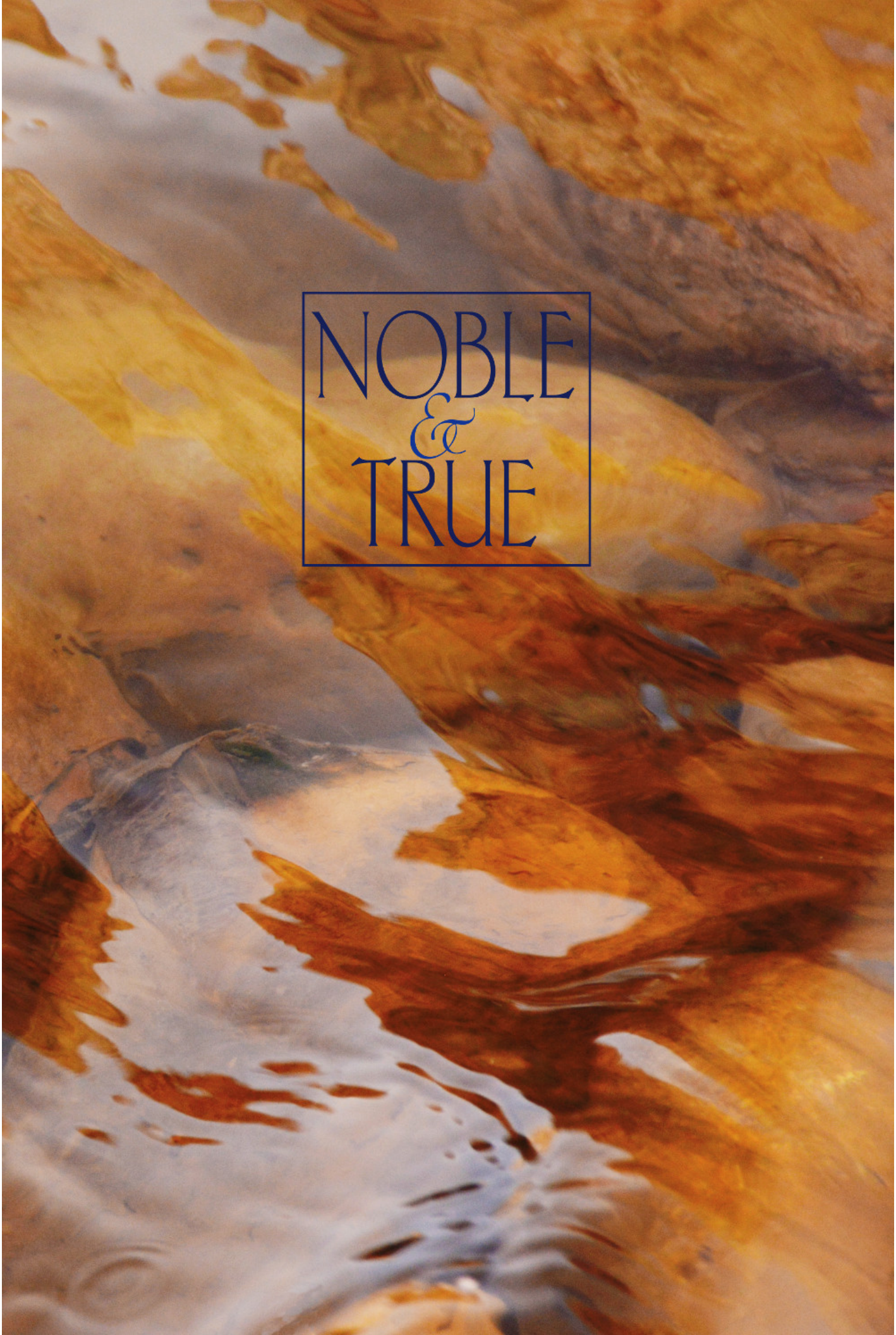
NOBLE
&
TRUE

Noble & True

Essays on the Buddhist Path

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu
(Geoffrey DeGraff)

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

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Danger is Normal

A short reflection that's often chanted in Theravada monasteries states, in part, "I am subject to aging... subject to illness... subject to death." That's the standard English translation, but the standard Thai translation is more pointed: "Aging is normal for me... illness is normal... death is normal for me." The extended version of the reflection goes on to say that these things are normal for everyone, no matter where. To be born into any world is to be born into a place where these dangers are normal. They lie in wait right here in the body that, at birth, we laid claim to, and the world around us is full of triggers that can bring these dangers out into the open at any time.

As the reflection concludes, these are good themes to reflect on every day—to keep us heedful of the fact that dangers are to be expected and are not an aberration. That way we can be prepared for them. Otherwise, we tend to forget—and our illusions of safety, when they're challenged, often lead to unrealistic desires for absolute safety that can cause us to create unnecessary dangers for ourselves and people around us.

It's an often-overlooked feature of the Buddha's teachings that he identified the basis for all our good and skillful qualities as heedfulness—not innate goodness or compassion: heedfulness. To recognize that there are dangers both within and without, that your actions can make the difference between suffering from those dangers and not, and that you'd better get your act together now: This is the heedfulness that makes us generous, wise, and kind. We're kind not because we're innately kind. In fact, our minds are so quick to change that they're not innately anything, good or bad, aside from being aware. If we're heedful, we're kind not only when others are kind to us or make us feel safe. We're kind because

we see that kindness is the safest course of action, even in the face of the unkindness of others.

This is why the Buddha told his monks, when they were ready, to go out into the wilderness to face some of the dangers there, so that they could overcome their complacency and become resourceful in dealing skillfully with threats to their physical and mental well being. That way they could learn to bring out their best qualities even when—especially when—confronted with the worst that the wilderness had to offer. Some of the most moving passages in the Pali Canon are the words of monks in the wilds who discovered, in the face of hunger, illness, and dangers from fierce animals, that the best way to keep their minds safe was to take refuge in practicing the Dhamma.

Now, the Buddha wouldn't push the monks into the wilderness right off the bat. He was like a wise parent who provides safety for her children as they're getting started in life, and then gradually acquaints them with the dangers of the world, providing them with the skills they'll need to negotiate those dangers on their own.

This is why so many of his teachings deal with issues of safety and danger: recognizing what true danger is, what true safety is, and knowing how to best find true safety in both within conditions and beyond them. And he didn't limit these teachings only to monks and nuns. He taught them to all his students, lay and ordained, because wilderness is not the only place where dangers abound. And monastics are not the only ones who can endanger themselves and others by holding to unwise and unrealistic notions about safety and danger. Complacency and the ignorance it fosters are problems for us all.

So it's useful to reflect on some of the Buddha's teachings on safety, to get his perspective on the dangers we all must encounter. Because it's hard to keep complex teachings in mind when you're face to face with danger, I'll boil the main principles of the Buddha's safety instructions to a few bullet points. That way they'll be easy to keep in mind when you need them most.

The first point puts the remaining points into perspective:

• **Total safety is possible, but only in nibbāna.** As long as you're not there yet, you have to accept the fact that you'll be forced again and again to sacrifice some things in order to save others that are more valuable. Life in saṁsāra is full of trade-offs, and wisdom consists of learning to make wise trades. If you forget this fact, you tend to float around in a complacent bubble of what you assume to be a karma-free zone where you can have your cake and enlightenment too—and the people who live in complacent bubbles are the ones most likely to thrash around wildly, endangering themselves and others, when that bubble bursts.

The next point focuses on the primary means for finding the total safety of nibbāna and relative safety in the world. It forms the basis for all the points that follow.

• **Your most lasting possessions are your actions.** Your body is yours only till death; your loved ones, at best, are yours no longer than that. The results of your actions, though, can carry well past death, so make sure that you don't sacrifice the goodness of your thoughts, words, and deeds to save things that will slip through your fingers like water. Specifically, this means that if you really want to find safety, your strategy can't involve killing, stealing, or telling lies. At the same time, you can't expose yourself to unnecessary dangers by taking intoxicants or engaging in illicit sex. These are the principles of the five precepts, and the Buddha taught them because they really work in safeguarding the people who observe them.

If you really want to protect your loved ones and other people around you from danger, remember that the same principle applies to them: Their most lasting possessions are *their* actions. So the best way to protect them is to teach them to observe the same five precepts. If they're willing to listen to you, you can explain the precepts to them. If they're not, you can teach the precepts by example—which, either way, is the only way to make the lesson stick.

• **To find some safety in the world, you first have to give safety to the entire world.** If you're determined to observe the precepts in all situations, you're giving a gift of safety to everyone, in that all beings, universally, will be protected from any harm you might do. In return, you get a share in the universal safety coming from your present actions. If, however, you follow the precepts only in some cases and not in others—if, for instance, you can rationalize killing and lying certain people in certain situations, for whatever the end—it's like building a fence around your property but leaving a huge gap in the back. Anyone, with any motive, can walk right in through the gap.

• **You can protect yourself from the results of your past unskillful actions by training the mind.** The fact that we're born in the human realm means that we all have some past bad karma, so simply avoiding unskillful karma in the present isn't enough to protect you from suffering. Fortunately, though, while we can't go back to change our past actions, we can weaken the effect of any past bad actions by training the mind.

The types of meditation especially helpful in this area include developing unlimited attitudes of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity; developing your discernment in knowing how to stop causing yourself unnecessary suffering in the present; and learning the ability not to let the mind be overcome by either pleasure or pain. When the mind is trained in this way, it's like a vast river of clean water: You can throw a lump of salt into the river and yet still drink the water, because it's so vast and clear. Otherwise, your mind will be like a small cup of water: The same lump of salt thrown into the cup will make the water unfit to drink.

• **The primary danger from other people lies, not so much in what they do to you, but in what they can get you to do.** Their karma is their karma; your karma is yours. Even when you're mistreated by others, their karma doesn't become your karma—unless you start mistreating them in return.

At the same time, the most dangerous people aren't necessarily those who are obviously mistreating you. Sometimes people you regard as your friends can try to get you to break the precepts, or to fire up passion, aversion, or delusion in your mind. In doing this, they can make you do lasting danger to yourself.

This means, on the one hand, that you have to train yourself not to fall for the reasonings or to be tempted by the rewards that some people will offer you to kill, lie, or steal for some "good cause." On the other, it means that you have to distinguish speech that's genuinely harmful from speech that's harmful only on the surface. Nasty words meant to hurt your feelings or get you upset are harmful only on the surface. Words that insinuate themselves into your mind, getting you to develop unskillful attitudes or do unskillful things: Those are the ones that can do deep, long-lasting harm.

• **You can protect yourself from harmful words by, again, training the mind.** The best protection against unskillful speech is to depersonalize it, and two techniques are especially effective in this regard.

One is to remember that human speech all over the world has always been, and always will be, either kind or unkind, true or false, beneficial or harmful. The fact that people may be saying unkind, false, or harmful things to you right now is nothing out of the ordinary. Like all dangers, it's normal, so there's no reason to feel that you're being singled out for any special mistreatment. You can take it in stride.

The second technique is to tell yourself, when something harmful is being said, "An unpleasant sound is making contact at the ear." And leave it at that. Don't build any internal narratives around that contact that will stab at your heart. You have ears, so you're bound to hear both pleasant and unpleasant sounds. But you can also develop discernment around how you use your ears and relate to those sounds. If you can let the words stop at the contact, they won't present any danger to your heart.

Obviously, these principles build on the working hypothesis of kamma and rebirth—a hypothesis that, we're told, is no longer viable in our modern/postmodern times. But none of us have to be prisoners of our times. After all, what vision of life does the modern/postmodern view offer? Fish fighting one another for the last gulp of water in a shrinking pool, all ending in death. What made the Buddha special was that he looked for a safety that lasted beyond death, and—having found it—showed others how to find it too. Along the way, he offered the possibility of safety with honor, something that modern/postmodern views can't provide.

The Dhamma is said to be timeless. In this world where death is so normal, now is as good a time as any to put that claim to the test.

What's Noble about the Noble Truths?

When people ask me this question, they often seem a little embarrassed, for fear that it's impolite or too obvious to ask. But it's well worth asking. After all, the end of suffering and the path to its end—the third and fourth noble truths—might be noble, but what's noble about the first and second noble truths: suffering and the craving that causes it? If anything, by attributing all suffering to craving, the truths seem to deny the possibility of noble suffering entirely. And what does it mean for a truth to be "noble" anyway?

A good place to start for an answer is with the Pali term for noble truth: *ariya-sacca.* This is a compound of two words: *ariya* (noble) and *sacca* (truth). The first word in any Pali compound, because it's stripped of its case ending, can function in many ways. This is one of the reasons that people fluent in the language liked to use compounds: Compounds can contain many layers of meaning that reward the person who tries to dig them out.

Ancient commentators specialized in the game of digging out these layers, and *ariya-sacca* is one of the compounds in which they liked to dig. Among the meanings they found in the word *ariya* is that the truths are *ennobling* because they take ordinary people to a noble attainment, a happiness that, because it's unconditioned, is reliable and blameless. The truths are also *of the nobles* in that noble—i.e., awakened—people have proven to themselves that these truths are true, and that they're the most important truths to teach to others. The commentators who dug out these meanings didn't see this sort of analysis as denying the fact that the truths themselves were noble. They simply saw it as adding resonance to their nobility.

For instance, even though the truths are true for noble people, they're not true *only* for noble people. They're classed as right view, part of the path that will take you from your not-yet-noble condition and lead you to a noble attainment. In other words, they're specifically *for* people who aren't yet fully awakened. They're part of the raft that takes you across the river. Once you're on the other side, you no longer need the raft. From that point on, the path of those who are fully awakened, like that of birds through space, can't be traced (Dhp 92–93). As the Buddha said, what he learned in the course of his awakening was like the leaves in the forest; the four noble truths are like just a handful of leaves (SN 56:31).

So these truths don't encompass all the views and knowledge of the awakened. They're taught by the awakened because they're part of the path to take unawakened people to awakening as well.

And the Buddha didn't save these truths only for those who are on the verge of awakening. Once, when quizzed by a newcomer to the Dhamma named Gandhabhaka, he taught the origination and cessation of suffering by using examples from Gandhabhaka's daily life: Why did he suffer over the death or imprisonment of some people and not of others? Gandhabhaka immediately grasped the basic principle—that all suffering comes from desire—and proceeded to apply those examples to understand the anxiety he felt over his absent son's safety (SN 42:11). The text doesn't say that Gandhabhaka gained awakening, but he did see—at least to some extent—how the noble truths are true. If he had taken these truths as a guide to his life, he would have found that they're ennobling as well.

But what makes the truths themselves noble? My dictionary says that among the various meanings of the word "noble" in common usage are these three: preeminent, highly virtuous, and deserving respect. "Noble" can also be used in a technical sense—as in the noble elements—meaning something that doesn't change with changing conditions. The noble truths are noble in all four of these senses.

The first sense—*preeminence*—relates to that handful of leaves. Even though the Buddha learned many, many things in the course of his awakening, he realized that all the lessons with the potential to lead others to awakening were contained in these four truths. They are truths that should be given top priority in the mind. As Ven. Sāriputta once said, all skillful dhammas (actions, phenomena, events) fall under the four noble truths in the same way that the footprints of all land animals can fit into the footprint of the elephant (MN 28).

These truths not only provide the framework for understanding everything else that is skillful, but also give directions for how to deal skillfully with whatever arises in your experience. Suffering is to be comprehended, its cause is to be abandoned, its cessation is to be realized, and the path to its cessation is to be developed. In this way, the four noble truths are the Buddha's most overarching teaching—the teaching that puts every experience in its place and tells you the most skillful way to shape your experiences into a path.

This is what the Buddha meant when he noted that all he taught was suffering and the end of suffering. He did, of course, in his many years of teaching, touch on other topics as well, but he always did so within the overarching framework of how those topics related to an understanding of suffering and its end. Even when he dealt with such far-ranging subjects as how to make a marriage work or how to be reborn as a deva or nāga, he treated them under the framework of kamma, the principle underlying the fact that our actions can either cause suffering or end it. In other words, he was illustrating the principles of right view and at the same time showing both how far those principles can extend and how useful they are to know. If he was questioned about topics that would get in the way of gaining right view—as when he was asked to take a stand on whether a fully awakened being does or doesn't exist after death (SN 22:86)—he'd refuse to answer on the grounds that doing so lay outside the range of his teaching.

For him, any questions that didn't fall under these truths were a waste of time.

The noble truths are also noble in the second sense of the word: *highly virtuous.* This is because the act of seeing yourself in terms of these truths is a noble act. Take the first two truths as an example. The first truth isn't just "suffering." It's the truth that suffering boils down to clinging to the five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness) around which we define our sense of who we are. To see your sense of self as inherently stressful is to give you some distance from it. Instead of simply following the dictates of what you think you are, you can step back from them and see how harmful they can be. In this way, you begin to comprehend them and, in gaining this objectivity, you're in a better position to act in less selfish ways. The willingness to view your sense of self in line with this truth is a virtuous act in and of itself.

The same point holds for the second noble truth. It's not just "craving." It's the truth that craving is the cause of suffering. To view your cravings in this way gives you some distance from them and puts you in a position where they're easier to drop when you see the stress and suffering they cause.

The noble truths are also noble in the sense that they *deserve respect.* This, in fact, is one of the meanings of "noble" that the Buddha himself explicitly used. He didn't reserve the term only for those who have already reached awakening. He also used it to describe the search that takes you there. Any search for a happiness in things subject to aging, illness, or death, he said, is ignoble. The search for a deathless happiness is the only noble search there is (MN 26). As part of the path to the deathless, the noble truths are noble in that they provide accurate directions for how to focus your search for happiness in a direction that genuinely deserves respect: toward a happiness that's harmless, lasting, and true.

