provide definite proof that unbinding is possible, they do leave that possibility open. That's all that any statement can do. The actual proof comes from following the path to unbinding until you've arrived.

Here the Buddha provided an analogy. A skilled elephant hunter goes into a forest to find a bull elephant. He sees large elephant footprints, but because he's skilled, he doesn't jump to the conclusion that they're the footprints of the bull elephant he wants. Why? Because there are dwarf female elephants with big feet. The footprints might be theirs. But the

footprints look promising, so he follows them. He comes across slash marks high in the trees, but because he's skilled, he doesn't jump to the conclusion that they're the marks of the elephant he wants. Why? Because there are tall female elephants with tusks. The slash marks might be theirs. But the marks look promising, so he continues following them until he actually sees a large bull elephant in a clearing or at the foot of a tree. That's when he knows that he's found the elephant he wants.

In the same way, you can hear the Dhamma and even practice the Dhamma, through the various levels of meditation and supernormal knowledges that can come from concentration, but those attainments count only as footprints and slash marks. Only when you've seen the deathless at the first stage of awakening do you know the Buddha was right. And only when you've gained the freedom of full awakening do you fully arrive at the goal you've been looking for ([MN 27](#)).

To make the point that the truth of unbinding—along with all the realizations that follow on realizing unbinding—is *objective*, the Buddha noted that it's not experienced through the six senses ([MN 49](#)). As we've learned from dependent co-arising, all things known through the six senses are conditioned by fabrications and intentions, and in particular by past actions, given that the six senses themselves are to be viewed as the results of past actions. This means that ordinary sensory knowledge is colored by desire and passion. It can't provide a grounding for any knowledge that's fully objective. Even when the Buddha told some of his listeners to judge a teaching by the results that come when putting it into practice, he didn't say that they could arrive at fully objective conclusions until they had had their first glimpse of awakening. Only a knowledge totally free from past conditioning, such as the Buddha's full awakening, could qualify as objectively true.

This is why the Buddha called unbinding the highest noble truth ([MN 140](#)). It's also why he used a special verb to describe knowledge of unbinding: A person who's had a direct experience of unbinding doesn't simply know it (*jānāti*). He or she *directly* knows it (*abhi jānāti*) without having to depend on any intermediaries or conditioning factors.

As for pointing out how *desirable* unbinding was, the Buddha primarily made use of similes. One of his most graphic similes described a hypothetical deal by which you would have to undergo extreme pain and

torture but would be guaranteed a realization of the four noble truths—one of his expressions for gaining your first glimpse of the deathless. As he said, if such a deal were possible and it were offered to you, you’d be well advised to take it.

“Monks, suppose there was a man whose life span was 100 years, who would live to 100. Someone would say to him, ‘Look here, fellow. They will stab you at dawn with 100 spears, at noon with 100 spears, & again in the late afternoon with 100 spears. You, thus stabbed day after day with 300 spears, will have a lifespan of 100 years, will live to be 100, and at the end of 100 years you will realize the four noble truths that you have never realized before.’

“Monks, a person who desired his own true benefit would do well to take up (the offer). Why is that? From an inconceivable beginning comes transmigration. A beginning point is not evident for the (pain of) blows from spears, swords, & axes. Even if this (offer) were to occur, I tell you that the realization of the four noble truths would not be accompanied by pain & distress. Instead, I tell you, the realization of the four noble truths would be accompanied by pleasure & happiness.” — [SN 56:35](#)

Given that the happiness of just a glimpse of awakening could obliterate the memory of that amount of pain and torture, imagine how great the happiness of total awakening to unbinding, free from desire and passion, could be.

16. Honest & Observant

The Canon makes clear that, in order to reach the goal that offers the highest embodiment of the four determinations, you have to start with whatever powers of discernment, truthfulness, relinquishment, and calm you already have. You then develop them by using them to overcome any desires that run counter to the path. Just as you strengthen your body by exercising it, you strengthen these skillful inner powers by putting them to use.

The Canon associates each of these determinations with a verb. You're determined—

not to neglect discernment,
to guard the truth,
to be committed to relinquishment, and
to train only for calm.

- Not neglecting discernment means that you always keep in mind the questions that lie at the basis of discernment: “What is skillful? What is unskillful? What is blameworthy? What is blameless? What should be cultivated? What should not be cultivated?” And finally, the questions that summarize the rest: “What when I do it will lead to my long-term harm and suffering? What when I do it will lead to my long-term well-being and happiness?” ([MN 135](#)). You see that long-term happiness is possible, that it will depend on your actions, and that long-term is better than short-term. So you always keep the long-term results of your actions in mind.

This means that genuine discernment, instead of focusing exclusively on the present moment, takes the future into consideration as well, as you keep in mind the long-term consequences of what you're doing in the present moment. This fact is reflected in the passages where the Buddha recommends focusing on what needs to be done right now: In every case, these passages come in the context of his discussions of mindfulness of

death. Given that you could die at any moment, you should do what you can right now to master the skills you'll need to handle death well ([MN 131](#); [AN 5:77](#); [AN 6:19–20](#)).

The need to take the future into consideration is also reflected in the passage with which we opened this book: When Sāriputta explains why the Buddha recommends abandoning unskillful qualities and developing skillful ones, the reasons encompass the results both in the present moment and well into the future ([SN 22:2](#)).

- Guarding the truth means being clear about what you base your opinions about the truth on. Hearsay? Tradition? Reasoning? Logic? Direct experience? Of the possible bases for your opinions, the Buddha says that only direct experience is reliable ([MN 95](#)), and that *it's* reliable only when you yourself have become a reliable person ([MN 110](#)). So truth is a quality not only of intellectual honesty but also of personal integrity.

- Being committed to relinquishment means finding joy in abandoning any attachment that weighs the mind down and, once you've abandoned it, letting it go for good.

- Training only for calm means abandoning anything, within or without, that disturbs the mind. Here it's worth noting that, in the beginning stages, you focus on eliminating disturbances that would pull you off the path. Only as the path develops do you begin to focus on disturbances within the path itself.

It's also worth noting that, on this level of developing the four determinations, three of them—discernment, truthfulness, and relinquishment—function as means. Calm, even here, is a quality for whose sake you train.

By developing these four qualities in these ways, you can overcome desires that are ignorant, deceptive, grasping, or agitated. You're also going against many of the common habits that the world at large uses in pursuing its desires:

the habit of going for quick results without thought for the long-term consequences;

the habit of using deceit when you can't get what you want through honest means;

the habit of accumulating as much as you can; and

the habit of looking for happiness in variety, excitement, and change for the sake of change.

In an image frequently used in the Canon, when you take on the practice, you stop flowing along with the passions of the world. Instead, you go against the stream, even when it's hard ([AN 4:5](#)).

It's hard because the desires that flow against the four determinations don't give in easily. After all, they've been in charge of the mind for who knows how many eons. And just because these desires are ignorant doesn't mean they're not clever. They can easily have you fooled—and *have* had you fooled for a long, long time. They can even quote Dhamma to their own purposes when they want to, lulling you into thinking that by fighting them, you strengthen them, so you should avoid challenging them; or that because contentment is a virtue, it's best just to accept them and be at peace with them.

The Buddha, however, never shied away from the fact that the practice will involve an internal battle. This is why he used so many martial analogies to rouse his monks to be up for the fight. For instance, he compared the practice to a fortress on a frontier: Mindfulness is like the gatekeeper who knows how to recognize enemies—unskillful mental qualities—and keep them from entering the fortress. Persistence is like the soldiers who defend the fortress, while learning the Dhamma is like providing the soldiers with weapons ([AN 7:63](#)).

In another analogy, the Buddha says that a monk who disrobes on hearing that there's a beautiful woman in a nearby village is like a warrior who, on seeing the cloud of dust raised by an approaching army, can't steel himself to enter the battle. A monk who disrobes when a woman throws herself all over him is like a warrior who falls mortally wounded in hand-to-hand combat. However, a monk who can extricate himself from a situation like that and go into the wilderness where he gains awakening, is like a warrior who, when engaged in hand-to-hand combat, comes out victorious ([AN 5:75](#)).

An important parallel between a monk and a warrior is that, because the mind can change direction so quickly, especially when it meets with internal resistance, you need to be trained to stick with the battle and see it all the way through.

The training the Buddha offers is twofold: from without and from within. Because you're starting from ignorance, you need training from other people who are already more advanced on the path than you are. People of this sort are not only capable of giving you instruction when you need it, but they can also "rouse, urge, and encourage" you when you don't feel up for the fight. These, in fact, are precisely the verbs the Canon uses to describe how the Buddha and his monks taught their students. Unlike the *samaṇa* schools that could only instruct others in their teachings on the powerlessness of human action, the Buddha—in teaching the power of human action—could provide a complete course of training that both informed his students of the possibility and desirability of taking on the training, and also fired up their hearts to exercise the power of their own actions as far as possible.

That's training from without.

You also need training from within, because the actual battle is inside your mind. It's a battle that only you can fight. This means that you have to be alert to what's happening in your mind from moment to moment, to see how and where the battle lines have shifted. To deal effectively with your inner battles, you can't simply internalize general lessons from outside. You need to develop your powers of observation and your own ingenuity to generate solutions to specific internal problems on time.

That's the training from within.

Both sides of the training rely on the first two of the determinations: discernment and truth, in their more rudimentary forms of being observant and honest.

In receiving training from others, you have to observe what's going on in your mind and in your behavior in general, and report it honestly to those who are training you. That way, they can trust you and be genuinely helpful in giving advice.

In training yourself, you have to be observant and honest about what you're doing and the results you're getting from your actions. In particular, you have to pay attention to what's working and what's not working in dealing with unskillful desires, so that you can solve problems quickly and not let them fester—and so that your unskillful desires don't pull the wool over your eyes.

When you become truthful and discerning in these ways, you have a good foundation for developing the other two determinations, relinquishment and calm.

That's why the Buddha didn't teach only peaceful or unburdened people. But it's also why he noted clearly that not everyone could be trained. Only if someone were honest and observant would he be willing to take that person on as a student fit to be tamed.

26. Training in Mindfulness

Right mindfulness—which the Buddha defines as a faculty of the active memory—builds on the work of right effort to foster concentration in two ways. To begin with, it helps in a general way to keep things in mind, which will be necessary to keep staying with the object of your concentration and to keep putting away any thoughts that would distract you from that object.

“There is the case where a monk is mindful, endowed with excellent proficiency in mindfulness, remembering & able to call to mind even things that were done & said long ago.” — [*AN 8:30*](#)

More specifically, the full formula for right mindfulness, given below, provides the how-to instructions for getting the mind into concentration. It boils down to two activities:

- 1) keeping the mind focused on a single object, such as an aspect of the body in and of itself, like the breath; and
- 2) subduing any thoughts of greed or distress that would pull you away from the framework of your focus and into the mental framework of the world outside.

To aid in perfecting both of these tasks as skills, the formula for right mindfulness recommends three helpful mental qualities that carry on the work of commitment and reflection as the Buddha taught it to Rāhula:

- a) ardency, which is the same as right effort;
- b) alertness, which is the ability to observe what you’re doing while you’re doing it; and
- c) mindfulness itself, which can draw on your memory to recognize skillful or unskillful qualities as they arise, to remember what needs to be done with them, and to remember the lessons you learn in the course of being ardent and alert to what you’re doing.

“There is the case where a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings in & of themselves... the mind in & of itself... mental qualities in & of themselves—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. This, monks, is called right mindfulness.” — [SN 45:8](#)

These four ways of developing mindfulness—focused on body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities, all in and of themselves as your frame of reference—are called the four establishing of mindfulness.

There’s a common misperception that mindfulness practice means adopting an open, accepting attitude toward everything that arises in the mind, free from judgments or agendas. The Canon, however, doesn’t support this view. Its definition of mindfulness as the governing principle in the practice shows that right mindfulness definitely has an agenda: Instead of simply watching mental qualities arise and pass away, it remembers, using verbal fabrications, to *make* skillful qualities arise and to *prevent* them from passing away.

“And how is mindfulness the governing principle? The mindfulness that ‘I will make complete any training with regard to good conduct that is not yet complete, or I will protect with discernment any training with regard to good conduct that is complete’ is well established right within. The mindfulness that ‘I will make complete any training with regard to the basics of the holy life that is not yet complete, or I will protect with discernment any training with regard to the basics of the holy life that is complete’ is well established right within. The mindfulness that ‘I will scrutinize with discernment any Dhamma that is not yet scrutinized, or I will protect with discernment any Dhamma that has been scrutinized’ is well established right within. The mindfulness that ‘I will touch through release any Dhamma that is not yet touched, or I will protect with discernment any Dhamma that has been touched’ is well established right within.

“This is how mindfulness is the governing principle.” — [AN 4:245](#)

The Canon also contains many analogies to show that right mindfulness applies clear standards of judgment as to what should and shouldn't be fostered in the training of the mind.

To begin with, its role is to prepare the mind for right concentration by keeping the mind away from thoughts that engender sensual desire. In this way, it's not open and accepting at all. It accepts only what will help concentration, and rejects what doesn't.

"Once a hawk suddenly swooped down on a quail and seized it. Then the quail, as it was being carried off by the hawk, lamented, 'O, just my bad luck & lack of merit that I was wandering out of my proper range and into the territory of others! If only I had kept to my proper range today, to my own ancestral territory, this hawk would have been no match for me in battle.'

"'But what is your proper range?' the hawk asked. 'What is your own ancestral territory?'

"'A newly plowed field with stones all turned up.'

"So the hawk, without bragging about its own strength, without mentioning its own strength, let go of the quail. 'Go, quail, but even when you have gone there you won't escape me.'

"Then the quail, having gone to a newly plowed field with stones all turned up and climbing up on top of a large stone, stood taunting the hawk, 'Now come and get me, you hawk! Now come and get me, you hawk!'

"So the hawk, without bragging about its own strength, without mentioning its own strength, folded its two wings and suddenly swooped down toward the quail. When the quail knew, 'The hawk is coming at me full speed,' it slipped behind the stone, and right there the hawk shattered its own breast.

"This is what happens to anyone who wanders into what is not his proper range and is the territory of others.

"For this reason, you should not wander into what is not your proper range and is the territory of others. In one who wanders into what is not his proper range and is the territory of others, Māra gains an opening, Māra gains a foothold. And what, for a monk, is not his proper range and is the territory of others? The five strings of

sensuality. Which five? Forms cognizable by the eye—agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, enticing, linked with sensual desire. Sounds cognizable by the ear... Aromas cognizable by the nose... Flavors cognizable by the tongue... Tactile sensations cognizable by the body—agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, enticing, linked with sensual desire. These, for a monk, are not his proper range and are the territory of others.

“Wander, monks, in what is your proper range, your own ancestral territory. In one who wanders in what is his proper range, his own ancestral territory, Māra gains no opening, Māra gains no foothold. And what, for a monk, is his proper range, his own ancestral territory? The four establishings of mindfulness. Which four? There is the case where a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings in & of themselves... the mind in & of itself... mental qualities in & of themselves—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. This, for a monk, is his proper range, his own ancestral territory.” — [SN 47:6](#)

Secondly, mindfulness takes note of what works and what doesn't work in trying to get the mind to settle down into concentration. In this way, mindfulness—instead of simply accepting what is—carries on the practice of commitment and reflection devoted to developing what you want: greater and greater skill in reaching inner states of well-being and calm.

“Now suppose that there is a wise, competent, skillful cook who has presented a king or a king's minister with various kinds of curry: mainly sour, mainly bitter, mainly peppery, mainly sweet, alkaline or non-alkaline, salty or non-salty. He takes note of his master, thinking, ‘Today my master likes this curry, or he reaches out for that curry, or he takes a lot of this curry, or he praises that curry. Today my master likes mainly sour curry.... Today my master likes mainly bitter curry... mainly peppery curry... mainly sweet curry... alkaline curry... non-alkaline curry... salty curry... Today my master likes non-salty curry, or he reaches out for non-salty curry, or he takes a lot of non-salty curry, or he praises non-salty curry.’ As a result, he is rewarded with clothing, wages, & gifts. Why is that?

Because the wise, competent, skillful cook takes note of his own master.

“In the same way, there is the case where a wise, competent, skillful monk remains focused on the body in & of itself... feelings in & of themselves... the mind in & of itself... mental qualities in & of themselves—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. As he remains thus focused on mental qualities in & of themselves, his mind becomes concentrated, his defilements are abandoned. He takes note of that fact. As a result, he is rewarded with a pleasant abiding here & now, together with mindfulness & alertness. Why is that? Because the wise, competent, skillful monk takes note of his own mind.” — [*SN 47:8*](#)

32. Leaping Up

The discourses describe two approaches for how to train the mind in liberating discernment based on the practice of jhāna. In the first, you gain insight into the processes of fabrication by observing the mind as it goes from one level of jhāna to another. In the other, you observe and evaluate a state of jhāna while you're still in it.

In both approaches, discernment performs two functions. You engage in the practice of jhāna with commitment and reflection first to discern the *fact* of fabrication in each level of jhāna. In other words, you see how that state of concentration is intentionally put together. Then, based on a desire for even greater calm, you refine your commitment and reflection to arrive at a *value judgment*, discerning the drawbacks of those fabrications and the jhānas created from them.

As we've already noted, this value judgment is a necessary part of liberating discernment. You fabricate states of jhāna based on desire and passion for them, and you feel desire and passion for them because of a value judgment: that the effort that goes into them is amply rewarded by the pleasure, rapture, and pleasing equanimity they provide.

So to free yourself from the fetter of desire and passion, you have to arrive at the opposite value judgment: They're not worth the effort they require. You get yourself to see that even though these are the ultimate fabricated states, the fact that you have to keep on fabricating them means that they're still not satisfying. They require subtle but continual effort. True peace and calm would have to require no fabrication at all. Only when the mind is struck with the realization that nothing fabricated can provide satisfactory happiness will it genuinely develop dispassion for all things fabricated and then incline to the unfabricated.

An example of the first approach, observing the mind as it goes from one state of jhāna to another, is the following passage, which focuses on the first step of reflection: realizing the fact of fabrication in the jhānas.

As you progress up the ladder of concentration, you see how the three types of fabrication—verbal, bodily, and mental—fall away.

“There are these six calmings. When one has attained the first jhāna, speech has been calmed. When one has attained the second jhāna, directed thought & evaluation [verbal fabrications] have been calmed. When one has attained the third jhāna, rapture has been calmed. When one has attained the fourth jhāna, in-and-out breathing [bodily fabrication] has been calmed. When one has attained the cessation of perception & feeling, perception & feeling [mental fabrications] have been calmed. When a monk’s effluents have ended, passion has been calmed, aversion has been calmed, delusion has been calmed.” — [*SN 36:11*](#)

This process is like subjecting a hunk of ore-bearing rock to heat. As the temperature rises progressively higher, first any lead in the rock melts and flows out, then the zinc, then the silver, then the gold.

You need to follow the approach of commitment and reflection to watch these fabrications fall away. Otherwise, you just stay absorbed in the jhānas. However, simply observing these types of fabrication fall away isn’t enough to develop dispassion for them. You have to desire to contemplate further for the sake of the even greater calm that can come only when you arrive at the value judgment that even the highest levels of concentration are not worth the effort that goes into them.

The Canon describes many ways in which you might arrive at this value judgment. The Buddha himself describes one way that he himself followed, presenting it as an inner battle between his determination for greater calm and his resistance to relinquishing something he already had. Training for greater and greater calm at each step of deepening concentration, he had to use discernment to overcome the desires that resisted that training. He did this by contemplating the drawbacks of the state he was in, and the rewards of abandoning and relinquishing whatever perception within that state was still afflicting his mind.

Here’s how he described bringing the mind into the first jhāna.

“I myself, before my self-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 released, (though) 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 released, (though) seeing it as peace?’ Then the thought occurred to me: ‘I haven’t seen the drawback of sensuality; I haven’t pursued (that theme). 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 released, (though) seeing it as peace.’

“Then the thought occurred to me: ‘If, having seen the drawback of sensuality, I were to pursue that theme; and if, having understood the reward of renunciation, I were to familiarize myself with it, there’s the possibility that my heart would leap up at renunciation, grow confident, steadfast, & released, seeing it as peace.’

“So at a later time, having seen the drawback of sensuality, I pursued that theme; having understood the reward of renunciation, I familiarized myself with it. My heart leaped up at renunciation, grew confident, steadfast, & released, seeing it as peace. Then, quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities, I entered & remained in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation.” – [AN 9:41](#)

Then, as he stayed in the first jhāna, any perceptions of sensuality that occurred to the mind struck him as an affliction.

So he saw that it would be good to go to an even higher stage of jhāna. But then again he encountered resistance in his own mind. He followed a similar program of contemplating the drawbacks of the state he was in, and the rewards of abandoning whatever perception was still afflicting his mind.

These were the afflicting perceptions that he noticed as he ascended the stages of jhāna:

Second jhāna: perceptions of directed thought;

Third jhāna: perceptions of rapture;

Fourth jhāna: perceptions of equanimity;

Infinite space: perceptions of form (such as the shape of the body as felt from within);

Infinite consciousness: perceptions of the dimension of the infinitude of space;

Nothingness: perceptions of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness;

Neither perception nor non-perception: perceptions of the dimension of nothingness.

After contemplating the drawbacks of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception, he attained the cessation of perception and feeling. As he saw that with discernment, he gained total release.

In this case, the Buddha's liberating value judgment came through reflection devoted to seeing the drawbacks of the state he was in, along with the rewards of going beyond that state.

It's worth noting that at each step along the way, his reflection was motivated by a determined desire: to overcome any other desires that stood in the way of deeper calm. If he hadn't been motivated by that determined desire, he would never have been able to master concentration or to arrive at the value judgment that inspired dispassion. This is an excellent example of how he used desire strategically to overcome the desires that stood in the way of awakening.