Finally, several passages in the Canon describe the four noble truths in ways suggesting that "noble" here also means *universal*

and *unchanging*. One passage (SN 56:20) describes the truths as real and not otherwise: In other words, they describe the actual way things are and they don't change with changing conditions. Many other passages contrast the truths with a set of teachings that AN 10:20 describes as "idiosyncratic *(pacceka)"* truths: statements that are partially true, or true only for people who have a partial view of reality. Noble truths are totally true, and true for everyone. Truths noble in this sense are like noble elements in chemistry. They don't change in line with their environment. This makes them even more worthy of respect, for they give reliable guidance whoever and wherever you may be.

So the noble truths are noble in all four senses of the word:

They're the preeminent teaching on skillfulness,
the willingness to view yourself in light of them is a virtuous act,
they're part of a path that deserves utmost respect, and
they don't change with changing circumstances; they're universally true.

In my own experience, the people who have been most willing to regard the noble truths as noble in these ways have benefited the most from them, and are by far the happiest, most admirable people I have ever met.

Truths with Consequences

The Pali Canon contains a puzzle on the topic of truth *(sacca).* On the one hand, there are passages teaching the four noble truths and asserting that these truths are categorical—i.e., universally true across the board (DN 9). There are also passages equating the attainment of awakening with the "attainment of truth" (MN 95). On the other hand, there are passages like these, from the Aṭṭhaka Vagga (Sn 4), implying that the Buddha was beyond holding to any assertions as "true" or "false":

> Of what would the brahman say 'true'
> or 'false,'
> disputing with whom:
> he in whom 'equal,' 'unequal' are not. — *Sn 4:9*

> Those who dispute, taking hold of a view,
> saying, "This, and this only, is true,"
> those you can talk to.
> Here there is nothing—
> no confrontation
> at the birth of disputes. — *Sn 4:8*

The Canon also contains a related puzzle on the issue of views *(diṭṭhi),* the opinions that people adopt about the truth. On the one hand, it draws a sharp line between right and wrong views, asserting that seeing things in terms of the four noble truths is right view, and that right view is an indispensible part of the path to the end of suffering (SN 45:8). On the other, the Canon contains passages like these, also from the Aṭṭhaka Vagga, asserting that a person at peace is better off not clinging to any view or asserting any view as necessarily true.

But how—in connection with what—
would you argue
with one uninvolved?
    He has nothing
embraced or rejected,
has sloughed off every view
    right here—every one. — *Sn 4:3*

By whom, with what,
should he be pigeonholed
here in the world?
    —this brahman
    who hasn't adopted views. — *Sn 4:5*

I don't say, 'That's how it is,'
the way fools tell one another.
They each make out their views to be true
and so regard their opponents as fools. — *Sn 4:12*

The brahman, evaluating,
doesn't accept theory,
doesn't follow views,
isn't tied even to knowledge. — *Sn 4:13*

There are two principal ways to approach these puzzles. One is to take them as signs that the Buddha's teachings on truth and views were subtle and nuanced, and that the contradictions in the puzzles are best treated as intentional paradoxes. The question is then whether the paradoxes can be resolved, say, by checking the Canon more carefully to see if the Buddha used the words "truth" and "views" in different ways in different contexts, or if he recommended different ways of relating to truths and views at different stages of the practice.

The other approach is to assume that the Buddha's attitude to truths and views was basically simple, and that he defined his terms consistently across the board, with no variations for

different stages in the path. From this assumption it would follow that only one side of each contradiction—either the side with a firm sense of right and wrong and true and false, or the side rejecting notions of right and wrong and true and false—accurately reflects the Buddha's views on truth and views, and that the other side is a later interpolation inconsistent with the Buddha's true teachings on these topics.

Now, the above passages asserting the need to go beyond views and attachments to true and false all come from the Aṭṭhaka Vagga, a set of poems in the fifth *nikāya,* or collection of suttas, in the Pali Canon. Because the Aṭṭhaka Vagga is mentioned in other parts of the Canon, indicating that it is older than the passages that mention it, a number of scholars have proposed that it is actually older than *all* the rest of the Canon. Taking up this proposal, those who hold to the simpler school of interpretation have suggested that these passages reflect the Buddha's original views on truths and views. As a result, they conclude that the passages asserting the categorical status of the four noble truths and right view found in the rest of the Canon—the Vinaya, the first four nikāyas, and other poetry in the fifth nikāya—are later interpolations.

From there, these scholars have further interpreted these passages from the Aṭṭhaka Vagga in line with traditional Western schools of thought that have also questioned the existence of objective truths, coming to a variety of conclusions such as these:

- *A person on the path should hold to no fixed views of right and wrong, even views about the path.*
- *The Buddha refused to take a position on questions of "truth" because there is no way of knowing if assertions about truths correspond to the way things actually are. Agnosticism is thus the position closest to the Buddha's own attitude to truth.*
- *The Buddha believed that each person has to find his or her own truth, and that any attempt to assert a universal truth is*

nothing more than an illegitimate attempt to assert power over others.

Although these conclusions differ in their details, they all agree in rejecting the idea of categorical, objective truths—of a clear right and wrong. Thus, if they were an accurate portrayal of the Buddha's position on truths and views, they would further imply, at the very least, that the traditional teachings on the four noble truths and right view are nothing more than subjective opinions that carry no special authority for a person interested in trying to put an end to suffering. More seriously, they would imply that the traditional teachings are a gross distortion of the Buddha's message, that the four noble truths are not really true, that even the idea of "right view" is wrong, and that a person on the path should hold to no truths and no views at all, even about the means and ends of the path.

It doesn't take too much thought to see that each of the above conclusions is self-contradictory, in that no view asserting the invalidity of truths and views can avoid calling itself into question. And if we can't have views about the true means and ends of the Buddhist path, why are we talking about Buddhism at all?

But even if we put aside the issue of whether these conclusions can stand up to close scrutiny on their own terms, a survey of the Pali Canon shows that they are based on a false assumption about the Canon. That assumption is that there is a sharp line of distinction between the contents of the Aṭṭhaka Vagga and that of the rest of the Canon, and that these two parts of the Canon stand consistently on opposite sides of the issue of truths and views.

For instance, the first four nikāyas, like the Aṭṭhaka Vagga, also contain passages asserting that the awakened ones have gone beyond clinging to views (SN 12:2), and to assertions of true and false. Here, for instance, is a passage from AN 4:24:

> "Whatever is seen or heard or sensed
> and fastened onto as true by others,

One who is Such—among the self-fettered—
would not further claim to be true or even false.
"Having seen well in advance that arrow
        where generations are fastened & hung
        —'I know, I see, that's just how it is!'—
there's nothing of the Tathāgata fastened."

As for the Aṭṭhaka Vagga, it contains many passages asserting right views in line with the four noble truths, such as Sn 4:1, 4:2, and 4:7, which agree with the second noble truth in identifying three types of craving—for sensuality, becoming, and non-becoming—as causes for suffering; Sn 4:15, which agrees with the third noble truth in extolling unbinding *(nibbāna)* as the goal; and Sn 4:16, which agrees with the fourth noble truth in recommending right resolve, right speech, right action, and jhāna as right concentration. The Aṭṭhaka Vagga also contains the following dialogue, in which the Buddha asserts the existence of a consistent objective truth that human beings can know:

Question:

"What some say is true
—'That's how it is'—
others say is 'falsehood, a lie.'
Thus quarreling, they dispute.
Why can't contemplatives
say one thing & the same?"

The Buddha:

        "The truth is one.
                There is no second
about which a person who knows it
would argue with one who knows.
Contemplatives promote
their various idiosyncratic truths.
That's why they don't say
one thing & the same."

Question:

"But why do they say
various truths,
those who say they are skilled?
Have they learned many various truths
or do they follow conjecture?"

The Buddha:

"Apart from their perception
there are no
many
various
constant truths
in the world." — *Sn 4:12*

At the same time, the series of poems in the Aṭṭhaka Vagga discussing issues of truth start with the following passage, indicating that their rejection of "true" and "false" holds, not for all truths, but for idiosyncratic *(pacceka)* ones: i.e., truths that are not universally true.

'Only here is there purity'
—that's what they say—
'No other doctrines are pure'
—so they say.
Insisting that what they depend on is good,
they are deeply entrenched
in their idiosyncratic truths. — *Sn 4:8*

Taken together, these passages suggest that the Buddha in the Aṭṭhaka Vagga was denying, not the validity of *all* views and truths, but only the validity of universal claims made for views and truths that don't deserve them. Given that many of the poems in the Aṭṭhaka Vagga take the form of riddles, with frequent paradoxes and plays on words, it shouldn't be surprising that its message is complex.

These two passages also call into question the three conclusions drawn from taking the previous Aṭṭhaka Vagga passages out of context:

- Because the truth is one, it can be argued that it doesn't change. Thus there can be fixed standards for measuring one's own views as right or wrong. As long as one is still on the path, one should regard right view as unfixed only to the extent that one has yet to confirm through experience whether it is genuinely right in leading to the end of suffering.
- The fact that people can know this truth implies that they are in a position to judge how well statements about it actually correspond to its reality. And because they know, agnosticism is far from the Buddha's own recommended attitude toward truth.
- The fact that people who actually know genuine truth don't dispute with one another about it implies that the truth is the same for all who experience it, and that it is not a purely subjective or individual matter.

All of this suggests that the simple school of interpretation doesn't do justice to the Pali Canon's puzzles on truths and views. This means that we have to explore how they might function as paradoxes to be resolved. To do this, we have to look more closely at what the Canon has to say on the question of truths and views, to see if we can detect any nuances or distinctions that would help to resolve the paradoxes and provide practical insights into how to relate to truths and views in a way that actually leads to the end of suffering.

The first distinction worth noting is that the word "truth" in the Canon has at least two meanings that are relevant to the paradoxes.

In some instances, "truth" means a *true event or experience*—something that actually happens or exists. In others, "truth" means a *statement about* actual events or experiences. The failure to

note this distinction has bedeviled many Western writers trained in schools of thought that hold to the belief that "truth" applies only to statements, and not to events described by statements. The fact that the Buddha didn't hold to this belief is shown in the following passage, which describes unbinding itself as a truth:

> "Whatever is deceptive is false; unbinding—the undeceptive—is true. Thus a monk so endowed is endowed with the highest determination for truth, for this—unbinding, the undeceptive—is the highest noble truth." — *MN 140*

Similarly, the following passage talks about experiencing a truth "with the body," which obviously means, not touching a statement, but directly realizing the experience of the truth in and of itself:

> "Exerting himself, he both realizes the ultimate meaning of the truth with his body and sees by penetrating it with discernment." — *MN 95*

The Buddha also uses "truth" in this way when he teaches the duties appropriate to the four noble truths: that the truth of suffering is to be comprehended, the truth of its cause abandoned, the truth of its cessation realized, and the truth of the path to its cessation developed (SN 56:11). Obviously, these duties don't involve, for example, abandoning the statement about the cause of suffering, or developing the statement about the path. Instead, you abandon the actual qualities of mind that act as the cause, and develop the actual qualities of mind that function as the path.

Understanding these two meanings of "truth" helps to resolve the paradox concerning the relationship of the fully awakened person to the truth. On the one hand, such a person has reached the truth of a deathless dimension that is freed from attachments to all things and is not dependent on any conditions. This is the sense in which such a person has attained the truth. At the same time, however, because views and statements about truths are

dependent on conditions, a person who fully attains the truth of awakening has to be free of all attachments to views and statements about truths, even to true statements about the truth of awakening itself.

However, this attainment doesn't come just by telling yourself to abandon views and truths. You have to comprehend the reasons for being attached to views in the first place, and to develop genuine dispassion for those reasons. To do this, you have to depend on true views about the reasons for attachment and the means for inducing dispassion. This is why, even though awakening involves letting go of all views and statements about truth, the path there requires holding to certain views and statements about truth as consistent guidelines for the right way to let go. This means that you relate to truth in one way when you're on the path, and another way when you've reached the goal. This is the second distinction worth noting.

One of the most famous paradoxes in the Aṭṭhaka Vagga points to precisely this distinction:

> One doesn't describe purity
> in terms of view,
> learning,
> knowledge,
> habit or practice.
> Nor is it found by a person
> through lack of view,
> of learning,
> of knowledge,
> of habit or practice. — *Sn 4:9*

The same distinction is conveyed by the famous simile of the raft in MN 22:

> "Then the man, having gathered grass, twigs, branches, & leaves, having bound them together to make a raft, would cross over to safety on the other shore in dependence on the

raft, making an effort with his hands & feet. Having crossed over to the further shore, he might think, 'How useful this raft has been to me! For it was in dependence on this raft that, making an effort with my hands & feet, I have crossed over to safety on the further shore. Why don't I, having hoisted it on my head or carrying on my back, go wherever I like?'

"What do you think, monks? Would the man, in doing that, be doing what should be done with the raft?"

"No, lord."

"And what should the man do in order to be doing what should be done with the raft? There is the case where the man, having crossed over, would think, 'How useful this raft has been to me! For it was in dependence on this raft that, making an effort with my hands & feet, I have crossed over to safety on the further shore. Why don't I, having dragged it on dry land or sinking it in the water, go wherever I like?' In doing this, he would be doing what should be done with the raft."

Even though you let go of the raft on reaching the shore, you have to keep holding firmly to the raft while making an effort with your hands and feet to reach the shore in the first place. To make a show of your lack of attachment to the raft by dancing around on the top of it is to risk being swept away by the river to the whirlpools downstream.

Putting this principle into practice when following the path means two things:

(1) adopting right—i.e., effective—views about truth;
(2) using them properly.

In judging whether a view is right or wrong, the Buddha advises assessing it in terms of the consequence of holding on to it. This means judging it by the actions it leads to and the results of those actions—and specifically how well those actions lead to the end of

suffering. MN 126 illustrates this point by comparing the act of adopting wrong views to that of trying to get milk from a cow by twisting its horn, or sesame oil by grinding gravel. To adopt right views, it says, is like trying to get milk from a cow by pulling on its udder, or sesame oil by grinding sesame seeds.

In this way, the Buddha recommends looking at truths as instrumental, i.e., as means to an end. His position on this point is similar to that of Western Pragmatism, which also recommends judging truths in terms of the acts they inspire, and how well those acts lead to your desired goals. However, the Buddha's teaching here differs from that of Pragmatism on two important points.

• The first is that, in some forms of Western Pragmatism, a statement can be judged to be true simply on grounds of utility: If adopting it as a view is beneficial as means to a particular end, such as making money or soothing your feelings, then it's true. This, however, leaves room for declaring some useful fictions—views of the world that don't really accord with the way it is—as true as long as they give the desired benefits when put into action. An example would be a false view of the world—say, one in which your actions can have no negative consequences—that you find useful because it's comforting, or that allows you to pursue your aims without qualms about unintended consequences.

In MN 58, however, the Buddha indicates that some truths are beneficial and some are not, but that all beneficial statements must first be true. In other words, utility alone is not enough to qualify an idea as true. Truth and utility are two separate things. Some statements may be true in the sense of corresponding to reality, but adopting them may not be beneficial for the ending of suffering. At the same time, no statement that doesn't correspond to reality can be regarded as either beneficial or true.

What the Pali Canon means by "corresponds" here can be inferred from the way it deals with offenses in the Vinaya, or disciplinary rules. There we find three ways in which correspondence to reality plays a role in analyzing what is and is

not an offense. All three types of correspondence are fairly straightforward and commonsensical, but they prove to have deeper implications for the practice.

First, for a perception to be true, it must match the facts: to perceive a human being as a human being, for instance, is a true perception. To perceive that human being as a common animal or a mannequin would be a false perception. For ease of reference, this can be called correspondence of perception.

Second, when one makes a statement to others—especially when accusing another monk of an offense—one must accurately cite one's evidence for making the statement. If the statement is based on what one heard someone else report, and one says so, that would count as corresponding to the truth. If one says that it was based on what one saw, that would not. This can be called correspondence of citation.

Third, when one is accused of an offense, one must give a truthful account of what one actually did. This means being honest not only about one's physical or verbal actions, but also about one's motivation and intentions associated with those actions. This can be called correspondence of narrative.

These three types of correspondence also function in the practice of the Dhamma.

First, in **the practice of mindfulness,** one must accurately discern what is happening in the mind: discerning, for example, a passionate mind state as a passionate mind state, or a pleasant feeling as a pleasant feeling.

Second, when making a statement, one "safeguards the truth" by **accurately reporting the evidence or line of thought** on which the statement is based (MN 95). For example, if one's statement is based on reasoning rather than direct experience, one safeguards the truth by saying so. Even though this second type of correspondence focuses primarily on statements to others, it carries over into matters within the mind. If you are careful about citing the sources of the opinions you express to others, you will also become more sensitive to the sources of your own internal

assumptions about the world and the self. This helps you to see how arbitrary many of those assumptions are, which makes it easier to abandon them if they get in the way of the practice.

Finally, as the Buddha taught his son, Rāhula (MN 61), anyone who hopes to make progress in the path must be **truthful in assessing his or her motives** when contemplating an action in thought, word, or deed, **and in assessing the actual results of one's actions,** both while doing them and after they're done. You can't learn to advance your aims—i.e., you can't be a truly effective pragmatist—if you don't accurately know what you're doing and the results of what you've done.

The second and third types of truth-as-correspondence—accurately citing the source of your opinions and giving an honest account of your actions—are directly related to each other, in that they focus your attention on your actions: what you did to shape the opinions that you bring to experience, and how you shape your experience in general through your intentions. The ability to be sensitive to these processes as they happen is central to the development of liberating discernment.