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Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu

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5. Fueled by Intention

The Buddha's main impersonal teaching takes the general principle of this/that conditionality and works it out in detail, in terms of specific events. It's called *dependent co-arising*. This is his explanation of how actions and events in your immediate experience arise together with the causes, also in your immediate experience, upon which they depend. In its most basic form, this teaching lists a sequence of causal factors, starting with events in the mind and ending with suffering. It's an explanation of how suffering involves, step by step, many specific mental actions working together.

The Canon contains several different versions of the sequence of causes. The differences among these versions can be explained by the fact that even though the general outlines of how suffering happens are the same for everyone, the specifics vary for each person and for particular instances of suffering. The differences also come from the complexity of this/that conditionality itself, with its potential for many different feedback loops.

One important feature that all the lists have in common is that they play out on many levels and in many time frames: across many lifetimes or from moment-to-moment in the mind. In line with this/that conditionality, an instance of suffering you experience right now can be the result of something you did either right now or lifetimes ago—or a combination of the two. The sequence of events can occur in the flash of an eye or over eons.

Each of the lists is long, but as the Canon points out, it's not necessary to know an entire list. In practice, all you have to do is to bring knowledge to a particular causal connection—knowledge of what it is, how it's caused, how it ceases, and the path of practice leading to its cessation. That severs that particular connection, which in turn brings the entire causal sequence leading to suffering to an end ([MN 9](#); [Sn 3:12](#)).

So first we'll focus on the factors dealing directly with kamma and its results.

One of the distinctive features of every formulation of dependent co-arising is the large number of factors occurring prior to input at the six senses. Even before you see a sight or hear a sound, activities in the mind that occur in ignorance can already prime you to suffer, even if the sight or sound is pleasant. The standard description ([SN 12:2](#)) places these prior factors in this order:

ignorance,
fabrications (acts of constructing intentions),
consciousness at the six senses,
name-and-form (mental acts and physical properties), and
the six sense media.

For our purposes here, we don't need to understand the entire list. We can focus just on the factors dealing with kamma past and present.

Start with *the six sense media*. These, as we've noted, should be seen as the results of old kamma. Then, as you work back through the list from there, you find two factors that deal explicitly with intention in the present moment—your present-moment kamma: *name-and-form* on the one hand, and *fabrications* on the other. Because the six sense media come after fabrication and name-and-form in the list of factors, this means that you experience your new kamma in the present even before you experience the results of your old kamma.

Examples of this fact are very common: You approach a situation with ideas of what you want to get out of it even before you've encountered it. Or your palette of preconceived notions—political, religious, social—colors what you'll see even before you see it.

What's radical about the Buddha's teaching here is in saying that your experience of old kamma, the six senses, is *totally* dependent on present kamma.

Therein lies hope. If your new kamma is done in ignorance, it'll prime you to suffer from the results of old kamma, no matter how good your old kamma was. But if it's done with knowledge, it can prime you in the other direction, toward suffering's end, regardless of how bad your old kamma might have been. If there is no present-moment kamma at all, there's no

grounding for any experience of the six senses. That frees the mind to experience a dimension apart from the six senses. As we'll see, that's not a location, but it's how suffering ceases.

Another distinctive feature of how present-moment intention is treated in dependent co-arising is that it always appears in factors that are composed of clusters of physical and mental events. This means that many physical and mental events can have an immediate effect on your intentions, and vice versa. This opens the possibility for very fast feedback loops of cause and effect in the mind.

Consider first how intention appears in the factor of **name-and-form**, or mental and physical events, as one of the sub-factors of “name.” There it's clustered with:

feeling,
perception,
attention, and
contact.

- Feeling, here, means feeling-tones of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain.
- Perceptions are mental labels—images or individual words—that identify what something is, what it means, or what it's worth. An example of all three aspects of perception would be when you come to a red light at an intersection: You perceive the light as “red,” you perceive that it means “stop,” and you perceive it as “worth obeying.”
- Attention is the act of focusing on what you regard as important or interesting, and ignoring what you regard as not. As the Buddha explains the act of attention, he notes that it's often a matter of focusing on the questions you want to see answered and ignoring the ones whose answers don't interest you ([MN 2](#)).
- Contact in this context means contact among events in the mind—as when a perception or feeling influences an intention, or when you pay attention to one perception rather than to another.

It's because of contact among these mental events that feedback loops in the mind can happen very quickly. For instance, you can give rise to an unskillful intention, it produces a mental feeling of pain, you generate a perception as to why the feeling has occurred, and you intend to do

something about it. This allows you to correct for your unskillful actions if you're paying proper attention.

An example would be when you feel anger and give rise to a split-second intention to say something hurtful to someone you love. That intention causes a twinge of pain. You pay attention to what you're doing, and immediately perceive that the pain is connected to the intention, so now you formulate a new intention to abandon the original one. This is how you can self-correct.

However, the process also has plenty of room for compounding an unskillful action, as when you aren't paying attention to what you're doing or you perceive the cause of the pain as something other than the original intention. For instance, you can easily blame your mental pain on the person you're angry at, and this fortifies the intention to do harm. This is how the mind spirals out of control.

The possibility for error explains why our desires can often be deluded, but the possibility for giving rise to new, more accurate perceptions and acts of attention explains why we can correct our ways. As we'll see, it's precisely this possibility that the Buddha exploits when he teaches people to bring knowledge to the acts of their minds.

Now consider the second location in which intention occurs prior to sensory contact, even earlier in the sequence, prior to the factor of name-and-form. That's the factor of **fabrication**, which is placed at the beginning of the causal sequence right after ignorance. "Fabrication" is sometimes treated as a synonym for intention ([SN 22:56](#)); sometimes it's explained as assembling mental and physical phenomena for the sake of a purpose ([SN 22:79](#)). The Pali term for fabrication—*saṅkhāra*—literally means "putting together." It's the creative, purposeful function of the mind.

The Canon classifies many types of fabrications, but in the context of dependent co-arising, the focus is on three: bodily, verbal, and mental.

These three fabrications occur on two levels of scale: macro and micro. On the macro level, in the world at large, the word *fabrications* denotes any intentional bodily, verbal, or mental actions that lead to good or bad levels of rebirth ([AN 4:237](#)). On the micro level, in your experience of the body and mind as you feel them from within in the present, *bodily*

fabrication denotes the in-and-out breath; *verbal fabrication* denotes the way you talk to yourself. This the Canon divides into two processes: directed thought, where you choose a topic to talk about, and evaluation, where you examine the topic, ask questions about it, or make comments on it. Finally, *mental fabrication* denotes feelings and perceptions, which we've already encountered under "name," above ([MN 44](#)).

The macro level of fabrication comes from the micro level. Without the in-and-out breath, you couldn't engage in any bodily action. Without talking to yourself, you couldn't break into speech. And without feelings and perceptions, you couldn't engage in other mental activities. This, as we'll see, is why meditation focused on these micro-level fabrications in the present moment can have an impact not only now but also far into the future. You're focusing directly on kamma right as it begins. That puts you in a good place, as you meditate, to send it in the right direction from the very start.

Also note that even though feeling and perception appear both under "fabrication" and "name," they play different roles in relation to intention in the two contexts. Under name, feeling and perception are mental events that can have an influence on intention and can be influenced by it. Under fabrications, though, the fact that feeling and perception are listed as fabrications means that they inherently contain an intentional element right within them. Not only *can* intention influence them, its influence is part and parcel of how they come to be. Without intention, you wouldn't experience feeling and perception at all.

This point, in fact, applies to all five of the objects that Sāriputta, in his imagined dialog with people in foreign lands, listed as the objects of desire and passion: form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness. Not only do we feel desire and passion for these aggregates, but our desire and passion for fabricating them also plays an important role in bringing them into being in the present moment ([SN 22:79](#)). It actualizes the potentials for these things coming in from old kamma. The present moment is a construction site, fueled by intention. Because it's perpetually under construction, it's not a place where you can find unending peace. And as long as the intentions responsible for constructing things in the present are influenced by ignorance, those constructions will collapse on us, either right away or over time, making us suffer.

Or you can make a comparison to cooking: Your past kamma provides the raw food that your present intentions put into a form that you can actually feed on. If your present-moment skills are meager—if you know only how to put your food into a fire, for instance—you can make yourself a miserable meal even if the ingredients in your pantry today are good. But if you have a wide variety of skills—if you bring knowledge and skill to your present-moment fabrications and acts of intention—you can make a good meal even out of ingredients that are bad.

As we'll see, the Buddha focuses a lot of attention on developing precisely these skills.

6. Ignorance

Given the importance that Ven. Sāriputta placed on the central role of desire and passion in the Buddha's teachings, it's odd that the standard description of dependent co-arising doesn't mention the words "desire" or "passion" at all. This seems even odder in light of a fact that the Buddha noted in another context: All phenomena are rooted in desire. The only thing *not* rooted in desire is unbinding, (*nibbāna*—better known by its Sanskrit name, *nirvāṇa*), which isn't really a thing. It's the final end of all phenomena ([AN 10:58](#)). Everything else, good or bad, skillful or unskillful, is rooted in desire.

The question is, how can this principle be squared with dependent co-arising? The answer is that if we poke around in the discussions surrounding the standard description of dependent co-arising and its alternative versions, we find that even though desire and passion are not explicitly mentioned anywhere in the list, implicitly they're everywhere.

We can start by noting the role they play in giving rise to the ignorance that lies at the start of the standard description of dependent co-arising. This ignorance is a specific kind of ignorance: ignorance of the four noble truths. These are the truths of:

suffering,
its origination or cause,
its cessation through the cessation of its cause, and
the path of practice leading to its cessation.

A full understanding of these truths would entail a full understanding of all the Buddha's teachings. And not only that: It would entail mastering a wide range of skills related to those truths. So, even though the following description of these truths is a little long, remember that it's only an introductory sketch.

The four noble truths can briefly be defined as follows:

1) **Suffering** (the Pali word here, *dukkha*, can also be translated as “stress” or “pain”): The Buddha lists many instances of suffering that are familiar to everyone—the suffering of birth, aging, and death; sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, despair; being with things and people you don’t love, being separated from things and people you do love; not getting what you want.

Then the discussion gets less familiar as the Buddha points to what all these forms of suffering have in common: the five clinging-aggregates. These are called aggregates because, on their own, they’re random heaps or masses of phenomena. They’re called clinging-aggregates, not because the aggregates cling, but because they’re the objects of clinging.

The aggregates are the five things mentioned by Sāriputta as the objects of desire and passion:

- form, i.e., the form of the body and of other physical things in general;
- feeling;
- perception;
- fabrications, which in this case means the act of fabricating thoughts and all of the other aggregates out of potentials coming from past kamma; and
- consciousness at the six senses.

The act of clinging to these aggregates can come in any of four types:

- sensuality, a passion for planning and fantasizing about pleasures of the five senses;
- views about the nature of the world;
- habits and practices, an insistence that things should be done a certain way, regardless of whether that way is really effective; and
- doctrines of the self: views about who you are. These doctrines are built out of your sense of how your identity is related to the five aggregates: either as identical with them, as possessing them, as existing within them, or as containing them within yourself ([SN 22:1](#)). For example, you might identify as your body, or as the owner of the body who somehow lives inside it. Or you might

identify with your individual consciousness, or as a cosmic consciousness enveloping all the other aggregates and everything else.

The aggregates, on their own, can be either pleasant or painful ([SN 22:60](#)). The act of clinging to any of the aggregates in any of the above four ways is what constitutes suffering.

By discussing suffering in this way, the Buddha is casting his net wide: He's making it clear that he means to cover all forms of mental suffering, so that when he teaches the cessation of suffering, he's teaching the total solution to mental suffering of every type.

2) The cause of suffering: any act of craving that leads to becoming. Becoming is the act of taking on an identity in a world of experience centered on a desired object. An example would be thinking about an ice cream cone: The ice cream appears in your imagination and is located in certain surroundings, also in your imagination, such as a refrigerator or an ice cream shop. You then decide that you want it, and then mentally enter into the world of those surroundings as you decide how to obtain the ice cream, taking on the role of the agent who will do what's needed to get it. Aspects of the outside world or your general identity as a human being that are relevant to the issue of obtaining the ice cream are part of the world and your identity in that particular becoming. Aspects that are not relevant to the issue of obtaining ice cream—such as the weather in another part of the world or your tastes in music—are not.

These worlds, and the identities in them, can exist on any of three levels: the level of sensuality, the level of form (as in states of concentration focused on the form of the body as felt from within), or the level of formlessness (as in states of concentration focused on formless phenomena, such as space, nothingness, or consciousness) ([AN 3:77](#)). Becomings can happen on the macro or micro level: macro on the level of the physical world, micro on the level of worlds in the mind. Your identity as a human being in this human world would count as a macro-level becoming. More fleeting identities and worlds in your imagination would count as micro-level becomings.

Macro-level becomings come from micro-level ones. A micro-level becoming at the moment of death, for instance, can lead to rebirth in a

world on the macro level—another indication of the mind’s power to shape experience.

There are three types of craving that lead to becoming:

- craving for sensuality;
- craving for becoming itself; and
- craving for non-becoming, i.e., the desire for a state of becoming that has already come into being to be destroyed.

This last instance may seem counterintuitive, but the Buddha regarded it as one of his most important insights that, in taking on the desire that either you or the world you inhabit be destroyed, you’re also taking on a new identity ([MN 49](#)).

3) The cessation of suffering is the abandoning, through dispassion, of all these three types of craving.

4) The path to the cessation of suffering is the noble eightfold path—right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. These eight factors come under what’s called the triple training of:

- heightened virtue (right speech, right action, right livelihood, all of which come under the virtue group in the noble eightfold path);
- heightened mind (right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration, all of which come under the concentration group);
- and
- heightened discernment (right view, right resolve, all of which come under the discernment group).

You’ll notice that the factors of the path listed under the triple training follow an order different from the order they follow in the noble eightfold path. That’s because the two lists are ordered on different principles. The noble eightfold path lists the path factors in the order in which you undertake them: First you listen to the Dhamma and try to understand it, pondering it to see that it makes sense. That’s the beginning of right view. Then you develop a desire to practice it, which is the beginning of right

resolve. These two factors then guide your practice of the remaining factors that develop virtue and concentration.

The triple training, on the other hand, lists the factors in the order in which they're mastered: first virtue, then concentration, then discernment. Training in virtue makes you more sensitive to your intentions and more honest in judging them, which helps in the development of honest concentration, able to see through the deceptions that can easily arise in a quiet mind. The practice of concentration, as you enter into four levels of absorption (*jhāna*) in a single preoccupation, gives you hands-on experience in dealing with the desires and passions of the mind as you try to bring them to stillness. This trains your discernment to see these desires and passions more clearly and to judge their results more accurately, to the point where you can develop dispassion for them and bring the mind to release.

These factors constitute the *how-to* training for the subduing of desire and passion—although here it's important to notice three things:

a) All of the factors are mutually reinforcing. It's not the case that you have to master one factor before you can attempt the second one, or that you can master one part of the triple training without help from the others. For instance, the Canon says that at the point in the practice where you've completed your mastery of virtue, you also have a partial mastery of concentration and discernment as well ([AN 3:87](#)). A simile from [DN 4](#) states that it's like washing your hands. Your left hand washes your right; your right hand washes your left. In the same way, virtue washes discernment—which, in the context of the simile, means discernment together with concentration—while discernment washes your virtue.

b) The descriptions of all four truths in the discernment factor of right view are part of the how-to. The Buddha doesn't make a distinction between theory and practice. How you view the problem of suffering is an important part of how you can put an end to it.

c) If you compare the factors of the path with the four forms of clinging, you'll notice that the path actually makes use of three of the four. This means that as you follow the path, you'll feed off of those factors instead of feeding off the unskillful types of clinging that simply left you in suffering.

- In holding to right view, you hold to a skillful form of view.

- In holding to the factors of virtue and concentration, you hold to skillful habits and practices;
- In holding to right effort, you motivate yourself by developing a skillful sense of self playing three roles: as a responsible agent, capable of following the path ([AN 4:159](#)); as the person who will benefit from following the path ([AN 3:40](#)); and as the inner commentator who can reflect intelligently on how well your practice is going, so that it can offer helpful comments on how to improve your skills ([AN 6:20](#)).

The only form of clinging not used by the path is clinging to sensuality. However, the path does provide a skillful alternative source of pleasurable mental food to compensate for renouncing sensuality: the pleasures of right concentration.

Ultimately, of course, these forms of clinging will have to be abandoned once they've fulfilled their duties, so that your release from suffering will be complete. As we will see later, clinging is identical with passion and desire, which means that to follow the path, you have to develop desire and passion for skillful views, skillful habits and practices, and skillful senses of self. This means further that the way the Buddha has you use clinging in the course of the training is simply one of many instances of how he recommends using desire and passion strategically along the path. The factors of the path are designed in such a way as to aim your desires and passions in a skillful direction, but they also contain implicit directions for how to let them go when they've completed their work.

It's for this reason that the Buddha compared the path to a raft that you build out of twigs and branches on this side of the river, and that you hold on to as you swim to freedom the other side ([MN 22](#); [SN 35:197](#)). Once you're there, you don't need to carry it around on your head. You let it go with a sense of appreciation for it, and then you're free to go on your way as you see fit.

These four truths are called noble because they inform the search for a noble goal: the dimension that's free of aging, illness, death, sorrow, and defilement ([MN 26](#)). The Canon also lists two other reasons for why they're noble:

- 1) They are "real, not unreal, with no alteration" ([SN 56:27](#)). In other words, they're always true.

2) They are taught by the noble one, the Buddha ([SN 56:28](#)).

As we stated above, the ignorance that drives dependent co-arising to lead to suffering is ignorance of these four noble truths. One of the ways of being ignorant of these truths is that you simply haven't been informed of them. Another way is knowing about them but without having mastered them as skills. You don't apply them to your experience, and as a result you haven't completed the duties appropriate to them:

to comprehend suffering,
to abandon its cause,
to realize its cessation, and
to develop the path to its cessation ([SN 56:11](#)).

Before you can complete these duties, of course, you need some guidance in how to take them on. *That will be the purpose of the remainder of this book: to explain these duties and, in particular, to show the role of desires and passions in the context of mastering those duties, both as targets to be subdued and as tools to be used in their subduing.* As we noted in Chapter 4, dependent co-arising provides the main framework for the body of this book. From this point on, we'll be focusing on how to take advantage of the main shift in the sequence of causes in dependent co-arising—from ignorance to knowledge of the four noble truths—to turn the sequence away from causing suffering and to redirect it toward suffering's end.

19. Rules & Determinations

Training in the Vinaya fosters all four forms of determination. We've already discussed one way in which it fosters discernment: You learn how to talk yourself into abstaining from actions that you like doing but will lead to long-term harm, and to talk yourself into doing actions that you don't like doing but will lead to long-term well-being.

But the Vinaya also fosters discernment in another way. It contains discussions of many cases where a monk misbehaves in a way that doesn't quite come under a rule that has been formulated, and the question arises: How to determine what penalty, if any, his misbehavior might deserve?

In adjudicating cases like this, the Vinaya employs a framework for analyzing actions that's useful not only for grading levels of offenses, but also for understanding the nature of action itself. The framework looks at an action in terms of five aspects: the intention, the perception, the object, the effort, and the result. For instance, to break the rule against killing a human being, five conditions have to be met:

object: a living human being,

perception: you perceive the human being as a living being,

intention: you want to kill the person,

effort: you engage in a bodily or verbal action aimed at making that person die, and

result: the person dies as a result of the action.

If a monk acts in a way that meets all of these conditions, he's permanently expelled from the Community. If some of these conditions are met but others are not, the penalty is less severe. Examples would include: dropping a large rock on a human being in the dark and so killing him, but perceiving him to be another large rock; trying to kill a human being but only injuring him/her; hitting someone on the back to dislodge something caught in his throat, not intending to kill him, but he dies as a

result. The first two examples would entail the lesser penalty of confession; the last example, no penalty at all.

What's important about this framework is that it emphasizes two factors that, in dependent co-arising, occur prior to sensory contact: intention and perception. Knowing that you'll have to analyze your actions in this way if your behavior is ever called into question, you learn to apply this framework to all your actions. As a result, you become more sensitive to events in your own mind and their role in inspiring you to act. That helps to develop your discernment.

As for the other determinations:

The fact that the rules are clear-cut, with clearly delineated exceptions, forces you to be precise in judging your own actions. The clear boundaries provided by the rules make it hard to fudge the question of whether your actions are harmful or not. In this way, the rules foster the quality of *truth*.

The need to abandon any behavior that goes against the rules—including the mental tendency to make excuses for yourself for not abiding by them—fosters the quality of *relinquishment*.

The reward of following the rules is that you have no reason for remorse over your behavior. This freedom from remorse is a source of joy, and as we pointed out in the discussion of the Buddha's instructions to Rāhula, that joy helps to foster a radiant sense of inner *calm*.

27. Training in Concentration

The Buddha defines concentration as the mind's having a single gathering place (*cittass'ek'aggatā*). In his standard definition of right concentration, he doesn't mention the object that acts as the mind's gathering place, but those objects are listed elsewhere in the discourses: In one passage, the themes of right concentration are said to be the four establishings of mindfulness ([MN 44](#)). Another passage, [AN 8:70](#), lists these four themes and adds four more: the four sublime attitudes of universal goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. These sublime attitudes count as mental qualities, which means that right concentration focuses on gathering the mind around one of the themes of right mindfulness.

Note, too, that in the standard definition of right concentration, the Buddha doesn't give instructions on how to get into right concentration. He does that elsewhere, as we've noted, in his description of right mindfulness.