The importance of all three types of truth-as-correspondence in the practice is reflected in the Buddha's admonition to his son Rāhula: His very first lesson to Rāhula was that anyone who feels no shame at telling a deliberate lie is devoid of the goodness of a contemplative (MN 61). Elsewhere, the Buddha stated that if you feel no shame at telling a deliberate lie, there is no evil that you will not do (Iti 25).

In this way, the Buddha's standard of truth was not purely pragmatic. Right view, to be genuinely right, has to be pragmatic *and* correspond to the way things are.

• The second point of difference between the Buddha's attitude toward truth and that of Western Pragmatism is that many forms of Pragmatism lack any objective standards for judging "what works," when put into practice, in attaining a desired goal. All too often a pragmatic argument for a particular truth is, "It's good enough for me," and that ends the discussion. There are no

objective standards for judging what's a worthwhile goal, or how well a truth has to work in order to be "good enough."

The Buddha, however, offered an objective standard for judging appropriate goals and the extent to which views work as means toward those goals. He began by noting that all action aims at happiness and wellbeing. The best goal would thus be a happiness that cannot change into suffering. The fact that such a happiness exists is the teaching of the third noble truth: the cessation of suffering. This is the Buddha's absolute standard for judging goals. Any lesser happiness in accordance with the attainment of this fact—i.e., a happiness that doesn't require actions that would get in the way of realizing this goal—might qualify as a worthwhile proximate goal, but it should be recognized as just that—proximate, and not ultimate. Any happiness whose attainment would stand in the way of attaining the fact of the third noble truth would not be a worthwhile goal at all.

This may be one of the reasons why the Buddha declared unbinding, the cessation of suffering, as the highest noble truth, not only because it is undeceptive, but also because it provides the objective standard for judging the efficacy of all other truths.

With regard to the right *use* of truths, the Buddha first points out three misuses of right view. The first is to draw improper inferences, or to fail to draw the proper inferences, from it (AN 2:24). Unfortunately, the Buddha doesn't give detailed criteria for what he means here, and we have to read widely in the Canon to observe which sorts of inferences he and his noble disciples actually draw from the basic teachings, and which sorts they reject.

The second misuse of right view is to develop pride around the fact of adopting it, as if that in and of itself made you a better person than others (Sn 4:5).

The third misuse of right view is to employ it simply for the purpose of winning debates. This is a point, however, that carries several nuances. The Canon is filled with warnings against debating for the sake of debate—this is the context for the Aṭṭhaka

Vagga's criticism of those who argue for their idiosyncratic truths (Sn 4:5, 4:8)—but the Canon also lists legitimate purposes for debate, such as establishing what is actually Dhamma and what is not (AN 1:140–141), defending the Dhamma against false accusations and misrepresentations (AN 10:93–94), and helping well-meaning but confused people to clarify their views (MN 56). This means that debates are not necessarily a bad thing, and that the purpose of engaging in debate is what determines whether doing so is a valid use of right view.

The primary intended purpose of right view is to be used as a guide in developing all the right factors of the path, from right view itself through right concentration (MN 117). As SN 22:39 shows, doing this in accordance with the Dhamma leads to dispassion for all things. In practice, this means that the factors of the path are used to develop dispassion first for anything that deviates from the path, and then for themselves, so that the mind can attain total release.

The way they do this can be seen in a number of passages treating the issue of how right view is used in developing dispassion specifically for views.

In AN 10:93, Anāthapiṇḍika visits a gathering of sectarians who ask him the views of the Buddha and his arahant disciples. Anāthapiṇḍika, who had already reached the first level of awakening, makes an interesting reply: He doesn't know the full extent of the Buddha's views. This, of course, relates to the fact that a fully awakened person has gone beyond views.

The sectarians then ask Anāthapiṇḍika about his own views, and in response he first asks to hear theirs. It turns out that they all hold positions on the hot debate topics of the day, such as the extent of the cosmos or the existence or non-existence of the soul. Anāthapiṇḍika criticizes their views, but instead of challenging the content of their positions, he focuses on the act of creating and holding to a position. In each case, he says, regardless of the content of the position, it comes from conditions that are

inconstant and stressful. By holding to such views, the sectarians are all holding on to stress.

The sectarians then ask Anāthapiṇḍika his view, and he replies:

> "'Whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen: That is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. Whatever is stress is not me, is not what I am, is not my self.' This is the sort of view I have."

On hearing this, the sectarians try to turn Anāthapiṇḍika's argument against him, saying that in holding to his view, he too is holding on to stress. He counters, however, by saying that in looking at views in this way, he is also able to discern the escape from that stress. His argument leaves the sectarians at a loss for words, and so he returns to the Buddha, who commends him for refuting the sectarians in this way.

This passage shows that right view contains the seeds for its own transcendence because it focuses, not so much on the world outside, but on the processes with which the mind creates its sense of the world. In doing so, it also draws attention to the processes of clinging in the mind, and judges them to be not-self: i.e., not worth holding on to. This is how right view develops dispassion for all processes—including, ultimately, any clinging to itself or to any of the other factors of the path.

This point is further explained in many other discourses, but three in particular stand out. In DN 1, the Buddha traces a variety of views—including four types of agnosticism—to sensory contact, and from there he follows the process of holding to views on to its consequences: through feeling, craving, clinging, becoming, and ultimately stress. In SN 22:81, he analyzes the processes by which the mind creates and holds to another variety of views—again including agnosticism—tracing them in the other direction, back to their causes, from fabrication through craving, feeling, and ultimately to contact with ignorance. In a sutta in the Aṭṭhaka Vagga—Sn 4:11—he treats quarrels over views as part of a cluster of such qualities as selfishness, conceit, and pride, and

again traces the entire cluster back to its causes: through things that are loved, desire, the distinction between "appealing" and "unappealing," contact, and ultimately to perceptions.

Despite the different details in how these suttas trace the processes surrounding the act of holding to views, in all of them the strategy is the same: to see that views come from processes that include intentional actions, or kamma, such as fabrication, craving, and desire. This is why the teaching on kamma is such an important tool in the strategy of right views, for without seeing the choices involved in intentional acts, one might assume that there was no choice but to follow in one's old ways. These intentional acts, in turn, are shown to exist in a web of dependencies that are fragile, unreliable, and unsafe, in that holding to them one opens oneself to suffering.

This strategy of looking at the processes surrounding the act of creating and holding to views is where adherence to the second and third types of truth-as-correspondence—sensitivity to the source of one's views, and sensitivity to one's actions and their results—bears full fruit. Without having developed sensitivity to these types of truth on the blatant level, it would be impossible to undertake this subtler stage in dismantling attachment to views.

The ultimate result, as Sn 4:11 concludes, is to see that genuine safety can be found only in going beyond dependencies of every sort. And only when the mind realizes this can it be in a position to abandon all passion for fabricating those actions and dependencies any further. When the mind stops fabricating them, they cease. As MN 118 and DN 1 add, when this cessation is followed by full relinquishment—of even the discernment that led to cessation—the mind is fully released. In the words of DN 1:

> "This, monks, the Tathāgata discerns. And he discerns that these standpoints, thus seized, thus grasped at, lead to such & such a destination, to such & such a state in the world beyond. And he discerns what is higher than this. And yet discerning that, he does not grasp at that act of discerning. And as he is not grasping at it, unbinding *[nibbuti]* is

> experienced right within. Knowing, as they have come to be, the origination, ending, allure, & drawbacks of feelings, along with the emancipation from feelings, the Tathāgata, monks—through lack of clinging/sustenance—is released."

However, without that discernment and the strategies needed to give rise to it, even the Buddha's release wouldn't have happened. This is why, even though a fully awakened person has gone beyond attachment to views, he or she recognizes that the truths of right view are essential guides to those strategies. As a result, when teaching others, such people continue to teach the truths of right view so that their listeners, in holding to them, can master those strategies, too. And it's important that they hold to these truths consistently, for only then will those strategies be able to do their work in an all-around way.

But because those strategies are means to an end, the Buddha was careful to leave behind a number of paradoxical teachings about truths and views as a warning not to fall into the simple-minded trap of taking views as ends in themselves—thinking, for instance, that the purpose of the path is to *arrive* at right view—and to realize instead that there will come a point in the practice where even ideas of "true" and "false" must be put aside.

So the more fully we appreciate the Buddha's paradoxes on truths and views, the more fully we'll be able to benefit from the consequences of adopting right view and putting into practice the truths that he taught.

We Are Not One

Twenty-five years ago, one of my teachers, Ajaan Suwat, led a meditation retreat in Massachusetts for which I served as translator. During a group interview session one afternoon, a retreatant new to Buddhism quipped, "You guys would have a good religion here if only you had a God. That way people would have some sense of support in their practice when things aren't going well."

Ajaan Suwat's gentle reply has stayed with me ever since: "If there were a god who could arrange that, by my taking a mouthful of food, all the beings in the world would become full, I'd bow down to that god. But I haven't found anyone like that yet."

There are two main reasons why these words have continued to resonate with me. One is that they're such an elegant argument against the existence of an all-powerful, all-merciful Creator. Look at the way life survives: by feeding on other life. The need to eat entails unavoidable suffering not only for those who are eaten, but also for those who feed, because we are never free of the need to feed. Wouldn't an all-powerful, all-merciful Creator have come up with a better design for life than this?

The other reason is that Ajaan Suwat indirectly addressed an idea often, but wrongly, attributed to the Buddha: that we are all One, and that our organic Oneness is something to celebrate. If we really were One, wouldn't our stomachs interconnect so that the nourishment of one person nourished everyone else? As it is, my act of feeding can often deprive someone else of food. My need to keep feeding requires that other living beings keep working hard to produce food. In many cases, when one being feeds, others die in the process. Oneness, for most beings, means not sharing a stomach but winding up in someone else's stomach and being

absorbed into that someone else's bloodstream. Hardly cause for celebration.

The Buddha himself never taught that we are all One. A brahman once asked him, "Is everything a Oneness? Is everything a Plurality?" The Buddha replied that both views are extremes to be avoided (SN 12:48). He didn't explain to the brahman why we should avoid the extreme view that all is Oneness. But three other passages in the Pali Canon suggest the reasons for his position.

In AN 10:29, he says that the highest non-dual state a meditator can master is to experience consciousness as an unlimited, non-dual totality. Everything seems One with your awareness in that experience, yet even in that state there is still change and inconstancy. In other words, it doesn't end suffering. Like everything else conditioned and fabricated, it has to be viewed with dispassion and, ultimately, abandoned.

In SN 35:80, the Buddha states that in order to relinquish ignorance and give rise to clear knowing, one has to see all things —all the senses and their objects--as something other or separate; as not-self. To see all things as One would thus block the knowledge leading to awakening.

And in MN 22, he singles out the view that the self is identical with the cosmos as particularly foolish. If the cosmos is your true self, he reasoned, then the workings of the cosmos would be yours to control. But how much control do you have over your immediate surroundings, let alone the whole cosmos? As Ajaan Lee once said, "Try cutting down your neighbor's tree and see whether there's going to be trouble."

Taken together, these three passages suggest that the Buddha wanted to avoid the view that everything is a Oneness because it doesn't put an end to suffering, because seeing all things as One gets in the way of awakening, and because the idea of Oneness simply doesn't square with the way things actually are.

But even though the Buddha didn't tell the brahman *why* he avoided the extreme of Oneness, he did tell him *how* to avoid it: by

adopting the teaching on dependent co-arising, his explanation of the causal interactions that lead to suffering.

Ironically, dependent co-arising is often interpreted in modern Buddhist circles as the Buddha's affirmation of Oneness and the interconnectedness of all beings. But this interpretation doesn't take into account the Buddha's own dismissal of Oneness, and it blurs two important distinctions.

The first distinction is between the notions of Oneness and interconnectedness. Just because we live in an interconnected system, dependent on one another, doesn't mean that we're One. To be One, at least in a way worth celebrating, the whole system should be working toward the good of every member in the system. But in nature's grand ecosystem, one member survives only by feeding—physically and mentally—on other members. It's hard, even heartless, to say that nature works for the common good of all.

The Buddha pointed to this fact in a short series of questions aimed at introducing Dhamma to newcomers (Khp 4). The questions follow the pattern, "What is One? What is Two?" all the way to "What is Ten?" Most of the answers are unsurprising: Four, for example, is the four noble truths; Eight, the noble eightfold path. The surprise lies in the answer to "What is One?"—"All beings subsist on food." Instead of saying that all beings are One, this answer focuses on something we all have in common yet which underscores our lack of Oneness: We all need to feed—and we feed on one another. In fact, this is the Buddha's basic image for introducing the topic of interdependent causality. Causal relationships are feeding relationships. To be interdependent is to "inter-eat."

Later generations of Buddhists replaced this image with others more benign, suggesting that interdependence involves nothing more weighty than reflected light: a net with jewels at every interstice of the net, each jewel reflecting all the other jewels; or a lamp surrounded by mirrors, each mirror reflecting not only the light of the lamp but also the light reflected from every other

mirror. The dazzling beauty of the interacting light beams sounds like something to celebrate.

But these images don't accurately portray the actual facts of interdependence. Our lives are not spent in a continual interplay of emitting and reflecting light. We're individual beings with individual stomachs. Perpetually hungry, we never have enough of feeding off of one another. This is nothing to celebrate. Instead, as the Buddha states in AN 10:27, the proper response to all this inter-eating is one of disenchantment and dispassion, leading the mind to gain release from the need to feed.

The second distinction that gets blurred when dependent co-arising is portrayed as the Buddha's affirmation of Oneness is the distinction between what might be called outer connections and inner ones: the connections among living beings on the one hand, and those among the events within each being's awareness on the other. When you look at the series of events actually listed in dependent co-arising, you see that it deals with the second type of interconnection and not the first. None of the causal connections are concerned with how beings are dependent on one another. Instead, every connection describes the interrelationship among events immediately present to your inner awareness—your sense of your body and mind "from the inside," the intimate part of your awareness you can't share with anyone else. These connections include such things as the dependence of consciousness on mental fabrication, of feelings on sensory contact, and of clinging on craving.

So the interdependence here is not between you and other beings. It's between all the experiences exclusively inside you. Just as I can't enter your visual awareness to see if your sense of "blue" looks like my sense of "blue," I can't directly experience your experience of any of the factors of dependent co-arising. Likewise, you can't directly experience mine. Even when I'm feeling a sense of Oneness with all beings, you—despite the fact that you're one of those beings—can't directly feel how that feeling feels to me.

In other words, instead of describing a shared area of experience, dependent co-arising deals precisely with what none of us holds in common. Even when the Buddha describes dependent co-arising as an explanation of the "origination of the world" (SN 12:44), we have to remember that "world" for him means the world of your experience at the six senses (SN 35:82). So here, too, the factors of dependent co-arising are all an affair of your experience as sensed from within.

The main message here is that suffering, which is something you directly experience from within, is caused by other factors that you experience from within—as long as you approach them unskillfully—but it can also be cured from within if you learn how to approach them with skill. In fact, suffering can only be cured from within. My lack of skill is something that only I can overcome through practice. This is why each of us has to find awakening for ourselves and experience it for ourselves—the Buddha's term for this is paccattam. This is also why no one, even with the most compassionate intentions, can gain awakening for anyone else. The best any Buddha can do is to point the way, in hopes that we'll be willing to listen to his advice and act on it.

Now, this is not to say that the Buddha didn't recognize our connections with one another, simply that he described them in another context: his teaching on kamma.

Kamma isn't radically separate from dependent co-arising—the Buddha defined kamma as intention, and intention is one of the sub-factors in the causal chain—but it does have two sides. When you give rise to an intention, no one else can feel how that intention feels to you: That's the inner side of the intention, the side in the context of dependent co-arising. But when your intention leads you to act in word and deed, that's its outer side, the side that ripples out into the world. This outer side of intention is what the Buddha was referring to when he said that we are *kamma-bandhu:* related through our actions (AN 5:57). My relation to you is determined by the things I have done to you and

that you have done to me. We're related, not by what we inherently *are,* but by what we choose to *do.*

Of course, given the wide range of things that people choose to do to and for one another, from very loving to very cruel, this picture of interconnectedness is not very reassuring. Because we're always hungry, the need to feed can often trump the desire to relate to one another well. At the same time, interconnectedness through action places more demands on individual people. It requires us to be very careful, at the very least, not to create bad interconnections through breaking the precepts under any conditions. The vision of interconnectedness through Oneness, in contrast, is much less specific in the duties it places on people, and often implies that as long as you believe in Oneness, your feelings can be trusted as to what is right or wrong, and that, ultimately, the vastness of Oneness will set aright any mistakes we make.

Because interconnectedness through kamma is not very reassuring on the one hand, and very demanding on the other, it's easy to see the appeal of a notion of Oneness benevolently designed to take care of us all in spite of our actions. And why that notion can appear to be a more compassionate teaching than interconnectedness through action, in that it provides a more comforting vision of the world and is more forgiving around the precepts.

But actually, the principle of interconnectedness through our actions is the more compassionate teaching of the two—both in showing more compassion to the people to whom it's taught and in giving them better reasons to act toward others in compassionate ways.

To begin with, interconnectedness through kamma allows for freedom of choice, whereas Oneness doesn't. If we were really all parts of a larger organic Oneness, how could any of us determine what role we would play within that Oneness? It would be like a stomach suddenly deciding to switch jobs with the liver or to go on strike: The organism would die. At most, the stomach is free simply to act in line with its inner drives as a stomach. But even

then, given the constant back and forth among all parts of an organic Oneness, no part of a larger whole can lay independent claim even to its drives. When a stomach starts secreting digestive juices, the signal comes from somewhere else. So it's not really free.

For the Buddha, any teaching that denies the possibility of freedom of choice contradicts itself and negates the possibility of an end to suffering. If people aren't free to choose their actions, to develop skillful actions and abandon unskillful ones, then why teach them? (AN 2:19) How could they choose to follow a path to the end of suffering? At the same time, if you tell people that what they experience in the present is independent of what they choose to do in the present, you leave them defenseless in the face of their own desires and the desires of others (AN 3:62). Kamma, however —despite the common misperception that it teaches fatalism— actually teaches freedom of choice, and in particular, our freedom to choose our actions right here and now. It's because of this freedom that the Buddha found the path to awakening and saw benefits in teaching that path to others.

The notion of Oneness precludes not only everyday freedom of choice, but also the larger freedom to gain total release from the system of inter-eating. This is why some teachings on Oneness aim at making you feel more comfortable about staying within the system and banishing any thought of leaving it. If what you are is defined in terms of your role in the system, you can't leave it—and you'll make sure that no one else tries to leave the system, either. It may require that you sleep in the middle of a road heavy with the traffic of aging, illness, and death, but with a few pillows and blankets and friendly companions, you won't feel so lonely.

But the Buddha didn't start with a definition of what people are. He began by exploring what we can do. And he found, through his own efforts, that human effort can lead to true happiness outside of the system by following a course of action, the noble eightfold path, that leads to the end of action—i.e., to release from the need to feed and be fed on.

Because each of us is trapped in the system of interconnectedness by our own actions, only we, as individuals, can break out by acting in increasingly skillful ways. The Buddha and members of the noble Saṅgha can show us the way, but actual skillfulness is something we have to develop on our own. If they find us trying to sleep in the middle of the road, they won't persuade us to stay there. And they won't try to make us feel ashamed for wanting to get out of the road to find a happiness that's harmless and safe. They'll kindly point the way out.

So to teach people interconnectedness through kamma is an act of greater compassion than teaching them interconnectedness through Oneness.

And it gives them better reasons to be compassionate themselves. On the surface, Oneness would seem to offer good incentives for compassion: You should be kind to others because they're no less you than your lungs or your legs. But when you realize the implications of Oneness—that it misrepresents the facts of how interconnectedness works and offers no room for freedom of choice—you see that it gives you poor guidance as to which acts would have a compassionate effect on the system, and denies your ability to choose whether to act compassionately in the first place.

Even worse: If all things are parts of a larger organic Oneness, then the evil we witness in the world must have its organic role in that Oneness, too—so how can we say that it's wrong? It may actually be serving the inscrutable purposes of the larger whole. And in a theory like this—which ultimately undermines concepts of right and wrong, good and evil—what basis is there for saying that a particular act is compassionate or not?

The teaching on kamma, though, makes compassion very specific. It gives a realistic picture of how interconnectedness works; it affirms both your freedom to choose your actions and your ability to influence the world through your intentions; and it

gives clear guidelines as to which actions are compassionate and which are not.

Its primary message is that the most compassionate course of action is to practice for your own awakening. Some writers worry that this message devalues the world, making people more likely to mistreat the environment, but no one has ever fracked his way to nibbāna. The path to awakening involves generosity, virtue, and the skills of meditation, which include developing attitudes of unlimited goodwill and compassion. You can't leave the system of inter-eating by abusing it. In fact, the more you abuse it, the more it sucks you in. To free yourself, you have to treat it well, and part of treating it well means learning how to develop your own inner food sources of concentration and discernment. When these inner foods have been developed to the full, the mind will gain access to a further dimension, outside of the food chain. In that way, you remove your mouth from the feeding frenzy, and show others that they can, too. What's uncompassionate about that?

Now for most of us, the path to awakening will involve many lifetimes—which is another reason to treat the world well. If we're in this for the long term, we have to eat with good manners, so that we'll be able to eat well for however long it takes. If we mistreat others, we'll be reborn into a world where we're mistreated. If we're wasteful of the world's resources, we'll be reborn into a wasted world. Because we'll be returning to the world we leave behind, we should leave it in good shape.

In the meantime, though, by following the path we're taking care of business inside—and this, too, is an act of compassion to others. One of the most heartrending things in the world to witness is a person deeply in pain who can't be reached: a young baby, crying inconsolably; an ill person on her deathbed, delirious and distraught. You want to reach into their hearts and take out a share of the pain so as to lessen it, but you can't. Their pain is precisely at the level of their experience defined by dependent co-arising—the area of awareness that they can't share with anyone else, and that no one else can enter to change. This is why seeing

their pain hurts us so: We're helpless in the face of the chasm between us. Glaring proof that we are not One.

Someday, of course, we'll be in their position. If we can take responsibility now for ourselves on the inner level—learning how not to be overcome by pleasure or pain, and not deceived by our cravings and perceptions—we won't suffer then, even during the pain leading up to death. As a result, we won't tear unnecessarily at the feelings of the people around us. This means that, even though we can't transfer the food in our mouths to fill their stomachs, we'll at least not burden their hearts.

And in mastering that skill, we give a gift both to others and to ourselves.

Under Your Skin

The Buddha's Teaching on Body Contemplation

During my first year as a monk, when I was staying at a monastery near Bangkok, we received an invitation from the children of a man in the last stages of liver cancer asking for some monks to visit him in the hospital, as he wanted to make merit and hear the Dhamma one last time before he died. Five of us went the next morning, and the senior monk in the group chatted with the man for quite a while to put his mind at ease and help him prepare for his coming death. Now was the time, the monk said, for him to put aside all concern for his body and to focus instead on the state of his mind so that it wouldn't be overcome by pain as his body fell apart.

Suddenly the man blurted out that the worst part of the cancer wasn't the pain. It was the embarrassment. All his life he had prided himself on staying fit and trim while his friends had gotten fat and paunchy, but now his belly was so horribly bloated from the cancer that he couldn't bear to look at it or to imagine what other people might think, seeing him like this. No matter how much the senior monk tried to reassure him that it was nothing to be ashamed of—that this was part of the body's normal nature beyond anyone's control—the man wouldn't let go of the conviction that his body had betrayed him and was now an embarrassment in the eyes of the world.

All through the conversation I couldn't help thinking that the man would have suffered a lot less if he had taken some of the time he had devoted to looking fit and spent it on contemplating the unattractiveness of the body instead. I myself had never felt much enthusiasm for this particular meditation theme—I preferred focusing on the breath, and would contemplate the parts of the

body more out of a sense of duty than anything else. But now I saw that the Buddha's teaching on body contemplation was really an act of kindness, one of the many effective and essential tools he left behind to help alleviate the sufferings of the world.

On the way back to the monastery, I also realized, to my chagrin, that I had been complacent about my own attitude toward my body. Despite my contemplation of my liver, intestines, and everything else under my skin, I still took pride in the fact that I had kept fit when other people my age were getting a little flabby. Although I had consciously resisted the unrealistic standards for looking good fostered by the media, I had felt a little moral superiority about staying in good shape. But now I had to admit that even my "reasonable" amount of pride was dangerous: I, too, was setting myself up for a fall. Eating and exercising to *be* healthy may generally be a good policy, but a concern for *looking* healthy can be unhealthy for the mind.

Most of us in the West, of course, don't see it that way. Because the modern obsession with impossibly perfect body images has taught so many people to hate their bodies to a pathological degree, we've come to identify all positive body images as psychologically healthy, and all negative body images as psychologically sick. When we learn of the Buddha's recommendations for contemplating the body, we see them as aggravating rather than solving the problem. What we need, we think, is a way of meditating that develops positive images of the body as a beautiful and sacred vehicle for expressing compassion and love.

From the Buddha's perspective, though, this attitude is radically deluded. As a prince he had been no stranger to the obsession of trying to measure up to extravagant standards of beauty. If you read the monastic rules describing the means of beautification denied to monks and nuns—creams, cosmetics, jewelry, hands and feet dyed red—you realize that India was just as obsessed with super-human ideals of beauty as are we. Through his understanding of how perceptions of the body can function both

as aids and hindrances in the quest for liberation, he came to realize that there are four kinds of body images, not just two: healthy positive, unhealthy positive, healthy negative, and unhealthy negative—"healthy" meaning leading to long-term happiness; "unhealthy," leading to long-term suffering and pain.

When you understand this point, you'll see that his teachings on the body are aimed at liberating us from unhealthy body images of both sorts, and replacing them with both sorts of healthy images. And when you understand the dangers of unhealthy body images—whether positive or negative—along with the freedom that comes from cultivating both sorts of healthy body images, you'll realize that the Buddha's training in resetting your body image is both a useful defense against the skewed messages of our culture and a necessary part of the Buddhist path.

Unhealthy body images, whether positive or negative, start with the assumption that the body's worth is measured by the beauty of its appearance. The damage done by this assumption when it leads to negative body images is common knowledge, but the damage done when it leads to positive ones is just as bad if not worse.

This is because the perception of beauty carries a power. We sense the power wielded by the people we perceive as attractive, and we want to exert the same power ourselves. This is one of the reasons why we resist the idea of seeing the body as unattractive, for that would be to deny us a major source of the power we consciously and unconsciously try to wield. We forget, or choose to ignore, the dangers that this kind of power entails.

1) It leads to unskillful kamma. Because beauty is comparative, it often carries with it a sense of pride and conceit with regard to those you perceive as less attractive than you, along with the kinds of unskillful actions that pride and conceit can so easily engender.

2) It's fragile. No matter how hard you try to stave off the signs of aging, they always arrive too soon. The pride that once sustained you now turns around to stab you. Even when the body is at the pinnacle of its health and youth, to perceive it as beautiful requires huge blind spots: that you ignore any external features that are less than beautiful, that you view it only from certain angles and when the lighting is just so—and don't even think of what lies inside, just under the skin, ready to ooze out of your orifices and pores. Because these unattractive features can show themselves at any time, you need constant reassurance that no one else notices them, and even then you wonder if the people reassuring you are telling you the truth.

When you're attached to something so fragile, you're setting yourself up to suffer. The appearance of each new wrinkle becomes a source of fear and anxiety, and when this is the case, how will you *not* be afraid of aging, illness, and death? And if you can't overcome this fear, how will you ever be free?

3) The fragility of this power also enslaves you to others. When you want to look good to others, you're placing your worth in their hands. This is why people self-conscious of their looks resent the objectifying gaze. They would prefer that it be an expression of pure admiration, but they know deep down that it often isn't. Do those who are gazing at you really admire you? What standards are they measuring you against? Even if they do admire you, how pure is the driving force behind their admiration? Is their attention something you really want? Even though you may have cultivated your beauty as a means of power, you can't control who that power will draw to you, or why.

When you internalize the gaze of others, you're a prisoner of what, in reality, you're reading into their gaze—an uncertain process at best. The more you want to believe in your own beauty, the more you become attracted to people

who show signs of being attracted to you, but then you find yourself serving their interests rather than your own.

In your quest to develop and maintain your beauty, you also become a slave to the beauty industry in its various forms—an industry that holds out the promise that perpetual beauty is possible, but keeps pushing the ideal of beauty to more and more impossible extremes, requiring more and more of your money and time. These extremes can even compromise your health, as in the cult of freakishly thin female models and morbidly muscular men.

This is probably the most ironic aspect of the power of beauty: that the desire to use your beauty to exert control over others ends up enslaving you to those who promise to help you maintain your beauty as well as to those you hope to control.

In contrast to an unhealthy positive body image, a healthy one focuses not on how good the body can *look* but on the good it can *do*. As an object of concentration, the body can be a source of rapture and well-being to sustain you on the path. You learn to appreciate the body as a tool for expressing kindness and developing the inner beauty of generosity and virtue—which, as the Buddha noted, are beautiful even through old age (see SN 1:51). With this sort of body image, the appearance of wrinkles is not a threat to the worth of your body, but simply a reminder to accelerate your efforts to do good as time is running out.

Most people believe that it's possible to appreciate the body both for its potential for beauty and for its potential for goodness, but an unhealthy positive body image undermines a healthy positive body image because the time and energy spent on shoring up your perception of your own beauty lessens the time and energy you could spend on doing good.

At the same time, the hidden agendas of beauty often confuse and pervert your perception of what "good" really is. This confusion, for instance, is what allows spiritual teachers to claim

that sex with their students can be a sacred and healing activity. No one who is free of an unhealthy positive or negative body image would seriously entertain such an idea.

It's because an unhealthy positive body image works at cross purposes with a healthy positive image that it needs to be counteracted with a healthy negative image of the body's beauty. This differs from an unhealthy negative body image in three important respects:

1) An unhealthy negative body image sees an unattractive body as bad. A healthy negative body image sees that physical unattractiveness is simply a perception, as empty as all other perceptions, and irrelevant to the body's worth or to your own worth as a person.

2) An unhealthy negative body image comes from seeing your body as unattractive and other people's as attractive. A healthy negative body image comes from regarding everyone as basically unattractive—like houses in the tropics made of frozen meat. Even if some of them are more nicely shaped than others, when you smell their slow decay in the present and think of what they'll be like when completely thawed, you're not attracted to any of them at all.

3) An unhealthy negative body image is the result of attachment. Hating our appearance doesn't mean we're unattached to our bodies. We're actually fiercely attached both to our bodies and to an ideal of beauty that our bodies have yet to attain. The conflict between these two forms of attachment is what makes us suffer.

What makes a healthy negative body image healthy is that it allows you to see the body's beauty as a matter of indifference and to regard the body purely as a tool for developing the skillful qualities of the mind.

The Buddha's strategy for developing a healthy negative body image starts with the mindfulness practice of focusing on the

body “in and of itself, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.” In other words, instead of regarding the body through the internalized gaze of others, you regard it simply as you experience it here and now, on its own terms. A good place to begin is with the experience of the breath, learning how to manipulate that experience so as to induce a feeling of ease and refreshment in your immediate sense of the body. This sense of well-being reaffirms the worth of the body as a source for harmless happiness—when approached skillfully—even as you dismantle your notions of its attractiveness.

There are two traditional ways to start the dismantling: either visualizing what the body would be like if you dissected it into its various parts, or visualizing how it would decompose after death.

For the dissection contemplation, you can start with the canonical list of 31 parts: head hair, body hair, nails, teeth, skin, muscles, tendons, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs, large intestines, small intestines, contents of the stomach, feces, bile, phlegm, lymph, blood, sweat, fat, tears, skin-oil, saliva, mucus, fluid in the joints, urine. Visualize each of these parts until you find one that’s especially disenchanting, and focus on that. Or you can focus on any part not on the list. I, for instance, have found it effective to think of what eyes look like without eyelids.

To get started with the right attitude to this contemplation—serious enough to show you mean business, but light-hearted enough to keep from getting depressed—you can ask yourself with each part: What would you do if you opened a room and found it unexpectedly on the floor? Or if you sat down at a table and found it on your plate? If it’s liquid, would you want to bathe in a vat of it? Think in these ways until you realize how ridiculous it is to want to look for beauty in a body made of these things.

For the decomposition contemplations, you can first visualize the body aging in ten-year stages, then dying, getting bloated, drying out in stages until it’s just dust. Then you can reverse the contemplation, bringing the body back to its present state to

emphasize the fact that the potential for all those stages is right here, right now. This contemplation helps to remind you that no matter how wisely you care for the body or how artfully you improve its appearance, it'll someday reach the point where you wouldn't want to be near it at all. If you don't learn how to let go of it now, you'll have a hard time letting go when death forces the issue.

For these perceptions to be healthy, you have to learn how to apply them equally to everyone. In fact, that's what these perceptions are meant to be: equalizers. You're looking at the truths of all bodies, equally, all over the world.

Most meditators are encouraged to apply these perceptions to their own bodies before applying them to others—on the grounds that our attraction to others often starts with our attraction to ourselves—but if you suffer from an unhealthy negative body image, start by applying them to a body you envy. Imagine, for instance, that supermodels were required to wear their skin inside out, and that all athletes and entertainers flaunting their abs were required to display everything else their abdomens contain. Only when your sense of humor can shake off your envy should you apply the perceptions of unattractiveness to yourself.

Regardless of what kind of unhealthy body image you start with, this contemplation is sure to get under your skin not only in a literal sense but also in an idiomatic one. It has to, because a part of the mind, well-entrenched for lifetimes, is sure to resist. If you obey the inner voices that put up resistance, you'll never be able to dig up the unhealthy attitudes hiding behind them. Only when you challenge that resistance will you clearly see the underlying unskillful agendas behind your attachment to bodily beauty. And only when you see them clearly can you work your way free from them.

After all, the ultimate purpose of this contemplation is to see that the problem doesn't lie with the body; it lies with your choice of perceptions. And it sensitizes you to how those choices are made: When you've been developing the perception that the body

is unattractive, why does the mind suddenly switch back to the perception that it's attractive? What are the steps in that shift? When you try to answer these questions through observing the mind in action, you learn a lot about how the mind can fool itself—and is very willing to be fooled.

Above all, try to bring an attitude of humor to this contemplation, so that you can laugh good-naturedly at your foolishness in looking for beauty in the body. If, at any time, these exercises lead to feelings of disgust or depression, drop them and return your attention to the breath until you've induced a sense of inner ease and refreshment. Resume the perceptions of unattractiveness only when you're in a more balanced state of mind. As one famous Thai meditation teacher said, you're not aiming at revulsion; you're simply trying to sober up.

If you're in a relationship, don't worry that you'll ruin it with this meditation. Only after a great deal of time and dedication can these perceptions—and the understanding you gain from them—eradicate sexual desire entirely. In the meantime, you can actually use these perceptions to strengthen your relationship as you apply them to anyone outside of the relationship who might tempt you to be unfaithful to your partner. They also help you to focus more attention on the aspects of the relationship that will give it a more substantial basis to last over time.