Instead, the standard definition of right concentration is concerned more with how right concentration is experienced in terms of four levels of *jhāna*, or mental absorption. These levels differ from one another both in the mind's relationship to the object in the various levels, and in the feeling-tone characteristic of each.

The first *jhāna* is characterized by feelings of pleasure and rapture—both physical and mental—coming from the fact that the mind is secluded from unskillful thoughts. However, it's still thinking about and evaluating the object of its focus—as in the simile of the cook evaluating whether his master likes or doesn't like his food—and making adjustments to get better results: both in making sure the mind stays secluded from sensuality and in maximizing the rapture and pleasure that come from seclusion. [MN 78](#) notes that this is the highest level of skillful resolves.

In the second jhāna, the mind no longer has to question its relationship to the object. As [MN 125](#) notes, it's focused on its object but doesn't engage in any thinking, even about the object itself. [MN 78](#) adds that even skillful resolves cease on this level of concentration. The mind's focus is maintained by an intention and a single perception of the object ([MN 111](#) ; [AN 9:36](#)). The simplicity of both the intention and perception allows the mind to plunge with assurance into a state of oneness with the object. This oneness carries through the remaining jhānas. On this level, stronger feelings of pleasure and rapture result from the oneness of the mind.

In the third jhāna, rapture fades away, the mind is equanimous, but there are still feelings of pleasure in the body.

In the fourth jhāna, the pleasure fades away. Equanimity and mindfulness reach a state of purity.

Here's the Canon's standard description of these four jhānas:

“There is the case where a monk—quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful dhammas—enters & remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation.

“With the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, he enters & remains in the second jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought & evaluation—internal assurance.

“With the fading of rapture, he remains equanimous, mindful, & alert, and senses pleasure with the body. He enters & remains in the third jhāna, of which the noble ones declare, ‘Equanimous & mindful, he has a pleasant abiding.’

“With the abandoning of pleasure & pain—as with the earlier disappearance of elation & distress—he enters & remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain.” — [SN 45:8](#)

The Buddha also gives a set of similes to describe the jhānas, and which provide more information about them. To begin with, they show that jhāna, instead of being narrowly one-pointed, is actually a state of stable full-body awareness. In the first three jhānas, the feeling-tones of the jhānas are allowed to permeate and saturate the body to the extent that no

part of the body is unsaturated by that feeling-tone. In the fourth jhāna, the body is simply filled by a pure bright awareness. Other passages note that, in the fourth jhāna, the in-and-out breathing naturally stops ([SN 36:11](#); [AN 10:72](#)). In other words, you don't sense any in-and-out breathing, even though you are fully aware of the body throughout. This is when absorption becomes strongest and most stable.

[The first jhāna:] “Just as if a dexterous bathman or bathman's apprentice would pour bath powder into a brass basin and knead it together, sprinkling it again & again with water, so that his ball of bath powder—saturated, moisture-laden, permeated within & without—would nevertheless not drip; in the same way, the monk permeates & pervades, suffuses & fills this very body with the rapture & pleasure born of seclusion. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture & pleasure born of seclusion.”

[The second jhāna:] “Just like a lake with spring-water welling up from within, having no inflow from the east, west, north, or south, and with the skies supplying abundant showers time & again, so that the cool fount of water welling up from within the lake would permeate & pervade, suffuse & fill it with cool waters, there being no part of the lake unpervaded by the cool waters; in the same way, the monk permeates & pervades, suffuses & fills this very body with the rapture & pleasure born of concentration. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture & pleasure born of concentration.”

[The third jhāna:] “Just as in a lotus pond, some of the lotuses, born & growing in the water, stay immersed in the water and flourish without standing up out of the water, so that they are permeated & pervaded, suffused & filled with cool water from their roots to their tips, and nothing of those lotuses would be unpervaded with cool water; in the same way, the monk permeates & pervades, suffuses & fills this very body with the pleasure divested of rapture. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded with pleasure divested of rapture.”

[The fourth jhāna:] “Just as if a man were sitting covered from head to foot with a white cloth so that there would be no part of his body to which the white cloth did not extend; in the same way, the monk

sits, permeating the body with a pure, bright awareness. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by pure, bright awareness.” – [DN 2](#)

In all of these similes, water represents pleasure; and movement, rapture. The amount of water in the second and third similes, as compared to the amount in the first, indicates that the pleasure in these two jhānas is much stronger and more pervasive than the pleasure in the first. The stillness of the lotuses in the third simile, and of the sitting man in the fourth, indicate that although rapture may be refreshing on the earlier levels of jhāna, its absence—after it has done its work—is very peaceful and calm.

Other details in the similes also make important points about the differences and relationships among the jhānas. For example, the activity of the bathman in the simile for the first jhāna—the only simile that has a conscious agent doing anything—symbolizes the activity of directed thought and evaluation, which figure out how to spread the sense of pleasure and rapture throughout the body. This is unlike the movement of the spring water in the simile for the second jhāna, which involves no conscious effort at all. Also—unlike the movement of the spring water, which is totally immersed in the water of the lake—the bathman isn’t totally immersed in the water he’s kneading into the bath powder. This symbolizes the fact that the mind isn’t totally immersed and surrounded by pleasure in the first jhāna, but stands somewhat apart from it. Only in the second jhāna is the mind totally immersed in a sense of oneness with its object.

At the same time, however, without the efforts of the bathman, the water wouldn’t get thoroughly worked into the ball of bath powder, and there would be no body-filling pleasure into which the mind could get immersed in the second jhāna. So the work of directed thought and evaluation, instead of being a mere instability in the first jhāna, actually accomplishes a necessary task: It prepares the way for the mind to enter the higher jhānas.

As [MN 117](#) notes, when directed thought and evaluation are doing this work, they’re performing the work of noble right resolve. In this way, the simile of the bathman—who has to be sensitive to the right combination of water and bath powder—conveys a message similar to the simile of the

cook above, who has to be sensitive to the needs and tastes of his employer. Both similes portray the work of discernment in preparing the mind to enter and remain in concentration. And, because evaluation can play a role in moving from one jhāna to a higher one, both similes can also be applied to the work of discernment in being sensitive to what needs to be done to refine your mastery of concentration as well.

36. Levels of Awakening

As we've noted, the triple training in heightened virtue, heightened mind (concentration), and heightened discernment lists the factors of the path in the order in which they're mastered. Mastery occurs on the different levels of awakening.

Before we look at the differences among these levels, it's good to look at what they have in common. All awakening experiences center on an experience of the unfabricated: deathless, unbinding ([Mv 1.23.5](#); [MN 1](#); [MN 48](#)), outside of space and time. All are attained by bringing the four determinations for discernment, truth, relinquishment, and calm to bear on the committed practice of the five faculties, and then on the reflection that follows the Buddha's five-step program of seeing the origination, the passing away, the allure, the drawbacks, and the escape from those same faculties ([SN 48:3–4](#)).

Where they differ is in the quality of each individual meditator's powers of reflection on having the experience of the deathless. This is why the Buddha stressed the need for reflection from the very beginning of the path. The more practice you gain in reflection, the more likely you'll be to reflect skillfully, in an all-around way, on the experience of the deathless when it occurs. As [AN 9:36](#) notes, if you don't detect the passion and delight you feel for the deathless or for the discernment that provided the opening to that dimension, your awakening won't be total. Only if, on reflection, you can abandon that passion, too, will your awakening—and your release—be complete.

The discourses illustrate this point with a simile: Those who don't attain full awakening on experiencing the deathless are like a person who stands by a well and sees that there's water in the well, but hasn't plunged into it. This is why they are said to have gained the Dhamma eye. Those who reach full awakening are like a person who has taken the plunge ([SN 12:68](#); [Sn 2:1](#)).

What the Dhamma eye sees is often expressed as the realization, “Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation” ([SN 56:11](#)). This insight into causality occurs naturally and justifiably only to a mind that has seen what isn’t subject to origination and is not subject to cessation.

The Canon, in its standard discussion of the levels of awakening, lists four, distinguishing them in terms of the fetters that are cut at each level and in terms of their long-term consequences: the personal qualities of those who have attained each level, and the number of rebirths remaining to them.

[MN 118](#) lists those who have achieved these four levels in descending order, starting with the fully awakened students of the Buddha, called arahants, who have cut through ten fetters and will never be reborn again.

“In this Saṅgha of monks there are monks who are arahants, whose effluents are ended, who have reached fulfillment, done the task, laid down the burden, attained the true goal, laid to waste the fetter of becoming, and who are released through right gnosis: Such are the monks in this Saṅgha of monks.

“In this Saṅgha of monks there are monks who, with the wasting away of the five lower fetters, are due to arise spontaneously (in the Pure Abodes), there to be totally unbound, destined never again to return from that world: Such are the monks in this Saṅgha of monks.

“In this Saṅgha of monks there are monks who, with the wasting away of (the first) three fetters, and with the attenuation of passion, aversion, & delusion, are once-returners, who—on returning only once more to this world—will put an end to suffering & stress: Such are the monks in this Saṅgha of monks.

“In this Saṅgha of monks there are monks who, with the wasting away of (the first) three fetters, are stream-enterers, certain, never again destined for the lower realms, headed for self-awakening: Such are the monks in this Saṅgha of monks.” — [MN 118](#)

Missing from this description are two important details. One, the fact that stream-enterers, in addition to being freed from rebirth on any level

lower than the human, will be reborn at most seven more times ([AN 3:88](#); [Sn 2:1](#)).

Two, this description doesn't identify which fetters are cut at which level. This information can be gleaned from the list of fetters in [AN 10:13](#):

“There are these ten fetters. Which ten? Five lower fetters & five higher fetters. And which are the five lower fetters? Self-identification views, doubt, grasping at habits & practices, sensual desire, & ill will. These are the five lower fetters. And which are the five higher fetters? Passion for form, passion for what is formless, conceit, restlessness, & ignorance. These are the five higher fetters. And these are the ten fetters.”

Thus, stream-enterers have cut through the fetters of self-identification views, doubt, and grasping at habits & practices. These can be explained as follows:

- The fetter of self-identification views would be any view that identifies one's self—“what I am”—

as being *identical* to any of the five aggregates,
as the *owner* of any of the five aggregates,
as *in* any of the five aggregates, or
as *containing* any of the five aggregates within it ([SN 22:1](#)).

Because the aggregates don't exist in the experience of the deathless, even though there is a consciousness that does not partake of any of the six senses ([MN 49](#)), stream-enterers see no reason to identify themselves as “I am this” in connection with any of the aggregates.

[SN 22:89](#) points out that when the fetter of self-identification views has been cut, one no longer believes “I am this” in any way connected to the aggregates, but as long as one still hasn't cut the higher fetter of conceit, there is still a lingering sense of “I am” around those aggregates. It illustrates this point with a simile: When you've washed a cloth in a cleaning agent, it's clean and spotless, but it still has a lingering scent of the cleaning agent around it.