And don't be afraid that this meditation will leave you listless and morose. The more you can free yourself from internalizing the gaze of others, the more liberated you feel. As you bring more humor to issues of the body's appearance, the more you unleash the healthy energies of the mind.

Silence Isn't Mandatory

Sensory Perception in the Jhānas

On the afternoon of his last day, as he was walking to the park where he would be totally unbound, the Buddha stopped to rest at the foot of a tree by the side of the road. There he was approached by Pukkusa Mallaputta—a student of the Buddha's first teacher, Āḷāra Kālāma—who proceeded to praise Āḷāra for the strength of his concentration: Āḷāra had sat in concentration, percipient and alert, as 500 carts passed by on a nearby road, but he neither saw them nor heard a sound. Only later did he learn about them, when another man traveling along the road asked him whether he had seen or heard the carts pass by.

The Buddha responded by telling Pukkusa of a time when he had been sitting in concentration in a threshing barn, percipient and alert, when the rain was pouring, lightning was flashing, and a thunderbolt killed two men and four oxen nearby, and yet he hadn't seen anything nor heard a sound. He, too, didn't know what had happened until he left the barn and asked someone why so many people had gathered nearby.

Pukkusa was so impressed by this story that, in his words, he took his conviction in Āḷāra and "winnowed it before a high wind" and "washed it away in the swift current of a river." He then took refuge in the Triple Gem, presented the Buddha with a pair of gold-colored robes, and left.

This incident provides a curious footnote to an incident in an earlier set of stories: the Buddha's own account of the events leading up to his awakening. After leaving home, he had studied with Āḷāra, who had taught him how to reach a formless concentration attainment called the dimension of nothingness, in which the mind is focused on a single perception: "There is

nothing." Yet when the Buddha-to-be had mastered that attainment, he realized that it didn't constitute the end of suffering. So he left Āḷāra in search of a better teacher, and eventually pursued awakening on his own. The point of this account was that, to gain awakening, the Buddha needed more than just a concentration attainment. He also needed to master the skills of the four noble truths so as to develop dispassion for all fabricated states of mind, including the most profound states of concentration. Only then could he reach the deathless.

The story of the Buddha's conversation with Pukkusa, in contrast, reads like an anti-climax. Pukkusa's interest goes no further than concentration, and he bases his conviction in the Buddha simply on the fact that the latter's concentration was very strong. As for whether the Buddha's concentration was actually stronger than Āḷāra's, there's no way of knowing, because Āḷāra wasn't presented with the same test.

The story does, however, raise an important question. It shows that the Canon recognizes stages of concentration in which the physical senses fall silent—and that the Buddha, as an awakened one, had mastered those stages—but it says nothing about whether those stages are necessary for awakening. Buddhaghosa—in his *Visuddhimagga* and in the commentaries he compiled from the ancient Sinhalese commentaries on the Pali suttas, or discourses—says that it is a mandatory feature of jhāna that the external senses fall silent, but that jhāna is not necessary for awakening. Some modern practice traditions agree with Buddhaghosa on both counts, but others—who disagree with Buddhaghosa on the second count, saying that jhāna *is* necessary for awakening—differ from one another on the first: some groups maintaining that, Yes, the external senses must fall silent in jhāna, others maintaining that, No, they don't.

I have already explored elsewhere the issue of whether jhāna is necessary for awakening—concluding that, according to the Pali suttas, it is (see *Right Mindfulness,* Appendix Three). Here I would like to examine what the suttas have to say about the other issue:

whether jhāna counts as jhāna only if the external senses fall silent. If the answer is Yes, that means that a person can attain awakening only after developing concentration to the point where all input from the external senses is blocked. This is clearly an issue of great practical importance for anyone aiming at true release.

Background: the Nine Attainments

Any attempt to determine the suttas' stance on this issue has to begin by analyzing how they describe the stages of concentration that can act as the bases for awakening. The suttas' most extensive standard list describes nine stages in all. The first four stages, called the four jhānas, are the only members of the list included in the standard definition of right concentration in discussions of the noble eightfold path (see SN 45:8). However, according to MN 140, the remaining stages—which the suttas call the "formlessnesses beyond forms," and which modern discussions call the "formless jhānas"—are simply applications of the equanimity found in the fourth jhāna. (Here, for the purpose of keeping these formless stages distinct from the four jhānas while at the same time saving space, I will refer to them as the "formless attainments." Any reference to "the jhānas" will mean the four jhānas, and not the formless attainments.)

Because many passages in the suttas describe how awakening can be based on any of the four jhānas or the five formless attainments, all nine stages seem to be rightly classed as right concentration.

The standard description of the nine stages is this:

> [1] "There is the case where a monk, quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful mental qualities, enters and remains in the first jhāna: rapture and pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation.
>
> [2] "With the stilling of directed thoughts and evaluations, he enters and remains in the second jhāna: rapture and

pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought and evaluation—internal assurance.

[3] "With the fading of rapture, he remains equanimous, mindful, and alert, and senses pleasure with the body. He enters and remains in the third jhāna, of which the noble ones declare, 'Equanimous and mindful, he has a pleasant abiding.'

[4] "With the abandoning of pleasure and pain—as with the earlier disappearance of joy and distress—he enters and remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity and mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain.

[5] "With the complete transcending of perceptions [mental notes] of (physical) form, with the disappearance of perceptions of resistance, and not attending to perceptions of multiplicity, (perceiving,) 'Infinite space,' he enters and remains in the dimension of the infinitude of space.

[6] "With the complete transcending of the dimension of the infinitude of space, (perceiving,) 'Infinite consciousness,' he enters and remains in the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness.

[7] "With the complete transcending of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, (perceiving,) 'There is nothing,' he enters and remains in the dimension of nothingness. [This was the stage mastered by Āḷāra.]

[8] "With the complete transcending of the dimension of nothingness, he enters and remains in the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception.

[9] "With the complete transcending of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception, he enters and remains in the cessation of perception and feeling." — *AN 9:32*

Some suttas—such as MN 121 and SN 40:9—mention another stage of concentration, called the themeless concentration of

awareness *(animitta-ceto-samādhi),* that can also be used as a basis for awakening:

> The monk—not attending to the perception of the dimension of nothingness, not attending to the perception of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception—attends to the singleness based on the themeless concentration of awareness." — *MN 121*

Because this themeless concentration of awareness, like the cessation of perception and feeling, follows on the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception, there is the question as to whether the two stages are identical. MN 44 suggests that they're not, saying that "themeless contact" is one of the first contacts that a meditator experiences on emerging from the cessation of perception and feeling. This suggests that the themeless concentration lies on the threshold of the cessation of perception and feeling, but is not identical with it.

It's important to note that the mere attainment of any of these stages of concentration does not guarantee awakening. As AN 4:178 notes, it is possible to attain a "peaceful awareness-release" without one's heart leaping at the idea of the cessation of self-identification or the breaching of ignorance. MN 113 notes that a person can go as far as the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception and, lacking integrity, exalt himself and disparage others over the fact that he has gained that attainment whereas other people haven't. MN 106 notes that it's possible, on reaching the same level, to relish and cling to the subtle equanimity experienced there. In all of these cases, if these defects of insight and character are not remedied, the meditator will make no further progress toward awakening.

The one possible exception to the principle that right concentration, on its own, cannot achieve awakening is the ninth stage in the standard list: the cessation of perception and feeling. *Perception,* here, means the mental note that identifies and recognizes things and events. *Feeling* means feeling-tones of

pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain. The *Visuddhimagga* (XXIII.18) states that anyone who has reached this attainment must also attain, at the very least, the penultimate stage of awakening: non-return. The suttas, however, are more equivocal on the issue. On the one hand, MN 113 does not list this attainment as a stage of concentration that a person without integrity could attain. At the same time, many of the suttas' descriptions of this attainment include the phrase, "and, as he sees (that) with discernment, his effluents are completely ended." These two points suggest that, as one leaves this attainment, the depth of concentration has automatically primed the mind for liberating insight. However, not all of the suttas' descriptions of this attainment include that concluding phrase (see, for example, DN 15 and AN 9:32), which may imply that the insight is not automatic.

At the same time, even if the attainment of the cessation of perception and feeling *does* automatically lead to awakening, we should note that it's not the only totally non-percipient stage of concentration recognized by the suttas. The other is the meditation that leads a person, after death, to be reborn in the dimension of non-percipient beings. This dimension is mentioned in DN 1 and DN 15, but the meditation leading there is not part of the standard list of concentration attainments, nor is it described by the suttas in any detail. What the suttas do indicate clearly is that the dimension of non-percipient beings is not a noble attainment, for as DN 1 notes, if a perception arises in the mind of a being there, that being falls from the dimension. If the being is then reborn in the human world and practices meditation, he/she will be unable to remember previous lifetimes and so may come to a conclusion that fosters wrong view: that beings arise out of nothing, spontaneously and without cause. This view would not occur to a person who has reached even the first stage of awakening, so the dimension of non-percipient beings is obviously not a noble state.

So the mere attainment of concentration—even to the extent of being totally free from perception—does not guarantee awakening.

This fact is reflected in the two main ways in which the suttas describe a person practicing concentration. In some cases, they say simply that the meditator enters and remains in a particular stage of concentration. In others, they say that the meditator, while remaining in that stage, analyzes it in terms of the fabrications of which it is composed, gains a sense of dispassion for those fabrications, and as a result gains release. The first sort of description falls under what AN 4:41 calls the "development of concentration that leads to a pleasant abiding in the here and now"; the second falls under what the same sutta calls the "development of concentration that leads to the ending of the effluents." This element of analysis added to the practice of concentration is what can lead to awakening.

MN 52 and AN 9:36 describe how this happens, with the latter giving the more extensive description of the two. After mastering a particular stage of concentration, the meditator analyzes it in terms of the five aggregates of which it is composed and then develops a series of perceptions around those aggregates aimed at developing a sense of disenchantment and dispassion for them. The dispassion is what then leads to release. For instance, with the first jhāna:

> "There is the case where a monk... enters and remains in the first jhāna: rapture and pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation. He regards whatever phenomena there that are connected with form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness, as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a disintegration, an emptiness, not-self. He turns his mind away from those phenomena, and having done so, inclines his mind to the property of deathlessness: 'This is peace, this is exquisite—the resolution 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—he is due to arise spontaneously (in the Pure Abodes), there to be totally unbound, never again to return from that world." — *AN 9:36*

The sutta then describes a similar process for each of the concentration attainments up through the dimension of nothingness, after which it concludes:

"Thus, as far as the perception-attainments go, that is as far as gnosis-penetration goes. As for these two dimensions—the attainment of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception and the attainment of the cessation of perception and feeling—I tell you that they are to be rightly explained by those monks who are meditators, skilled at attainment, skilled at attainment-emergence, who have attained and emerged in dependence on them." — *AN 9:36*

In other words, unlike its treatment of the first seven stages of concentration, the sutta does not describe how one might analyze the last two attainments so as to gain release. Why these two attainments are treated differently from the others is suggested by a similar discussion in MN 111. There the Buddha praises Ven. Sāriputta for his penetrating discernment in being able to ferret out mental qualities as he experiences them in the practice of concentration. The discussion applies a standard formula to each attainment from the first jhāna up through the dimension of nothingness, and then switches gear to a second formula that differs from the first formula in two important respects. The difference can be illustrated by comparing the discussion for the dimension of nothingness, which follows the first formula, and the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception, which follows the second:

"And further, with the complete transcending of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, (perceiving,) 'There is nothing,' Sāriputta entered and remained in the dimension of nothingness. Whatever qualities there are in the dimension of nothingness—the perception of the dimension of nothingness, singleness of mind, contact, feeling, perception, intention, consciousness, desire, decision, persistence, mindfulness, equanimity, and attention—he ferreted them out one after another. Known to him they arose, known to him they became established, known to him they subsided. He discerned, 'So this is how these qualities, not having been, come into play. Having been, they vanish.' He remained unattracted and unrepelled with regard to those qualities, independent, detached, released, dissociated, with an awareness rid of barriers. He discerned that 'There is a further escape,' and pursuing it, he confirmed that 'There is.'

"And further, with the complete transcending of the dimension of nothingness, Sāriputta entered and remained in the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception. He emerged mindfully from that attainment. On emerging mindfully from that attainment, he regarded the past qualities that had ceased and changed: 'So this is how these qualities, not having been, come into play. Having been, they vanish.' He remained unattracted and unrepelled with regard to those qualities, independent, detached, released, dissociated, with an awareness rid of barriers. He discerned that 'There is a further escape,' and pursuing it, he confirmed that 'There is.'" — *MN 111*

The important differences in the two formulae are these: (1) The first formula lists in great detail the qualities that Sāriputta ferreted out, whereas the second doesn't. This may relate to the fact that perception in the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception is so subtle and attenuated that a meditator in that dimension cannot label mental qualities clearly. (2) In the

second formula, the Buddha is careful to say that Sāriputta did the analysis *after* emerging from the attainment, and that the analysis referred to *past* qualities, whereas he doesn't qualify the earlier discussion in this way. This indicates that it is possible to do this sort of analysis while staying in any of the attainments up through the dimension of nothingness, whereas in the final two attainments, the level of perception is so attenuated that any of the perceptions used in analysis would destroy the attainment. For this reason, these two attainments can be analyzed only after the meditator has emerged from them.

This is why the Buddha treats the arising of discernment with regard to these final two attainments in much less detail than he does with regard to the lower seven. This point will have an important bearing on the following discussion.

But the main lesson to draw from these passages is that concentration, simply as a pleasant abiding in the here and now, cannot lead to awakening. It needs the added activity of discernment for there to be full release.

Silence in the Formless Attainments

Modern discussions of the question as to whether the external senses have to fall silent in right concentration for there to be the possibility of awakening tend to focus on the first jhāna, and for two connected reasons: (1) It is the lowest stage of concentration to be classed as right concentration. (2) As MN 52 and AN 9:36 show, a meditator practicing for the sake of awakening need not master all nine stages of concentration. It's possible to gain awakening based on a mastery of just the first. Thus, if a stage of concentration in which the physical senses fall silent is required for awakening, this stipulation must apply to the first jhāna.

Three passages in the suttas seem to provide clear evidence that this proposition is incorrect, in that they describe attainments where the external senses fall silent, but without including the first jhāna—or any of the other jhānas—in their descriptions.

A.1: The first passage is AN 9:37, where Ven. Ānanda discusses four levels of concentration in which the meditator can be percipient yet without any sensitivity to the physical senses. Three of these levels are the first three of the formless attainments. The fourth is the concentration that follows on the attainment of full awakening. The four jhānas, however, are not mentioned as meeting this description at all.

> Ven. Ānanda said, "It's amazing, friends, it's astounding, how the Blessed One who knows and sees, the worthy one, rightly self-awakened, has attained and recognized an opening in a confined place for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and distress, for the attainment of the right method, and for the realization of unbinding, where the eye will be, and those forms, and yet one will not be sensitive to that dimension; where the ear will be, and those sounds... where the nose will be, and those aromas... where the tongue will be, and those flavors... where the body will be, and those tactile sensations, and yet one will not be sensitive to that dimension."
>
> When this was said, Ven. Udāyin said to Ven. Ānanda, "Is one percipient when not sensitive to that dimension, my friend, or unpercipient?"
>
> [Ven. Ānanda:] "One is percipient when not sensitive to that dimension, my friend, not unpercipient."
>
> [Ven. Udāyin:] "When not sensitive to that dimension, my friend, one is percipient of what?"
>
> [Ven. Ānanda:] "There is the case where, 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 and remains in the dimension of the infinitude of space. Percipient in this way, one is not

sensitive to that dimension [i.e., the dimensions of the five physical senses].

"And further, with the complete transcending of the dimension of the infinitude of space, (perceiving,) 'Infinite consciousness,' one enters and remains in the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness. Percipient in this way, too, one is not sensitive to that dimension.

"And further, with the complete transcending of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, (perceiving,) 'There is nothing,' one enters and remains in the dimension of nothingness. Percipient in this way, too, one is not sensitive to that dimension.

"Once, friend, when I was staying in Sāketa at the Game Refuge in the Black Forest, the nun Jaṭila-Bhāgikā went to where I was staying, and on arrival—having bowed to me—stood to one side. As she was standing there, she said to me: 'The concentration whereby—neither pressed down nor forced back, nor with fabrication kept blocked or suppressed—still as a result of release, contented as a result of standing still, and as a result of contentment one is not agitated: This concentration is said by the Blessed One to be the fruit of what?'

"I said to her, 'Sister, the concentration whereby—neither pressed down nor forced back, nor kept in place by the fabrications of forceful restraint—still as a result of release, contented as a result of standing still, and as a result of contentment one is not agitated: This concentration is said by the Blessed One to be the fruit of gnosis [arahantship].' Percipient in this way, too, one is not sensitive to that dimension." — *AN 9:37*

Because this passage, when describing attainments where the external senses fall silent even when the meditator is percipient, mentions only the first three formless attainments and the concentration of arahantship, it seems to give clear support to the

idea that there is no need for the physical senses to fall silent in every level of right concentration. A person could attain any of the four jhānas and yet still hear sounds, etc., and—as AN 9:36 notes—could use that stage of concentration to attain full awakening.

A.2: A careful look at another passage—the standard description of the dimension of the infinitude of space, the first attainment in Ven. Ānanda's list—shows why the attainments in his list differ from the four jhānas in this regard. The description states that the meditator enters and remains in this dimension "with the complete transcending of perceptions of form, with the disappearance of perceptions of resistance, and not attending to perceptions of multiplicity." As noted above, the word "perception" here carries the meaning of mental note or label, the act of recognizing or identifying a mental object. So, to move from the fourth jhāna to the dimension of the infinitude of space, it's necessary that mental labels of resistance disappear, and that the meditator transcend mental labels of form and pay no attention to mental labels of multiplicity.

Two of these terms, *resistance* and *multiplicity,* require explanation.

"Resistance" *(paṭigha)* can be understood in two ways. DN 15 identifies it as the type of contact that allows mental activity to detect the presence of forms. What this apparently means is that mental acts can recognize the presence of physical objects primarily because physical objects put up resistance to any other objects that might invade their space.

However, Buddhaghosa, in the *Visuddhimagga* (X.16), follows the Abhidhamma in defining "resistance" as contact at the five external senses. Because he gives no sutta reference to support this interpretation, it is the weaker of the two.

However, there is a sutta passage—in MN 137—that defines "multiplicity *(nānattā)"* as the objects of the five senses: forms, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations. In other words, this passage assigns to "multiplicity" the meaning that Buddhaghosa

assigns to "resistance." MN 137 then contrasts multiplicity with the word, "singleness *(ekattā),"* which it identifies as the first four formless attainments.

Thus, regardless of whether perceptions of sensory input are called perceptions of resistance or perceptions of multiplicity, the practical upshot is that a meditator entering and staying in the dimension of the infinitude of space would, at the very least, have to pay no attention to any mental labels that would recognize or identify objects present to the physical senses. If "resistance" means contact at the five senses, then such perceptions would have to disappear.

This leads to a question: Following the interpretation drawn from MN 137, why would the simple act of not paying attention to perceptions of the objects of the senses make a meditator insensitive to the presence of those objects? The answer lies in the fact that, in the suttas' descriptions of the stages of sensory awareness, perception plays a role at two stages in the process.

—In MN 18, for instance, perception comes *after* sensory contact and the feelings that arise based on the contact. To ignore perceptions of multiplicity at this stage of the process would not make one insensitive to the objects of the senses. They would be present enough to give rise to perceptions, but the meditator would simply pay those perceptions no attention.

—However, in the standard formula for dependent co-arising (see, for example, SN 12:2), perception—as a sub-factor of fabrication (see MN 44)—also occurs *prior to* sensory contact. To pay no attention to perceptions of multiplicity at this stage of the process, and to pay sole attention to the perception, "infinite space" instead, would allow the meditator to become insensitive to the physical senses and their objects. The same would be true if perceptions of sensory input were indicated by "perceptions of resistance" and those perceptions were to disappear.

It would seem clear that because the standard formula for the nine concentration attainments mentions these requirements beginning only with the dimension of the infinitude of space,

they are not required for any of the lower levels. For a meditator in, say, the fourth jhāna, perceptions identifying sounds would not have disappeared. Even though he/she would ordinarily not pay attention to those perceptions, he or she could, for a brief moment, note a perception identifying a sound and then drop it, returning to the object of his/her concentration, and—as long as this is done mindfully and with equanimity—this would still count as being in the fourth jhāna.

Thus there seems good reason to take AN 9:37 and the standard formula for the dimension of the infinitude of space as authoritative in showing that it is not necessary for the physical senses to fall silent in any of the four jhānas.

A.3: Further support for this reading of AN 9:37 comes from a passage in MN 43 in which Ven. Sāriputta lists the attainments that can be known with a purified intellect-consciousness—the consciousness of mental phenomena—divorced from the five physical sense faculties: i.e., the eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body. His list consists of the first three formless attainments, and makes no mention of the four jhānas.

> Ven. Mahā Koṭṭhita: "Friend, what can be known with the purified intellect-consciousness divorced from the five (sense) faculties?"
>
> Ven. Sāriputta: "Friend, with the purified intellect-consciousness divorced from the five faculties, the dimension of the infinitude of space can be known (as) 'infinite space,' the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness can be known (as) 'infinite consciousness,' the dimension of nothingness can be known (as) 'There is nothing.'
>
> Ven. Mahā Koṭṭhita: "With what does one know a quality that can be known?"
>
> Ven. Sāriputta: "One knows a quality that can be known with the eye of discernment."

Ven. Mahā Koṭṭhita: "And what is the purpose of discernment?"

Ven. Sāriputta: "The purpose of discernment is direct knowledge, its purpose is full comprehension, its purpose is abandoning." — *MN 43*

In other words, the only concentration attainments that can be known by a purified intellect-consciousness divorced from the five physical sense faculties are the first three formless attainments. The passage from MN 111 quoted above helps to explain why the remaining two formless attainments are not listed here: They cannot be known through the eye of discernment while one is in those attainments. A meditator can analyze them with discernment only after he/she has left the attainment.

The same point would also apply to the fourth attainment in Ven. Ānanda's list, the fruit of gnosis.

Thus to be included in Ven. Sāriputta's list in MN 43, an attainment has to meet three criteria: (a) One can analyze it with discernment while one is in that attainment, and one's consciousness is (b) purified and (c) divorced from the five physical sense faculties.

Ven. Sāriputta does not explain what he means by "purified" here. Ostensibly, it could mean any of three things: purified of defilement, as in the Buddha's standard description of his own mastery of the fourth jhāna (see, for example, MN 4); having purity of equanimity and mindfulness (as in the standard description of the fourth jhāna); or, alternatively, it could simply be another way of saying "purely divorced from the five physical senses," in which case the second criterion above (b) would be identical with the third (c).

Now, of the three criteria, MN 111 shows that all four jhānas meet the first criterion, because a meditator can analyze them with discernment while dwelling in them, and the fourth jhāna meets the first two possible meanings of the second. The fact that the fourth jhāna is not listed in MN 43 means that it does not

meet the third criterion (or, what amounts to the same thing, the third possible meaning of the second). In other words, one's consciousness while in the fourth jhāna is not divorced from the five physical senses. If those senses do not fall silent in the fourth jhāna, the same could be said of the lower three jhānas as well.

In this way, all three passages—AN 9:37, MN 43, and the standard description of the dimension of the infinitude of space—clearly show that there is no need for the physical senses to fall silent while in the four jhānas. This means further that, to gain awakening, there is no need to attain a stage of concentration that blocks out all awareness of those senses. Awakening can occur when based on any of the four jhānas even when a background awareness of the physical senses is present.

Buddhaghosa's Interpretations

Buddhaghosa, however, argues that none of these three passages should be taken at face value in proving that a meditator can sense external sensory input in the jhānas, and instead should be interpreted to allow for the opposite: that the external senses actually fall silent in the first jhāna. But when we examine his arguments—and those of his modern supporters—to prove his interpretations of these passages, we find that they leave much to be desired.

Because his most substantial argument focuses on passage A.2, we will begin with his discussion of that passage first.

A.2: In *Visuddhimagga* X.17, he argues that the phrase, "with the disappearance of perceptions of resistance, and not attending to perceptions of multiplicity," should not be read as indicating a step that occurs only with the entry into the dimension of the infinitude of space. Instead, it should be read as describing a step that had already occurred earlier in the ascending stages of concentration.

He bases his argument on two analogies. The first is that, in the formula for the fourth jhāna, the phrase, "with the abandoning of pleasure and pain" is actually describing a step that occurred earlier in the stages of concentration, and not just with the fourth jhāna.

There is, however, no basis for his drawing this analogy here. The third jhāna, even though it is marked by equanimity, is also marked by "pleasure sensed with the body." This pleasure is abandoned only with the entry into the fourth jhāna.

Furthermore, MN 44 shows why pain is not really abandoned until pleasure is also abandoned:

> [Visākha:] "In what way is pleasant feeling pleasant, lady, and in what way painful?"
>
> [Sister Dhammadinnā:] "Pleasant feeling is pleasant in remaining, and painful in changing, friend Visākha. Painful feeling is painful in remaining and pleasant in changing. Neither-pleasant-nor-painful feeling is pleasant in occurring together with knowledge, and painful in occurring without knowledge."

In other words, even pleasant feeling contains pain in the fact that it changes. Thus the meditator, when going through the stages of jhāna, does not abandon either pleasure or pain until entering the fourth jhāna. The phrase describing this step is not referring to anything that happened earlier in the stages of concentration. For this reason, Buddhaghosa's first argument by analogy does not hold.

His second argument by analogy is that the description of the third noble path—the path to non-return—mentions the abandoning of fetters, such as self-identity view, that were already abandoned as a result of the earlier noble paths, and so the description of the entry into the dimension of the infinitude of space should be read the same way, as mentioning something that had already happened earlier.

This argument, too, does not hold. In the descriptions of the noble paths, the fetters abandoned with each path are explicitly mentioned in the description of that path, with the ascending descriptions being cumulative: A person who has attained the first path has abandoned *x;* a person attaining the third has abandoned *x* and *y;* and so forth. For there to be an analogy here, then if the disappearance of perceptions of resistance and lack of attention to perceptions of multiplicity were a feature of the first jhāna, they would have to be mentioned in the description of the first jhāna. But they aren't. This is why Buddhaghosa's second argument by analogy also does not hold.

A.1: As for AN 9:37—in which Ven. Ānanda lists the attainments where one is percipient without being percipient of the five external senses and their objects—Buddhaghosa's commentary to that sutta explains the absence of the four jhānas in Ven. Ānanda's list as follows: The object of the four jhānas—the internal mental image on which they are focused—counts as a "form" and so, to avoid confusion with the forms that are the objects of the eye, Ven. Ānanda chose to exclude those jhānas from his list. This explanation, however, ignores the fact that Ven. Ānanda explicitly assigns "those forms" to the eye—as he assigns "those sounds" to the ear, etc.—so if he had meant to include the four jhānas in his list, he could have done so without causing confusion. His listeners would have known clearly that "those forms" referred to forms seen by the eye, and not to internal forms seen by the mind.

Thus Buddhaghosa's argument here, too, is unconvincing. It's more likely that Ven. Ānanda excluded the four jhānas from his list because the meditator can still be sensitive to the five external senses when in those jhānas.

Still, modern proponents of the position that the external senses fall silent in the first jhāna have proposed another reason for not taking AN 9:37 at face value in this way. Their proposal is that Ven. Ānanda originally included the four jhānas in his list,

but—through a faulty transmission of the text—those jhānas disappeared between his time and ours.

The argument in support of this proposal focuses on the form of the sutta: Because the sutta is found in the Nines section of the Aṅguttara Nikāya, and because it's part of a chapter in which all the other suttas list all nine concentration attainments, it should list them all as well, replacing the cessation of perception and feeling with the concentration that is the fruit of arahantship.

This argument, however, misses two important points. The first is that AN 9:37, following the general pattern in the Nines, contains nine items already: the five physical senses, the first three formless attainments, and the concentration that is the fruit of arahantship. Five plus three plus one equals nine. Thus the sutta already qualifies for the Nines.

The second point is that not all the formless attainments qualify for inclusion in this sutta. Ven. Ānanda here is talking about states in which the meditator is percipient. As AN 9:36 points out, the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception and the cessation of perception and feeling do *not* count as percipient states, so they can't be included in Ven. Ānanda's list. Thus only the first three formless attainments qualify for inclusion. To include the four jhānas along with them and the concentration that is the fruit of arahantship—four plus three plus one—would give a total of eight, which would actually disqualify the sutta from inclusion in the Nines.

For these reasons, the modern argument from form is unconvincing—which means that the face-value interpretation of AN 9:37 still stands: A meditator can still be sensitive to the five external senses when in the four jhānas.

A.3: As for MN 43—in which Ven. Sāriputta lists what can be known by the purified intellect-consciousness divorced from the five faculties—Buddhaghosa, in his commentary to that sutta, maintains that the phrase, "purified intellect-consciousness divorced from the five faculties," is a reference to the fourth jhāna.

This presents him with a problem, though, in that the consciousness of the fourth jhāna does not directly know the three formless attainments given in Ven. Sāriputta's list. One would have to be *in* those attainments for one's consciousness to directly know them. To get around this problem, Buddhaghosa maintains that "can be known by" can also mean, "can be known as a result of"—in other words, a meditator can attain the three formless attainments as a result of attaining the consciousness of the fourth jhāna.

This is not an idiomatic reading of the passage, but grammatically it is a legitimate interpretation of the instrumental case, the case in which the word "consciousness" appears in the sutta, and it allows Buddhaghosa to maintain that consciousness is divorced from the physical senses in the fourth jhāna. Because, as noted above, the suttas do not describe the jhānas below the fourth as "purified," Buddhaghosa apparently felt no need to mention the lower jhānas in this context.

However, his interpretation presents him with a further question: If "can be known," means, "can be experienced as a result of the fourth jhāna," why is the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception not listed as well? To answer this question, Buddhaghosa quotes part of the above passage from MN 111 to add a further stipulation to the meaning of "known," saying that the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception is not listed because no one except the Buddha—not even Ven. Sāriputta—can resolve it distinctly into its individual phenomena. In other words, "can be known" must also mean, "can be analyzed into its individual phenomena." This would fit with the statement in MN 43 that "can be known," means, "can be known with the eye of discernment."

The question that Buddhaghosa fails to address, however, is this: Why doesn't Ven. Sāriputta include the fourth jhāna in his list? After all, it meets both of Buddhaghosa's stipulations for "can be known": As MN 111 shows, the fourth jhāna can be known as a result of attaining the fourth jhāna, and it can be analyzed into its

individual phenomena. If it met Buddhaghosa's underlying assumption—that consciousness in the fourth jhāna is divorced from the five physical senses—then it would have to be included in the list as well. But it's not.

This leaves a gaping hole in Buddhaghosa's interpretation—an inconsistency that undermines the interpretation as a whole.

The most consistent interpretation of Ven. Sāriputta's list in MN 43 is the one stated above: To be included in the list, a concentration attainment needs to meet three criteria: A meditator can analyze it with discernment while in that attainment, his/her consciousness is purified, and that consciousness is divorced from the five physical sense faculties. Because the fourth jhāna meets the first two criteria, the fact that it is not listed in MN 43 is a sign that it does not meet the third. In other words, one's consciousness while in that attainment—or in the lower jhānas—is not divorced from the five physical senses.

This means that, despite the various arguments proposed for interpreting AN 9:37, MN 43, and the standard description of the infinitude of space to support the opposite position, all three passages in fact offer clear proof that—from the perspective of the suttas—the physical senses do not need to fall silent in any of the four jhānas. Right concentration can still be right even when a background sensitivity to the physical senses is present.

More Arguments for Silence in the First Jhāna

However, proponents of the position that concentration counts as jhāna only when the physical senses fall silent do not focus only on sutta passages whose face value has to be denied in order to maintain their position. They also cite four passages that, they claim, give positive proof that the suttas openly support them. Buddhaghosa cites one of these passages—AN 10:72—but without explaining why it proves that the senses must fall silent in the first jhāna; modern supporters of his position provide an argument to

bolster his citation, and add the other two citations to strengthen their case.

A close examination of these citations, though, shows that none of them actually support the position they are supposed to prove. To see why, we have to look carefully at what each of the four passages has to say. The following discussion treats them one by one, first quoting the passage, then stating the modern argument for "soundproof jhāna" based on it, and finally showing how the passage does not support the argument as claimed.

B.1: *"Quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities, one enters and remains in the first jhāna." — DN 2*

This passage at the beginning of the standard formula for the first jhāna states the prerequisite events for entering that jhāna. The argument based on it is this: "Sensuality" here means the objects of the five senses. Thus a meditator can enter the first jhāna only when input from the five senses falls away.

The problem with this argument is that the suttas *never* define "sensuality" as the objects of the five senses. Instead, they define sensuality as a passion for sensual resolves—the plans and intentions the mind formulates for sensual pleasures:

> "There are these five strings of sensuality. Which five? Forms cognizable via the eye—agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, fostering desire, enticing; sounds cognizable via the ear... aromas cognizable via the nose... flavors cognizable via the tongue... tactile sensations cognizable via the body—agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, fostering desire, enticing. But these are not sensuality. They are called strings of sensuality in the discipline of the noble ones."
>
> The passion for his resolves is a man's sensuality,
> not the beautiful sensual pleasures
> found in the world.

The passion for his resolves is a man's sensuality.
The beauties remain as they are in the world,
while, in this regard,
the enlightened
subdue their desire. — *AN 6:63*

In light of this definition, "secluded from sensuality" simply means that one has subdued one's passion for sensual resolves. One has not necessarily escaped the input from the senses. And one has not abandoned all resolves. As MN 73 points out, unskillful resolves are abandoned in the first jhāna. Because the first jhāna contains directed thought and evaluation, resolved on the single task of solidifying one's focus on a single object, skillful resolves are actually a necessary part of the first jhāna. The singleness of the task taken on by directed thought and evaluation is what qualifies the first jhāna as a state of singleness. Only with the attainment of the second jhāna are skillful resolves abandoned as well, leading to singleness on a higher level.

However, it has been further argued that "sensuality" in the standard formula for the first jhāna has a special meaning—i.e., the objects of the five senses—different from the definition given in AN 6:63—or anywhere else in the suttas.

This argument, however, doesn't accord with what we know of the Buddha's teaching strategy. As he said in DN 16, he didn't keep a secret teaching that he revealed only to a few people. And because he repeated the formula for the jhānas so many times, it's unlikely that he would have forgotten to explain any special technical meanings for the terms the formula contains. Assuming that he would have wanted his instructions to be useful and clear, we have to conclude that he would have been careful to explain what he meant by his terms—which indicates that "sensuality" in the jhāna formula has the same meaning as in AN 6:63.