- The fetter of doubt is doubt in the fact that the Buddha is awakened, the Dhamma is well-taught, or that the Saṅgha of the Buddha's noble disciples has practiced well. Stream-enterers, in seeing the deathless and

realizing that it was attained through the path taught by the Buddha, have verified confidence that these things are, in fact, true.

- The fetter of grasping at habits & practices can be explained in two ways: (1) any sense that awakening can be attained simply through following rules; and (2) any sense of identity built around one's habits and practices. [MN 78](#) notes that those who have gone beyond this fetter are virtuous but not “made of virtue.” In other words, they don't build any sense of conceit around their virtue, exalting themselves or disparaging others. As [SN 55:26](#) notes:

“[T]he disciple of the noble ones is endowed with virtues that are appealing to the noble ones: untorn, unbroken, unspotted, unsplattered, liberating, praised by the observant, ungrasped at, leading to concentration.”

What the noble ones find appealing in these virtues is that the precepts that are the rudiments of the holy life—against killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, and taking intoxicants—are never intentionally broken, but at the same time are not grasped at: Stream-enterers observe them, not because of pride, but from having seen that their own unskillful actions were what prevented any previous experience of the deathless, so they wouldn't want to delay their further awakening by behaving in unskillful ways ever again.

Those are the fetters that stream-enterers have cut. As [AN 3:87](#) notes, such people are fully accomplished in virtue, but only moderately accomplished in concentration and discernment. [SN 55:5](#) adds that the stream itself is equal to the noble eightfold path, which includes the factors covering discernment and concentration along with those covering virtue. This means that stream-enterers have had some experience of jhāna and in seeing things in terms of right view, simply that they haven't mastered these factors.

As the Canon notes in many places, it's when you become a stream-enterer that you are now in training. Having gained the perspective that comes from experiencing the deathless, your sense of which pleasures are worth the effort and which ones are not worth the effort is informed by that experience. You may not yet be consummate in the discernment that

comes from full mastery of the skills appropriate to the four noble truths, but you are consummate in view.

The fourth fetter is sensual passion. This, as we've noted before, would be any passion for sensual fantasies and plans.

The fifth fetter is ill will. Because ill will comes from thwarted sensuality, these two fetters are cut together.

These are the two extra fetters cut by non-returners. As [AN 3:87](#) notes, such people are fully accomplished in virtue, fully accomplished in concentration, and moderately accomplished in discernment.

The sixth fetter is passion for form: the pleasures of the four jhānas.

The seventh fetter is passion for what is formless: the subtle pleasure of the equanimity in the formless states of concentration.

The eighth fetter is conceit, the lingering sense of “I am.” The Canon notes that those who have abandoned this fetter may still use the words “I” and “mine” in their conversation, but they don't make any assumptions based on those words ([SN 1:25](#)).

The ninth fetter is restlessness—any “stirring up” of the mind—and the tenth is ignorance. As we've already noted, the word ignorance—*avijjā*—can also mean lack of skill. Ignorance on this level is ended when you've mastered all the skills required by the duties of the four noble truths.

These are the five higher fetters abandoned on the attainment of arahantship. They are extremely subtle, a point well-illustrated by the following exchange:

Then Ven. Anuruddha went to Ven. Sāriputta and, on arrival, exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he said to Ven. Sāriputta, “Here, by means of the divine eye, purified & surpassing the human, I see the thousand-fold cosmos. And my persistence is aroused & unsluggish. My mindfulness is established & unmuddled. My body is calm & unaroused. My mind is concentrated & gathered into singleness. And yet my mind is not released from the effluents through lack of clinging/sustenance.”

Ven. Sāriputta: “My friend, when the thought occurs to you, ‘By means of the divine eye, purified & surpassing the human, I see the thousand-fold cosmos,’ that is related to your conceit. When the

thought occurs to you, ‘My persistence is aroused & unsluggish. My mindfulness is established & unmuddled. My body is calm & unaroused. My mind is concentrated & gathered into singleness,’ that is related to your restlessness. When the thought occurs to you, ‘And yet my mind is not released from the effluents through lack of clinging/sustenance,’ that is related to your anxiety. It would be well if—abandoning these three qualities, not attending to these three qualities—you directed your mind to the deathless property.” – [AN 3:131](#)

As [MN 118](#) notes, arahants have cut the fetter of becoming. As you may remember from the introductory explanation of the four noble truths, there are three levels of becoming: on the level of sensuality, form, and formlessness. Similarly, three of the ten fetters are types of passion corresponding to the same three levels: Sensual passion is cut on the level of non-return; passion for form and for formlessness, on the level of arahantship. That covers all possible forms of passion that could lead to further becoming. That’s why, when arahants have cut these three fetters, there’s no possibility for them ever to be reborn again.

Such people are said to be *asekha*, beyond training. As far as the ending of suffering and stress is concerned, the Buddha has nothing more to teach them. At the same time, they have no more need for conviction in the Buddha’s awakening or in the path leading there, because—having followed that path with commitment and reflection—they’ve gained direct knowledge of the deathless for themselves.

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Sāvattthī at the Eastern Gatehouse. There he addressed Ven.

Sāriputta: “Sāriputta, do you take it on conviction that the faculty of conviction, when developed & pursued, gains a footing in the deathless, has the deathless as its final end & consummation? Do you take it on conviction that the faculty of persistence... mindfulness... concentration... discernment, when developed & pursued, gains a footing in the deathless, has the deathless as its final end & consummation?”

“Lord, it’s not that I take it on conviction in the Blessed One that the faculty of conviction... persistence... mindfulness... concentration...

discernment, when developed & pursued, gains a footing in the deathless, has the deathless as its final end & consummation.... I have known, seen, penetrated, realized, & attained it by means of discernment. I have no doubt or uncertainty that the faculty of conviction... persistence... mindfulness... concentration... discernment, when developed & pursued, gains a footing in the deathless, has the deathless as its final end & consummation.” – [SN 48:44](#)

Totally free of passion, arahants dwell with unrestricted awareness ([AN 10:81](#)). After their awakening, they return to the six senses, but with a sense of being disjoined from them ([MN 140](#)). They experience the results of old kamma, they practice mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, but again, the objects of their awareness make no inroads on the mind ([MN 107](#); [SN 22:122](#); [SN 47:4](#)). That’s because, being free from passion, they no longer take these things in by trying to feed on them.

The Canon illustrates this point with a vivid simile:

Ven. Nandaka: “Just as if a dexterous butcher or butcher’s apprentice, having killed a cow, were to carve it up with a sharp carving knife so that—without damaging the substance of the inner flesh, without damaging the substance of the outer hide—he would cut, sever, & detach only the skin muscles, connective tissues, & attachments in between. Having cut, severed, & detached the outer skin, and then covering the cow again with that very skin, if he were to say that the cow was joined to the skin just as it had been: Would he be speaking rightly?”

A group of nuns: “No, venerable sir. Why is that? Because if the dexterous butcher or butcher’s apprentice, having killed a cow, were to... cut, sever, & detach only the skin muscles, connective tissues, & attachments in between; and... having covered the cow again with that very skin, then no matter how much he might say that the cow was joined to the skin just as it had been, the cow would still be disjoined from the skin.”

Ven. Nandaka: “This simile, sisters, I have given to convey a message. The message is this: The substance of the inner flesh stands for the six internal media; the substance of the outer hide, for the

six external media. The skin muscles, connective tissues, & attachments in between stand for passion & delight. And the sharp knife stands for noble discernment—the noble discernment that cuts, severs, & detaches the defilements, fetters, & bonds in between.’ — [MN 146](#)

Arahants still have intentions and engage in purposeful actions, but because their actions are done without greed, aversion, or delusion, they bear no karmic fruit. The Buddha illustrates this point with the simile of a good seed that has been destroyed:

“Just as when seeds are not broken, not rotten, not damaged by wind & heat, capable of sprouting, well-buried, planted in well-prepared soil, and a man would burn them with fire and, burning them with fire, would make them into fine ashes. Having made them into fine ashes, he would winnow them before a high wind or wash them away in a swift-flowing stream. Those seeds would thus be destroyed at the root, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising.

“In the same way, any action performed with non-greed—born of non-greed, caused by non-greed, originating from non-greed: When greed is gone, that action is thus abandoned, its root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising.

“Any action performed with non-aversion...

“Any action performed with non-delusion—born of non-delusion, caused by non-delusion, originating from non-delusion: When delusion is gone, that action is thus abandoned, its root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising.” — [AN 3:34](#)

Arahants will experience death simply as “all this will grow cold right here”—“all,” here, standing for the six sense media ([SN 35:23](#); [Iti 49](#)). Because the consciousness of awakening is not known through the six senses ([MN 49](#)), that consciousness will not be affected when the six senses grow cold. In the present life, arahants can’t be pinned down as to what they are, and after death they can’t be described as existing, not existing, both, neither, or in any other way ([SN 22:85–86](#)). Because they

are free of the desires and passions that define people as beings, they are undefined and immeasurable, “like the great ocean” ([MN 72](#)).

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2. An Affirmation of Power

The Buddha didn't teach in a vacuum. There were many other religious and philosophical schools spreading their teachings in his day. Some of them we know from non-Buddhist sources, such as the Vedas of the brahmins, the ancient Indian priestly caste, whose texts dated back thousands of years. Others we know from the Pali Canon itself, as its suttas—or discourses—depict the Buddha engaged in conversations with members of those schools, refuting their teachings and sometimes converting them to the Dhamma. In fact, the early Buddhists were so eager to set themselves apart from other contemporary schools of thought that the first two suttas in the collection of discourses are devoted to listing the teachings of other schools and comparing them to the Buddha's course of training, to indicate how his teachings were something radically new and different from its rivals. To show clearly what the Buddha's teaching was, they started by showing what it wasn't.

The other religions and philosophies of the time fall into two groups: the teachings of the orthodox brahmins as found in the Vedas, and the teachings of the *samaṇas*, or contemplatives, who rejected the Vedas' authority. Modern etymology derives the word *samaṇa* from “striver,” but as we'll see, not all *samaṇa* schools advocated a life of striving. Passages from the Pali Canon seem closer to the mark in deriving *samaṇa* from *sama*, which means to be “on pitch” or “in tune.” The *samaṇa* philosophers were trying to find a way of life and thought that was in tune, not with social conventions, but with the laws of nature as these could be deduced from scientific observation, personal experience, reason, meditation, or shamanic practices. The Buddha used the term *samaṇa* to describe himself and his monastic followers.

What's most striking about the alternative teachings of the time is how many of them teach powerlessness. Contrary to a popular misconception, it wasn't the case that everyone in the Buddha's time believed in the power of karma, or action. Most of the alternative teachings of the time actually

taught that karma was either unreal or powerless. The brahmins, for instance, taught that members of other castes were powerless to perform the rituals and sacraments needed to ensure well-being in this life and the next. Instead, those people had to depend on the brahmins to perform those rituals and sacraments for them.

As for the samāṇas, many of their schools taught powerlessness of a different sort, either:

- the powerlessness of the human mind to gain objective knowledge concerning which ways of acting are skillful and which are not; or
- the powerlessness of human action in general to have an effect on the course of the universe or on a person's own happiness.