So the phrase "secluded from sensuality" in the description of the first jhāna means nothing more than that meditators entering and remaining in the first jhāna have to abandon sensual resolves.

Although—in focusing their minds on their meditation theme—they shouldn't focus attention on input from the external senses, the standard formula doesn't require them to block that input entirely from their awareness.

B.2: *"There is the case where a monk... enters and remains in the first jhāna: rapture and pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation. This is called a monk who, coming to the end of the cosmos, remains at the end of the cosmos.... There is the case where a monk... enters and remains in the second jhāna... the third jhāna... the fourth jhāna... the dimension of the infinitude of space... the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness... the dimension of nothingness... the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception. This is called a monk who, coming to the end of the cosmos, remains at the end of the cosmos." — AN 9:38*

The argument based on this passage states that "cosmos" *(loka)* here means the objects of the five senses. Thus a meditator who has entered the first jhāna—and all the remaining attainments—must have gone beyond the range of those senses.

This argument, however, ignores the definition for "cosmos" given in the same sutta:

> "These five strings of sensuality are, in the discipline of the noble ones, called the cosmos. Which five? Forms cognizable via the eye—agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, fostering desire, enticing; sounds cognizable via the ear... aromas cognizable via the nose... flavors cognizable via the tongue... tactile sensations cognizable via the body—agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, fostering desire, enticing. These are the five strings of sensuality that, in the discipline of the noble ones, are called the cosmos." — *AN 9:38*

In other words, the word "cosmos" in AN 9:38 means the pleasant and enticing objects of the senses. If the Buddha had

wanted to state that all input from the physical senses is blotted out in all of the jhānas and formless attainments, he would have defined "cosmos" in this context as all objects of the physical senses. But he didn't. He limited it to *enticing* sensory objects. And as AN 6:63 states, when one has subdued sensual desire, the beautiful objects remain as they were. They are not blocked from awareness. They simply lose their power.

This means that AN 9:38 is not saying that input from the senses is totally blocked in the first jhāna. Instead, it's simply elaborating on one of the implications of the phrase "secluded from sensuality": When one is secluded from one's passion for sensual resolves, one has gone—at least temporarily—beyond the power of enticing objects of the senses to foster desire.

B.3: *"Singleness of mind is concentration." — MN 44*

The argument based on this sentence takes note of two facts. One, taking the sentence in context, the term "concentration" here means right concentration, and therefore the jhānas. Two, the term translated as "singleness" here—*ek'aggatā*—can literally be interpreted as "one-pointedness": *eka* (one), *agga* (point), *–tā* (-ness). From these two facts, the argument proceeds to reason that if the mind in jhāna is truly one-pointed, it should not be aware of anything other than one point. Thus it should not be aware of any input from the senses.

This argument is also used to deny the possibility that a meditator might be able to analyze a state of jhāna while still in it (see "Purity of Concentration," below), on the grounds that, by definition, the mind cannot think and be one-pointed at the same time.

Although the two facts on which this argument is based are hard to dispute, the argument goes astray in imposing too narrow a meaning on the word *ek'aggatā,* one that is foreign to the linguistic usage of the Canon.

a) To begin with, *agga* has many other meanings besides "point." In fact, it has two primary clusters of meanings, in neither of which is "point" the central focus.

The first cluster centers on the fact that a summit of a mountain is called its *agga.* Clustered around this meaning are ideas of *agga* as the topmost part of something (such as the ridge of a roof), the tip of something (such as the tip of a blade of grass), and the best or supreme example of something (such as the Buddha as the *agga* of all beings). AN 5:80 plays with these meanings of *agga* when it criticizes monks of the future who will "search for the tiptop flavors *(ras'agga)* with the tip of the tongue (*jivh'agga).*"

The second cluster of meanings for *agga* centers on the idea of "dwelling" or "meeting place." A hall where monks gather for the uposatha, for example, is called an *uposath'agga.*

Given that the object of concentration is said to be a dwelling *(vihāra),* and that a person dwells *(viharati)* in concentration, this second cluster of meanings may be the more relevant cluster here. A mind with a single *agga,* in this case, would simply be a mind gathered around one object, and need not necessarily be reduced to a single point.

b) But even more telling in determining the meaning of *ek'aggatā* in the context of concentration are the everyday ways in which *ek'agga,* the adjective form of the noun, is used in the Canon to describe minds. Two examples, one from the Vinaya and one from a sutta, are particularly relevant.

In Mv.II.3.4, the phrase, "we pay attention," in the instructions for how to listen to the Pāṭimokkha, is defined as: "We listen with an *ek'agga* mind, an unscattered mind, an undistracted mind." Even if *ek'agga* were translated as "one-pointed" here, the "point" is obviously not so restricted as to make the ears fall silent. Otherwise, we would not be able to hear the Pāṭimokkha at all. And the fact that the mind is *ek'agga* doesn't mean that we can't also hear other sounds aside from the Pāṭimokkha. It's just that those sounds don't make the mind lose its focus on a single theme.

In AN 5:151, the Buddha lists five qualities that enable one, when listening to the true Dhamma, to "alight on assuredness, on the rightness of skillful qualities." The five qualities are:

"One doesn't hold the talk in contempt.
"One doesn't hold the speaker in contempt.
"One doesn't hold oneself in contempt.
"One listens to the Dhamma with an unscattered mind, an *ek'agga* mind.
"One attends appropriately."

Because appropriate attention means to contemplate experiences in terms of the four noble truths (see MN 2), this passage shows that when the mind is *ek'agga,* it's not only able to hear. It can also think at the same time. If it couldn't hear or think, it couldn't make sense of the Dhamma talk. So again, even if we translate *ek'agga* as "one-pointed," the *ek'agga* mind is not reduced to so miniscule a point that it cannot hear or think. It is simply gathered around a single object. And because appropriate attention deals in the same terms with which the Buddha recommends that a meditator analyze jhāna while in it, the mind can still count as *ek'agga* while doing the analysis.

So, in short, when MN 44 defines concentration as singleness or one-pointedness of mind, the definition does not preclude the ability to receive from the senses while in concentration.

B.4: *"For the first jhāna, noise is a thorn.*
"For the second jhāna, directed thoughts and evaluations are thorns.
"For the third jhāna, rapture is a thorn.
"For the fourth jhāna, in-and-out breaths are thorns." — AN 10:72

This is the one sutta citation that Buddhaghosa provides in the *Visuddhimagga* (X.17) to prove that the external senses must fall silent in the first jhāna. As noted above, though, he doesn't substantiate his case.

To fill in this blank, modern arguments in support of Buddhaghosa's interpretation of these passages center on the meaning of the word "thorn" here, saying that it means something whose presence destroys what it pierces. Thus, to say that noise is a thorn for the first jhāna means that if one hears a noise while in that jhāna, the jhāna has been brought to an end. This interpretation is supported, the argument continues, by the pattern followed with regard to the remaining jhānas: The presence of directed thought and evaluation automatically ends the second jhāna; the presence of rapture ends the third; in-and-out breathing, the fourth.

However, there are altogether ten items in this sutta's list of "thorns," and in some of them the "thorn" obviously does *not* destroy what it pierces. For example:

> "For one guarding the sense doors, watching a show is a thorn.
> "For one practicing celibacy, nearness to women is a thorn."

If "thorn" were to mean something that cannot be present without destroying what it pierces, then nearness to women would automatically destroy a man's celibacy, and watching a show would automatically destroy one's guarding of the senses, which isn't true in either case. It's possible to be near a women and to continue being celibate, and to watch a show in such a way that doesn't destroy your guard over your senses.

An interpretation of "thorn" that consistently fits all ten items in the list, however, would be that "thorn" means something that creates difficulties for what it touches. Thus to say that directed thought and evaluation is a thorn for the second jhāna means that these mental activities make it difficult to enter or remain in the second jhāna; to say that noise is a thorn for the first jhāna simply means that noise makes it difficult to enter or remain there.

This interpretation is supported by the background story in AN 10:72, the sutta where these thorns are listed. It begins by telling

how a group of elder monks in a monastery frequented by noisy laypeople leave for a quieter monastery with the thought, "The jhānas are said by the Blessed One to be thorned by noise. What if we were to go to the Gosiṅga Sāla forest park? There we would live comfortably, with next-to-no noise, next-to-no crowding." When the Buddha learns of what they have done, he praises them. Had he wanted to make the point that noise cannot be heard in the first jhāna, he would have criticized them for going to the trouble of leaving the first monastery, and recommended that if they wanted to escape the disturbance of noise, they should have entered the first jhāna and dwelled comfortably there instead. But he didn't.

So this sutta proves nothing more than that noise makes it difficult to enter or maintain the first jhāna. It doesn't prove that noises cannot be heard while in the jhāna.

From the discussion of these four citations—DN 2, AN 9:38, MN 44, and AN 10:72—we can conclude that none of them provide convincing proof that the physical senses have to fall silent in the first jhāna—or any of the four jhānas. This means that the conclusions drawn from AN 9:37, MN 43, and the standard formula for the dimension of the infinitude of space still stand: The physical senses may fall silent in the formless attainments, but there is no need for them to fall silent in the four jhānas. And because awakening can be based on any of the four jhānas, this means further that a meditator can attain awakening without entering into a concentration attainment where the senses are blocked from his/her awareness.

Purity of Concentration

This still leaves open, however, another question: Is it *necessary* for the external senses to fall silent in the formless attainments, or is it simply *possible* for them to fall silent in those attainments? In other words, when focusing on a formless perception, if one pays no heed to perceptions of multiplicity and yet they keep occurring

in such a way that sensory input is not blocked out, would that still count as a formless attainment?

Causality as described in dependent co-arising leaves this open as a theoretical possibility, because causal influences within the mind can act not only immediately—as when inattention to perceptions of multiplicity right now could block an awareness of the external senses right now—but also over time, as when attention to perceptions in the past might allow for an awareness of the external senses right now. In other words, if a meditator pays attention to perceptions of sound consistently before entering concentration, that act of attention could theoretically allow those perceptions to persist during the subsequent period of concentration when he/she was no longer giving them any attention at all.

However, the suttas do not say whether this theoretical possibility actually applies in practice. In fact, the only narrative account that addresses the issue is found in the Vinaya—the division of the Canon dealing with monastic rules. Because it is so short, and because its primary concern is with disciplinary issues, it does not address the Dhamma side of the issue in any conclusive detail. But it does raise some important points. The story is this:

> Then Ven. Mahā Moggallāna addressed the monks: "Just now, friends, having attained the imperturbable concentration on the bank of the Sappinikā River, I heard the sound of elephants plunging in, crossing over, and making a trumpeting call."
>
> The monks were offended and annoyed and spread it about, "Now, how can Ven. Moggallāna say, 'Just now, friends, having attained the imperturbable concentration on the bank of the Sappinikā River, I heard the sound of elephants plunging in, crossing over, and making a trumpeting call.' He's claiming a superior-human state." They reported this matter to the Blessed One, (who said,) "There is that concentration, monks, but it is not purified.

Moggallāna spoke truly, monks. There is no offense for him." — *Pr 4*

This passage appears as part of the explanation of the fourth rule in the monks' Pāṭimokkha, or monastic code, a rule covering false claims of meditative attainments. Its main concern is with whether Ven. Moggallāna violated this rule in making his statement about hearing the elephants.

There is, however, a technical Dhamma term at stake here: "imperturbable concentration *(āneñja-samādhi)."* MN 66 states that the first three jhānas are perturbable—subject to movement—whereas the fourth jhāna isn't. The first jhāna is perturbable in that it includes directed thought and evaluation; the second, in that it includes rapture-pleasure; the third, in that it includes equanimity-pleasure. MN 66 does not describe exactly what qualities in the fourth jhāna make it imperturbable—aside from the fact that it lacks the preceding factors—but AN 9:34 and AN 9:41 provide a suggestion. They note that although the fourth jhāna is marked by purity of equanimity, it does not focus on *perceptions* dealing with equanimity. This means that even though phenomena apart from the object of concentration may be present, the mind neither focuses on them nor is it disturbed by thoughts or feeling tones around those perceptions.

But the fourth jhāna is not the only stage of concentration that counts as imperturbable. MN 106, without following the standard descriptions of the concentration attainments, cites an imperturbable concentration based on perceptions of forms—this is apparently the fourth jhāna—and one that is based on abandoning perceptions of forms. Because it goes on to say that the dimension of nothingness lies beyond the imperturbable, "imperturbable" would apply to two formless attainments: the dimension of the infinitude of space and the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness. Thus there are three levels of imperturbable concentration in all.

Unfortunately, the account in Pr 4 does not indicate which of these three stages of concentration Ven. Moggallāna was in, so we

cannot say for sure whether this account applies to any of the formless attainments. Nor does it explain what the Buddha meant by "not purified." Given the different ways "purified" is used in the suttas, it could mean many things. As we noted above, "purified"—with reference to the fourth jhāna—is used in two senses: In the standard formula for the concentration attainments, "purified" refers to purity of mindfulness and equanimity. In the Buddha's description of his own mastery of the fourth jhāna, "purified" appears in a list that suggests freedom from defilement: "When the mind was thus concentrated, purified, bright, unblemished, rid of defilement, pliant, malleable, steady, and attained to imperturbability...."

With reference to the formless attainments, MN 43 uses the word "purified" in what may be another sense, indicating a consciousness divorced from the five sense faculties. This would seem to be the meaning of the word most relevant in the context of Ven. Moggallāna's story. After all, simply hearing the sound of elephants is not a defilement (see SN 35:191(232)), and if the purity of equanimity and mindfulness in the fourth jhāna can be used to hear divine sounds (see MN 4), it can surely also be used to hear the sound of trumpeting elephants. However, given the uncertainty surrounding this story, there is no firm proof that this is what "purified" means here.

The Commentary to this story, in discussing the term "not purified," assumes that Ven. Moggallāna had left the factors of jhāna entirely when he heard the sound of the elephants. The Subcommentary seems closer to the mark in assuming that he had reverted briefly to factors of a lower jhāna, such as directed thought and evaluation. If Moggallāna had entirely left the jhānas when hearing the elephants, the Buddha would not have said that he had spoken truly about which stage of concentration he was in, and instead would have said that Moggallāna spoke out of a misunderstanding. That would have been enough to exonerate Moggallāna from an offense under the rule.

But because the Buddha said that Ven. Moggallāna spoke truly, we have to assume that Moggallāna was in a state of imperturbable concentration, even though the attainment of that concentration was not pure. This means that we have to further assume that the Canon allows for a certain amount of leeway in classifying what counts as a particular stage of right concentration. The fourth jhāna, for example, can vary somewhat in the extent to which it is purified of the factors of a lower jhāna—at least momentarily—and yet still qualify as being the fourth jhāna. The dimension of the infinitude of space might vary in the extent to which consciousness is purified of any connection to the five physical senses.

This point helps to explain an apparent anomaly in the way the suttas describe the attainment of the different stages of right concentration. As noted above, there are some cases in which they say simply that the meditator enters and remains in a particular stage. In others, they say that the meditator, while remaining in that stage, analyzes the stage in terms of the fabrications of which it is composed, gains a sense of dispassion for those fabrications, and as a result gains release.

As AN 9:36 shows, the process of analysis involves some fairly extensive use of perceptions, along with directed thought and evaluation, even while the meditator is in the state being analyzed. This would not be an anomaly in the case of the first jhāna, which includes directed thought and evaluation as one of its defining qualities. But the suttas state explicitly that this can also happen in the second jhāna—which is defined as resulting from the abandoning of directed thought and evaluation—and on up through the even more refined levels, including the dimension of nothingness. According to MN 111, the only attainments in which the meditator *must* mindfully leave the attainment before analyzing it are the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception and the cessation of perception and feeling.

If there were no leeway in the descriptions of the various concentration attainments, this sort of analysis would be

impossible in any of the attainments beyond the first jhāna. However, given the Buddha's comment in the story of Ven. Moggallāna, indicating that the concentration attainments can vary somewhat in their level of purity and still count as right concentration, this sort of analysis is possible. And, in fact, the ability to step back from one's concentration while fabricating it is a useful skill, because it is one of the ways in which a meditator can achieve awakening.

This skill is what Ven. Sāriputta, in MN 43, calls "the eye of discernment." AN 5:28 picks up the theme of vision to describe this skill with an analogy:

> "And further, the monk [having mastered the four jhānas] has his theme of reflection well in hand, well attended to, well-pondered, well-tuned [well-penetrated] by means of discernment.
>
> "Just as if one person were to reflect on another, or a standing person were to reflect on a sitting person, or a sitting person were to reflect on a person lying down; even so, monks, the monk has his theme of reflection well in hand, well attended to, well-pondered, well-tuned [well-penetrated] by means of discernment. This is the fifth development of the five-factored noble right concentration." — *AN 5:28*

In other words, the meditator can step back or step above the attainment, without destroying it, and penetrate it by means of the eye of discernment to the point of awakening. To use a more modern analogy, a meditator developing concentration for the sake of a pleasant abiding is like a hand fully snug in a glove; one developing concentration for the sake of the ending of the effluents is like a hand pulled slightly out of the glove but not so far that it leaves the glove. As the Buddha learned on the night of his awakening, the ability to analyze one's jhāna requires an even higher level of skill than the simple ability to enter and remain in

the jhāna, for the latter skill, on its own, cannot bring about awakening (see AN 4:123), whereas the former skill can.

The Right Use of Concentration

Thus, even though Ven. Mahā Moggallāna's story gives no hard evidence one way or the other as to whether a meditator in the formless attainments could hear sounds, it does clear up an important issue surrounding the practice of right concentration for the purpose of full release. An attainment of concentration does not have to be fully pure in order to qualify as right—and, in fact, if one knows how to use the impurity of one's attainment, it can actually be an aid to awakening.