The Buddha had a term for the schools that taught the powerlessness of the first sort—the inability of the mind to know which courses of action are skillful and which ones are not. He called them “eel-wrigglers.” As he saw it, a teacher's primary duty to his students was to give them grounds for determining which courses of action they should and shouldn't take. This means that the eel-wrigglers were shirking their responsibilities—or worse, because they implied that ideas of “should” or “shouldn't” had no objective grounding at all. The same point would apply at present to those who insist that objective truths about right and wrong behavior are impossible to know and so should be left as a mystery, leaving their listeners to confront these mysteries on their own without any guidance.

As for the samāṇa schools that taught the powerlessness of human action in general, they usually framed their teachings by starting with a particular view about how the world works. In some cases, they taught that the world was totally determined by physical laws, in which human action and moral considerations had no role to play. In these cases, they either denied that human action was real, or they claimed that it was real but had no effect on anything. Also, they claimed that moral standards had no basis in nature, so they were nothing more than fictions with no objective authority. In other cases, samāṇa teachers claimed that past actions had an effect on the present, but present actions couldn't make a difference as to whether or not you suffered right now. Some teachers taught that the world was shaped entirely by the will of a creator god, which human action was powerless to affect. You would simply have to accept the will of that god, whether it was benevolent or not.

On the other extreme, there were schools claiming that there was no such thing as cause and effect, that everything happened spontaneously, so people should follow their own spontaneous whims and grab pleasures while they can.

What all these samana schools had in common was that they started with a view of the world and ended up by saying that human action had no consequences and so had no power to shape events within the world. Ideas of good and evil were mere social conventions with no grounding in reality, so people could ignore them with impunity, taking the path of least resistance and enjoying whatever sensual pleasures they felt compelled to desire.

It's easy to see how some people might like being told they were powerless, on the grounds that this view would absolve them from any responsibility for their actions and free them to follow their inclinations. If you believed in the Vedas, you could hire brahmans to perform sacrifices and other rituals for you—assuming that you could afford them—while you lived your life as you pleased. If you didn't believe in the Vedas, you wouldn't have to waste money on rituals and could still do as you pleased. And there are people at present who delight in modern versions of teachings like this, on the grounds that there's no one to tell them what they have to do, and no one to hold them accountable for what they've done.

But it's also easy to see how intelligent people would be dissatisfied with teachings of this sort. If you abdicate responsibility, you're also abdicating both the power to avoid suffering and the joy that comes from being an agent who can make a difference in your own life and in the world around you. If, on the other hand, human beings have no power, then they themselves, along with their choices and efforts, have no importance at all. If you're powerless to know what's right and wrong, then you're left without guidance on how to run your life. If the world is determined by laws beyond your control, and those laws play out in a way that would make you suffer, there's no way you can avoid that suffering. If there are no causal laws at all, there's no way you can defend yourself against spontaneous sufferings suddenly attacking you out of nowhere. In all these cases, the Buddha would say, you're left bewildered and unprotected.

So, when Sāriputta—instead of introducing the Buddha’s teachings with a view of the world—starts with a course of action, claiming that that course of action would lead to long-term happiness, his intelligent listeners would immediately understand it as an assertion of the power of human action and a refutation of powerlessness. And because the action he starts with is a mental one, it’s an assertion of the power of the mind. He’s basically saying that you have within your mind the power not to suffer, and that the Buddha is offering reliable guidance on how to do that.

Also, because of the power of action and the relative freedom to make choices in how to act, it’s possible to offer training in how to develop the skills needed to avoid suffering. This means that the Buddha’s teaching is not just a picture of the world to contemplate and discuss. It’s a call and a guide to skillful action.

This is why intelligent listeners would find the Buddha’s teaching promising, and why they would want to learn more.

It’s also why, as we begin our exploration of the Dhamma from the perspective offered by Ven. Sāriputta’s point of entry, the first issue to explore is what the Buddha had to say about the nature and power of action. We’ll find that, because the act of teaching is a type of action, *what* he had to say on this topic also influenced *how* he chose to say it. This illustrates one of the principle points of his teaching: You learn by committing yourself to a course of action and then reflecting on the results ([AN 10:73](#)). The Buddha exemplified this lesson for his listeners by showing that he had committed himself to teaching effectively and had reflected well on the implications of what he taught.

8. Craving & Clinging

The second spot in the sequence of dependent co-arising where desire and passion play a major role comes *after* sensory contact. The factors following on contact, in sequence, are:

feeling,
craving,
clinging,
becoming,
birth,
aging and death.

You may recall that in the four noble truths, the Buddha identifies craving as the cause of suffering, and the clinging-aggregates as suffering itself. This means that all the factors in dependent co-arising from ignorance through craving fall under the second noble truth, the origination of suffering, whereas the first noble truth, suffering, begins with clinging and goes all the way through death.

This suggests a sharp line between craving and clinging, as two separate noble truths with two separate duties appropriate to them, abandoning and comprehending, respectively. In actuality, though, the line isn't as sharply defined as it might appear.

There's a dialog where the Buddha defines the cause of suffering as desire and passion ([SN 42:11](#)). There are also discourses where he says to abandon desire and passion with regard to anything that's inconstant, stressful, or not-self, such as the five aggregates ([SN 22:139](#); [SN 22:142](#); [SN 22:145](#)). Now, abandoning is the duty with regard to craving. So these passages, taken together, say in effect that desire and passion are equivalent to craving. But there are also discourses where the Buddha equates desire and passion with clinging ([SN 22:121](#); [SN 35:110](#)). This raises the question: If that's the case, what's then the difference between craving and clinging?

The first step in answering this question is to note that the Pali word for craving, *taṇhā*, also means thirst. The Pali word for clinging, *upādāna*, also means sustenance and the act of taking sustenance from something, as when a tree takes sustenance from the soil, or a fire takes sustenance from its fuel. In other words, craving is associated with hunger, and clinging with the act of feeding.

The second step in answering the question is to note that the Buddha didn't define suffering as clinging. He defined it as clinging-aggregates, or the act of clinging to the aggregates.

Now, when you're looking for something to eat but haven't yet found it yet, you're hungry. That's the hunger of craving. When you start eating food, your hunger is still there even though you've located your food, latched on to it, and started taking it in. That hunger is what keeps you eating until you're full. In the same way, there's still craving present in the act of clinging to the aggregates. That's where the desire and passion are.

This observation is in line with a statement that the Buddha makes elsewhere in the Canon, in [SN 22:139](#), [SN 22:142](#), and [SN 22:145](#), where he asks what you should abandon when you see that the aggregates are inconstant, stressful, and not-self. The answer is that you should abandon, not the aggregates themselves, but any desire and passion for them. Because the duty with regard to the second noble truth, of craving, is to abandon it, he's pointing to the fact that you have to comprehend the clinging-aggregates as constituting suffering, but the aggregates themselves are not to be abandoned. Only the craving and clinging—the desire and passion for them—should be dropped.

This is why, when Sāriputta notes in [MN 28](#), that “Any subduing of desire and passion, any abandoning of desire and passion for these five clinging-aggregates is the cessation of stress,” he's not in conflict with his own statement in [MN 141](#) where he follows the Buddha's more standard formulation in saying that the cessation of stress is the abandoning of the three types of craving. In both cases, you're subduing and abandoning desire and passion—what Sāriputta identified in [SN 22:2](#) as the essential message of what the Buddha taught.

So, given that both craving and clinging are identical with desire and passion, the factors of craving and clinging are the second spot in dependent co-arising where desire and passion play a role.

This means that, in the standard description of dependent co-arising, desire and passion play a role both before sensory contact and feeling—as factors sustaining ignorance—and after, as factors following on feeling and leading up to becoming.

15. Desires & Determination on the Path

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

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

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

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

The brahman admitted that that was the case.

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

This analogy explains several aspects of the role of desire in developing the fourth noble truth, the path to the end of suffering.

You need the desire for awakening in order to undertake the path.

While you're on the path, you need more than just desire: You also need right concentration, right effort, and—by implication—all the other factors of the path and the triple training.

You finally overcome your desire for awakening, not by suppressing or denying it, but by satisfying it. You satisfy it by using it in the course of developing the path.

These facts are reflected in the Buddha's extended discussion of the four noble truths in [DN 22](#). There he notes that one of the main forms of suffering is not getting what you want, and he defines what you want as freedom from aging, illness, and death; sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair. Simply wanting to gain these forms of freedom through the power of your desire is to suffer. But the Buddha doesn't tell you not to want them. After all, these were the wants that drove his own search for awakening in the first place ([MN 26](#)). Instead, he advises you to channel those wants into developing the path. That's how he gained results, and how you'll gain results, too.

The standard definitions for the factors of the path show that desire plays an explicit role in two of them: right resolve and right effort.

Right resolve is the determination to abandon resolves for sensual passion, ill will, and harmfulness, and to develop in their place resolves for renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness. The three resolves to be abandoned come under the first two of the hindrances: sensual desire and ill will. These hindrances, you may recall, are the conditions that sustain ignorance. This means that the resolves to be developed are aimed at putting an end to those conditions. Right resolve is, for this reason, the active side of the training in heightened discernment: You not only know the four noble truths, but—based on that knowledge—you also resolve to put an end to the conditions that keep you from mastering those truths along with their duties. That resolve is wise.

Right effort is defined as generating desire, arousing persistence, and upholding your intent to do four things: to prevent unskillful mental qualities from arising, to abandon those that have already arisen, to give rise to skillful mental qualities, and to develop to their culmination any skillful mental qualities that have already arisen.

Right resolve comes under the training of heightened discernment; right effort, under the training in heightened mind. This fact would make it seem as if there's no role for desire in the other aspect of the triple training, the training in heightened virtue, but that's not the case. The Buddha points out that right effort circles around every factor of the path: generating the desire to give rise to the right version of that factor and to abandon the wrong version ([MN 117](#)). For example, you have to generate desire to abandon wrong speech and wrong action, and to stay within the

bounds of right speech and right action. This is why one of the Buddha's most common teachings to people at large was to point out the rewards of virtue in this life and the next, so that they would generate the desire to practice virtue themselves ([DN 16](#)).

What's striking about the role of desire in developing the path is that it holds to an overarching skillful desire—the desire for awakening—to determine which desires should be encouraged and which should be abandoned. In other words, you establish priorities among your desires and you use skillful desires to stick to your priorities. Then you train yourself—with the help of the training you receive from others—to hold to those priorities every time you're faced with the choice of encouraging one desire over another.

If there weren't any conflict among your desires, there would be no need for training. This means that, by its very nature, training will involve inner conflict. There's no way you can progress in your training without it. As we survey each part of the triple training, we'll see exactly how this conflict plays out as you progress along the path.

This policy of holding to one desire so as to overcome any other desires that would get in its way is called determination (*adhiṭṭhāna*). Ironically, given the overriding role that determination plays in the path, the Canon contains only one passage where the Buddha discusses in any detail what it means to be determined on awakening. It's in [MN 140](#). There he separates this determination into four aims that all come together with the realization of unbinding.

- One, in aiming at unbinding, you're determined on *discernment*, because the knowledge of the ending of the effluents—the final knowledge before the experience of unbinding—is the highest noble discernment.
- Two, you're determined on *truth*, in that unbinding—the undeceptive—is the highest noble truth.
- Three, you're determined on *relinquishment*, because the relinquishment of mental acquisitions—the mental baggage of possessiveness that weighs you down—is the highest noble relinquishment.
- Four, you're determined on *calm*, because the abandoning of passion, aversion, and delusion is the highest noble calm.

In this way, discernment and relinquishment find their highest expression in the last steps of the path to unbinding; truth and calm, in unbinding itself. The fact that, in arriving at unbinding, you've arrived at the highest expression of each of these determinations means that your overriding desires have been totally satisfied. You've managed to establish order among your various desires, skillful and unskillful, seeing that the desire for awakening offers the only prospect for genuine happiness. Now that that happiness has been found, all your desires and determinations are allayed.

30. Discernment in Concentration

That warning is the message of the discernment aimed solely at calm. This means that training in breath meditation in particular, and right concentration in general, play a role not only in training in the heightened mind, but also in training in heightened discernment.

To appreciate how this is so, we have to look at how the Buddha defines discernment before we look at how the four tetrads of breath meditation fulfill the training in right mindfulness and right concentration. That way, we can notice the activity of discernment inherent in those four tetrads.

The discourse that lists the qualities that make you worthy of the Dhamma defines discernment as follows:

“There is the case where a monk is discerning, endowed with discernment of arising & passing away—noble, penetrating, leading to the right ending of stress.” — [AN 8:30](#)

Discernment starts with recognizing the distinctive mark of fabrication: events arising and passing away ([AN 3:47](#)). In this way, it establishes the *fact* of fabrication. But just as mindfulness is not bare awareness of events arising and passing away, neither is discernment. It also has to discern the *value* of fabrication to see that, although fabrications are useful in constructing the path to the end of suffering, ultimately, when that path has been fully developed, no further fabrications are worth the effort that goes into them.

In other words, discernment has to see that fabrication in all its forms—such as the aggregates and consciousness at the senses—is a type of kamma, something you *do*, and that beyond the path, it’s not worth doing. After all, desire and passion for the processes of fabrication are based on the value judgment that those processes are worth the effort that goes into them. You won’t be able to subdue desire and passion until you arrive at

an opposing and more persuasive value judgment, that fabrications, no matter how good, are simply not worth the effort.

These aspects of discernment's role—seeing both the fact and value of fabrications—are contained in the remaining words in the definition of discernment: *noble, penetrating, and leading to the right ending of stress.*

In the Buddha's vocabulary, *noble* relates to the noble search for the deathless ([MN 26](#)). This means you don't look at arising and passing away simply to affirm that it's happening. You're searching for a way to put an end to it, to arrive at something unfabricated. This is why you need discernment that's *penetrating*.

A discourse named Penetrating ([AN 6:63](#)) shows what this means. To have penetrating knowledge of something, you have to know:

what it is,
its cause,
its diversity—in other words, the range of its skillful and unskillful forms,
its results—good or bad,
its cessation, and
the path to its cessation.

Applied to fabrication, penetrating knowledge would have to see that:

fabrication is identical with intention;
its immediate cause is contact (such as the contact in name and form);
its diversity covers all skillful and unskillful actions, including the aggregates;
its results are pleasures and pains;
its cessation comes with the cessation of contact—this would mean the cessation of all six senses ([SN 35:117](#))—and
the path to its cessation is the noble eightfold path ([SN 22:57](#)).

So instead of simply observing arising and passing away, if you want your knowledge to be penetrating, you have to dig into the causes and results of that arising and passing away, and to see their different potentials. This requires that you take a proactive approach to fabrication. If you simply watch fabrications coming and going, you don't really know

which causes lead to which results. But if you consciously and intentionally manipulate the causes, you can learn for yourself what causes what. This is why the Buddha recommended a more proactive approach to breath meditation, in which you train yourself to engage in different bodily, verbal, and mental fabrications to calm the body and mind and to arrive at your own direct knowledge of causal relationships.

For this program of penetrating discernment to *lead to the right ending of stress*, you not only have to penetrate the six aspects of fabrication listed in [AN 6:63](#), but you also have to put the noble eightfold path into practice. Again, you learn by doing. The path ends stress by fostering dispassion for its cause, which is craving. So to put an end to stress, discernment has to look at the arising and passing away of fabrications in a way that leads to dispassion for craving.

Keep these points in mind as we review the ways in which the four tetrads of breath meditation foster right mindfulness and right concentration. You'll see that these tetrads also foster discernment that's noble, penetrating, and leads to the right ending of stress.

34. Allure & Drawbacks

The Canon provides other guidelines for how to reflect in a way that gives rise to the value judgment that all things fabricated are not worth the effort that goes into them. Two guidelines in particular stand out, both because they're repeated so frequently in the discourses and because they provide details that are missing in the guidelines offered in [AN 9:41](#) and [AN 9:36](#).

The first provides a general overview for the reflections aimed at subduing desire and passion, dividing those reflections into five steps: You look for the

origination of the fabrications in question; for their
passing away; for their
allure; for their
drawbacks; and for the
escape from them, which is the subduing of desire and passion.

The discourses apply this formula to the six internal sense spheres (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, intellect), the six external sense spheres (sights, sounds, aromas, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas), the four physical properties (earth, water, wind, fire), and the cosmos as a whole ([SN 14:31](#), [SN 35:13–14](#); [AN 3:104](#)). It applies a seven-step variant of this formula to the five aggregates, incorporating in its first four steps the pattern of the four noble truths—what the aggregates are, their origination, their cessation, the path of practice leading to their cessation—followed by the three steps of seeing their allure, their drawbacks, and the escape from them in the subduing of desire and passion ([SN 22:57](#)).

However, the Canon also contains two discourses that, put together, apply the five-step formula to the aggregates as well ([SN 22:5](#); [SN 22:26](#)). In fact, these two discourses flesh out the five-step formula in more detail than any of the others.

The five steps fall into two parts. The first two steps focus on the fact of fabrication; the last three, on its value.

In the first two steps, the origination is sometimes identified in a way that follows the explicit wording of the standard version of dependent co-arising, and sometimes not. And it's more interesting when it doesn't. [SN 22:5](#) is a case in point. It says that the aggregate in question originates when you "enjoy, welcome, and remain fastened to" it. It passes away when you don't. This is in line with the teaching that all phenomena are rooted in desire—which, as we noted earlier, implicitly underlies dependent co-arising even though it's not explicitly mentioned in it.

The part of the reflection that focuses on the value of fabrication begins with a step not mentioned in either [AN 9:36](#) or [AN 9:41](#): seeing the allure of what it is that you desire. This step is crucial. Until you see the actual allure of the desired object—what you find attractive about it—you can't really let go of your desire and passion for it, no matter how much you focus on the drawbacks of the fabrication in question. As long as the allure stays buried, you can't identify it clearly and so can't abandon it.

[SN 22:26](#) says simply that the allure lies in whatever pleasure or joy arises in dependence on the fabrication, which doesn't tell us much.

More informative is a list in [DN 22](#) that details all the places where craving arises and settles. Wherever your craving is located, that's where you'll find the allure. It could be focused on:

- the external sense media,
- the internal sense media,
- consciousness at the sense media,
- contact at the sense media,
- feeling born of that contact,
- perception of the external sense media,
- intention for the external sense media,
- craving for the external sense media,
- thought directed at the external sense media,
- evaluation of the external sense media.

For instance, if you crave a person and want to get past that craving, you have to determine whether the allure is in the sight, sound, etc., of that person, in the perceptions you have about that person (or of yourself

in relation to that person, as you build your self image around that relationship), in the things you tell yourself about that person, or in the act of craving itself—as when people are in love with the idea of being in love.

The location of the allure can often be obscured by conflicted emotions around it, which is why determination on truth plays an especially important role in this step of the reflection. The same point applies to seeing the drawbacks: As long as you're protective of your desire and passion for the allure, you'll resist seeing the drawbacks for what they actually are.

However, when you can honestly compare the allure with the drawbacks and see that the fabrication in question is not worth the trouble involved in continuing to fabricate it, that's when you can arrive at an honest value judgment: The allure is worthless. That judgment is what takes direct aim at subduing desire and passion. After all, desire and passion are aroused by the allure. When you can pinpoint the allure and see that it has been lying to you—promising happiness but making you pay a heavy price—it loses its appeal. The more thorough your understanding of the allure and of the drawbacks, the more thorough the dispassion and release that result.

This is where the Buddha's second guide to inducing dispassion comes in. In his second discourse ([SN 22:59](#)), he focuses on three perceptions that, when applied in a thoroughgoing way to the aggregates, can result in full awakening. In terms of the five-step program, these perceptions function on the fourth step: seeing the drawbacks of the aggregates.

We've already encountered these perceptions in [AN 9:36](#): inconstancy, stress, not-self. There we saw that any of them can induce dispassion for the aggregates, but in [SN 22:59](#) the Buddha fleshes them out further in two ways.

First, he shows the interrelationship among them: If something is inconstant, it's inherently stressful, because any happiness based on it is unreliable. If it's inconstant and stressful, it's not worth claiming as you or yours. In other words, you have to perceive it as not-self.

Here the Buddha is asking his listeners to engage in some verbal fabrication to arrive at a value judgment: The aggregates—and all other fabrications—don't measure up to the standards set by the question that

lies at the base of discernment: “What when I do it will lead to my long-term well-being and happiness?” If something is inconstant, it doesn’t qualify as long-term. If it’s stressful, it doesn’t qualify as well-being and happiness. And if something isn’t long-term happiness, it’s not worth claiming as “me” or “mine.” In more basic terms, whatever the allure of those fabrications, it’s outweighed by their drawbacks. Whatever effort goes into fabricating those fabrications is simply not worth it.

This value judgment, of course, can be effective only if you’re convinced that a higher happiness is possible if you let go of what you’re attached to. This is why this reflection carries weight only in the context of the four noble truths: Either you’ve already had a glimpse of that higher happiness in your first glimpse of the deathless—this was the case of the Buddha’s listeners in [SN 22:59](#)—or you firmly believe in the reality of the third noble truth: that dispassion constitutes the end of suffering.

Applying the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self to the fabrications you’re experiencing in the here and now is enough to induce dispassion for those fabrications, but the mind might be able to imagine satisfaction in better fabrications at some other time or place. That would keep its dispassion from being complete.

Which is why the Buddha doesn’t stop there. He goes on to have his listeners reflect that all the aggregates—“past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near”—should be seen as: “This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.” This reflection covers every option in time and space. If you truly follow it, it leaves only one possibility open: dropping the parameters of time and space entirely.

That’s when desire and passion are totally subdued, and that’s the total escape. The mind is totally released.