And there's no need for right concentration to block out sounds. After all, one can gain awakening from any of the four jhānas. AN 9:37 and MN 43—in not listing those jhānas as among those where one is insensitive to or divorced from the physical senses—stand as proof that they don't automatically block out sensory input.

The important point about concentration is how one *uses* it. As the Buddha says in MN 152, if the consummate development of one's faculties simply consisted in the ability not to see sights or hear sounds, then blind and deaf people would count as consummate in their faculties. Consummation in this area actually consists of the discernment that allows one to be uninfluenced by sensory input even as one is fully aware of that input.

Āḷāra Kālāma had strong concentration—strong enough to block the sound of 500 carts passing by—but he took it no further. He treated it as an end rather than a means because he lacked insight into how to contemplate it with the eye of discernment to reach awakening. The same point applies to the inhabitants of the dimension of non-percipient beings. As for Ven. Mahā Moggallāna: Even though his concentration may not have been as pure as theirs—at least on the day he sat by the river—he was still

able to use it as a means for going beyond all fabrication, and in that way reach total release.

In the final analysis, that's what counts.

The Not-self Strategy

As the Buddha once said, the teaching he most frequently gave to his students was this: All fabrications are inconstant; all phenomena are not-self *(anattā)* (MN 35). Many people have interpreted this second statement as meaning that there is no self. Others, however, have noticed statements in the Pali Canon—our earliest extant record of the Buddha's teachings—that refer to the idea of self in a positive manner, as when the Buddha stated that the self is its own mainstay (Dhp 160), or when he encouraged a group of young men—who were searching for a woman who had stolen their belongings—to search for the self instead (Mv I.14.4). From these statements, these readers conclude that the statement, "All phenomena are not-self," is meant to clear away attachment to a false view of self so that an experience of the true self can be attained.

The debate between these two positions has lasted for millennia, with each side able to cite additional passages from the Canon to prove the other side wrong. Even now, both sides continue to find adherents attracted to their arguments, but neither side has had the final word.

A common way of trying to resolve this impasse has been to say that both sides are right but on different levels of truth. One version of this resolution states that there is a self on the conventional level of truth, but no self on the ultimate level. An alternate version of the resolution, however, switches the levels around: The conventional self does not exist, whereas a higher level of self on the ultimate level of truth does. And so the impasse remains.

All of these positions, however, gloss over the fact that the one time the Buddha was asked point-blank about whether the self

does or doesn't exist, he remained silent. The person who asked him the question, Vacchagotta the wanderer, didn't bother to ask the Buddha to explain his silence. He simply got up from his seat and left.

However, when Ven. Ānanda then asked the Buddha why he didn't answer the question, the Buddha gave four reasons—two for each of the two alternatives—as to why it would have been unskillful to respond to Vacchagotta's question by saying either that the self exists or does not exist. (1) To state that there is a self would be to side with the wrong view of eternalism. (2) To state that there is no self would be to side with the wrong view of annihilationism. (3) To state that there is a self would not be in keeping with the arising of knowledge that all phenomena are not-self. (4) To tell Vacchagotta that there is no self would have left him even more bewildered than he already was.

If we take the Buddha's reasons here at face value, they indicate that both sides of the debate over the existence or non-existence of the self, instead of being partially right, are totally wrong. Their mistake lies in the point they have in common: the assumption that the Buddha's teachings start with the question of the metaphysical status of the self, i.e., whether or not it exists.

That, of course, is if we take the Buddha's reasons for his silence at face value. The partisans who want to maintain the claim that the Buddha took a position on the existence of the self, however, have tended to ignore the first three reasons for his silence in the face of the question and to focus exclusive attention on the fourth. If someone else more spiritually mature than Vacchagotta had asked the question, they say, the Buddha would have revealed his true position.

However, none of the first three reasons apply specifically to Vacchagotta's reaction to the Buddha's possible answer.

The purpose of this essay is to show that these reasons should be accepted as indicating that the Buddha refused consistently to take a stand on whether there is or isn't a self, and that his silence

on this issue is important. To establish these points, it looks at the Buddha's silence in three main contexts:

(1) the purpose and range of his teachings;
(2) the metaphysical assumptions that make that purpose possible; and
(3) his pedagogical strategy in trying to achieve that purpose.

Once we understand these contexts, we can come to a better understanding not only of the Buddha's silence, but also of:

(4) why views concerning the existence or non-existence of the self do not serve the purpose of the Buddha's teachings;
(5) why perceptions of "self" and "not-self" nevertheless can act as strategies to help serve that purpose;
(6) in particular, what purpose is served by the perception, "All phenomena are not-self"; and
(7) why all these perceptions are no longer needed and no longer apply once they have succeeded in serving the Buddha's main purpose in teaching.

In other words, the purpose of this essay is to show that the Buddha's teachings on self and not-self are strategies for helping his students attain the goal of the teaching, and that neither apply once the goal is attained.

1. The Purpose & Range of the Teachings

All of the Buddha's teachings have to be understood in light of their primary purpose, which is to solve a single problem: the problem of *dukkha* (stress, suffering). Other issues are treated only as they relate to solving this problem. Any issues that are irrelevant to this problem—or would interfere with its solution—lie outside of the range of what he was willing to address.

> 'Both formerly and now, Anurādha, it's only stress that I describe, and the cessation of stress.' — *SN 22:86*

"The cessation of stress," here, does not refer to the simple passing away of individual instances of stress, which happens all the time. Instead, it refers to the total ending of stress, an attainment that can be reached only through a path of practice aimed at fostering dispassion for the origination or cause of stress.

These facts shape the Buddha's central teaching, the four noble truths: stress, its origination, its cessation, and the path of practice leading to its cessation.

2. The Metaphysical Assumptions of the Four Noble Truths

From these four truths, the metaphysical assumptions underlying the Buddha's teachings as a whole can be detected. And they are not hard to find, for they're revealed by the way the truths are interrelated. The first two noble truths state that stress is caused by the mental action of craving and clinging. The last two truths state that the cessation of stress can be reached by means of the actions that make up the path to its cessation. The way these truths are paired shows that the Buddha's basic metaphysical assumptions concern action (*kamma):* that action is real, that it's the result of choice, that it has consequences, and that those consequences can lead either to continued stress or to its end.

Given these assumptions, it makes sense to look at perceptions of self and not-self as types of kamma, and to evaluate them as to whether they are actions causing stress or leading to its end. And that is exactly what the Buddha does. He points to the act of creating a sense of self-identity—in his terms, "I-making" and "my-making" *(ahaṅkāra, mamaṅkāra—see* AN 3:33)—as a major cause of stress. The not-self teaching is also an action, a perception that is one of many actions employed as part of the path to the ending of stress by bringing that cause to an end. However, the Buddha also found that certain types of self-identity were useful in getting his students started on the path and to motivate them to stay on course until the skills of the path were so mature that the

perception of self was no longer needed. The perception of not-self would then be used to undercut any clinging to any possible sense of self, thus bringing about full awakening. Because one of the descriptions of awakening is that it's the "end of action" (SN 35:145; AN 4:237; AN 6:63), every act of perception—including perception of self and not-self—would be put aside when awakening is reached.

This means that in the Buddha's teachings about the path, both "self" and "not-self" are used, not as metaphysical tenets, but as strategies: perceptions that are meant to serve a particular purpose along the way and to be put aside when no longer needed.

In fact, the entire path to the end of stress is a set of eight strategies—the factors that give the path its name as an eightfold path: right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. All of these factors are skills to be developed and mastered: strategies devoted to a skillful purpose that are then dropped when that purpose is achieved.

Right view—the proper focus and framework for understanding stress and its cessation—is one of these strategies. And it's under this path factor that views about self and not-self function in helping to bring stress to an end. This means that the teachings on self and not-self are answers, not to the question of whether or not there is a self, but to the question that the Buddha said lies at the beginning of the discernment leading to right view: "What, when done by me, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" (MN 135) You find long-term welfare and happiness by learning to use perceptions of self and not-self in a skillful way.

As for the goal, the cessation of stress, the Canon states that although it may be experienced, it lies beyond the range of description, and so any descriptions of self or not-self would not apply. Because it is the end of action, it is devoid of all strategies. Concepts of self and not-self can be dropped not only because they are inadequate to describe the goal, but also because once the goal is attained they have no function to serve.

3. The Buddha's Teaching Strategy

To help his listeners master right view as a means to that goal, the Buddha followed a pedagogical strategy of answering only those questions that stayed on topic. In line with this policy, he divided questions into four categories based on how they should be handled to keep the listener properly focused with the correct framework in mind (AN 4:42). The first category covers questions deserving a categorical answer, i.e., an answer true across the board. The second category covers those deserving an analytical answer, one in which he would expand or rephrase the question to show under what conditions his answers would or would not apply. The third category covers questions in which the questioner should be cross-questioned first to help clear up the question or help prepare the questioner to understand the answer. The fourth category covers questions that should be put aside because they treat issues that are off topic and would lead the questioner off course.

The most important questions deserving categorical answers are those focused on the skills of the four noble truths: comprehending stress, abandoning its cause, realizing its cessation, and developing the path of practice to its cessation.

Of these skills, the most central one is to develop the path factors that undercut the cause of stress within the mind: passion and desire for things that are bound to change. As a first step in this skill, the Buddha offered—as part of right view—different ways of categorizing the range of objects for which people feel passion and desire. A primary set of categories consists of five activities, called aggregates *(khandha):* form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness. When people cling to these activities through passion and delight, they suffer. As Ven. Sāriputta, one of the Buddha's foremost disciples, explained to a group of his fellow monks:

> Ven. Sāriputta: 'Friends, in foreign lands there are wise nobles and brahmans, householders and contemplatives—

for the people there are wise and 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 passion and desire."

'"...passion and desire for what?"

'"...passion and desire for form... feeling... perception... fabrications... consciousness."

'"...seeing what danger [or: drawback] does your teacher teach the subduing of passion and desire for form... feeling... perception... fabrications... consciousness?"

'"...when one is not free from passion, desire, love, thirst, fever, and craving for form, then with any change and alteration in that form, there arise sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair." ...

'[Similarly with feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness.]

'"...and seeing what benefit does your teacher teach the subduing of passion and desire for form... feeling... perception... fabrications... consciousness?"

'"...when a person is free from passion, desire, love, thirst, fever, and craving for form, then with any change and alteration in that form, there does not arise any sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, or despair."

'[Similarly with feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness.]' — *SN 22:2*

One of the main manifestations of passion and desire for these aggregates is to view them as "me" or "mine," creating a sense of self around them.

'There is the case where an uninstructed, run-of-the-mill person—who has no regard for noble ones, is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma; who has no regard for men of integrity, is not well-versed or disciplined in their

Dhamma—assumes form to be the self, or the self as possessing form, or form as in the self, or the self as in form. He is seized with the idea that 'I am form' or 'Form is mine.' As he is seized with these ideas, his form changes and alters, and he falls into sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair over its change and alteration.

'[Similarly with feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness.]' — *SN 22:1*

These ways of building a self-identity around any of the aggregates are what the Buddha meant by the terms, "I-making" and "my-making." Beings engage in the process of I-making and my-making because of the pleasure to be found in the aggregates.

'Mahali, if form were exclusively stressful—followed by stress, infused with stress and not infused with pleasure—beings would not be infatuated with form. But because form is also pleasurable—followed by pleasure, infused with pleasure and not infused with stress—beings are infatuated with form. Through infatuation, they are captivated. Through captivation, they are defiled. This is the cause, this the requisite condition, for the defilement of beings. And this is how beings are defiled with cause, with requisite condition. [Similarly with the other aggregates.]' —*SN 22:60*

The activities of I-making and my-making are defiling because, even though they aim at pleasure, they lead to stress—both because the act of clinging is stressful in and of itself, and because it tries to find a dependable happiness in things that are subject to change, stressful, and not totally under one's control.

'If form were self, this form would not lend itself to dis-ease. It would be possible [to say] with regard to form, "Let my form be thus. Let my form not be thus." But precisely because form is not self, this form lends itself to dis-ease. And it is not possible [to say] with regard to form, "Let my form be

thus. Let my form not be thus." [Similarly with the other aggregates.]' — *SN 22:59*

'Monks, do you see any clinging in the form of a doctrine of self which, when you cling to it, there would not arise sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair?'

'No, lord.'

'...Neither do I... What do you think, monks: If a person were to gather or burn or do as he likes with the grass, twigs, branches, and leaves here in Jeta's Grove, would the thought occur to you, "It's *us* that this person is gathering, burning, or doing with as he likes"?'

'No, lord. Why is that? Because those things are not our self and do not pertain to our self.'

'Even so, monks, whatever is not yours: Let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term welfare and happiness. And what is not yours? Form is not yours... Feeling is not yours... Perception... Fabrications... Consciousness is not yours. Let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term welfare and happiness.' — *MN 22*

Questions that focused on why and how to put an end to I-making and my-making were among those that the Buddha would answer categorically.

Mogharāja:

One who regards the world in what way
isn't seen by Death's King?

The Buddha:

Always mindful, Mogharāja,
regard the world as
        empty,
having removed any view
        in terms of self.
This way

one is above and beyond death.
One who regards the world
in this way
isn't seen by Death's King. — *Sn 5:15*

In other words, the Buddha would give categorical answers to questions that regarded the activity of clinging to a sense of self both as a choice and as a choice that could be reversed.

To help his listeners see that activity in action, and to reverse it then and there, he would often use the following strategy of cross-questioning to get them to examine their experience of the five aggregates in a way that would lead them to sense disenchantment and dispassion for the aggregates, and so to stop the processes of I-making and my-making around them. The result was that many of his listeners, on being cross-questioned in this way, would gain total release from all stress.

'What do you think, monks—Is form constant or inconstant?'

'Inconstant, lord.'

'And is that which is inconstant easeful or stressful?'

'Stressful, lord.'

'And is it fitting to regard what is inconstant, stressful, subject to change as: "This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am"?'

'No, lord.'

[Similarly with feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness.]

'Thus, monks, any form whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: Every form is to be seen with right discernment as it has come to be: 'This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.'

[Similarly with feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness.]

> ‘Seeing thus, the instructed disciple of the noble ones grows disenchanted with form, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with fabrications, disenchanted with consciousness. Disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, he is released. With release, there is the knowledge, “Released.” He discerns that “Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.”’
>
> That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, the group of five monks delighted in the Blessed One’s words. And while this explanation was being given, the minds of the group of five monks, through lack of clinging/sustenance, were released from effluents. — *SN 22:59*

Notice, however, the conclusion to which this pattern of cross-questioning leads: that the aggregates do not deserve to be regarded as “mine,” “my self,” or “what I am.” For the purposes of leading his listeners to release, the Buddha did not ask them to come to the further conclusion that there is no self. In fact, questions as to whether there is or is not a self fall into the category of those deserving to be put aside. Questions framed in those terms, instead of aiding in the end of stress, simply act as fetters and entanglements, interfering with the path.

Here, for instance, is the record of the Buddha’s encounter with Vacchagotta:

> As he was sitting there, Vacchagotta the wanderer said to the Blessed One, ‘Now then, Master Gotama, is there a self?’ When this was said, the Blessed One was silent.
>
> ‘Then is there no self?’ For a second time the Blessed One was silent.
>
> Then Vacchagotta the wanderer got up from his seat and left.
>
> Then, not long after Vacchagotta the wanderer had left, Ven. Ānanda said to the Blessed One, ‘Why, sir, did the

Blessed One not answer when asked a question by Vacchagotta the wanderer?'

'Ānanda, if I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is a self, were to answer that there is a self, that would be in company with those contemplatives and brahmans who are exponents of eternalism [i.e., the view that there is an eternal soul]. And if I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is no self, were to answer that there is no self, that would be in company with those contemplatives and brahmans who are exponents of annihilationism [i.e., that death is annihilation]. If I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is a self, were to answer that there is a self, would that be in keeping with the arising of knowledge that all phenomena are not-self?'

'No, lord.'

'And if I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is no self, were to answer that there is no self, the bewildered Vacchagotta would become even more bewildered: "Does the self that I used to have now not exist?"' — *SN 44:10*

As we have already noted, people who hold that the Buddha took a position one way or the other on the question of whether or not there is a self have attempted to explain away the Buddha's silence in the face of Vacchagotta's questions. They usually do so by focusing on his final statement to Ānanda: Vacchagotta was already bewildered, and to say that there is no self would have left him even more bewildered. In some cases, they add the same qualification to the Buddha's first two statements to Ānanda, saying that Vacchagotta would have *misunderstood* the statement that there is a self as tending toward eternalism, or the statement that there is no self as tending toward annihilationism. For example, some of these people claim that the Buddha took an analytical Yes and No position on the question—that the self exists on one level, but not on another. If he had simply answered Yes or No to Vacchagotta's questions, the latter would not have understood the subtlety of the teaching. Others claim that to say

that the self does not exist is not really annihilationism, as there is no self to be annihilated. A wiser person, all of these interpretations conclude, would not have misunderstood these points.

As proof, they focus on the qualifications that the Buddha uses to preface all four of his reasons: "If I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer…" This, they claim, indicates that if someone else had asked the question, the Buddha would have responded differently because the statements, "The self exists" and/or, "The self does not exist" would have meant something else to a different person.

This interpretation, though, ignores four things: (1) If the Buddha had wanted to assert to a person more spiritually advanced than Vacchagotta that there is a self or is no self, he could have done so with Ānanda. But he didn't. (2) If he had held to an analytical view on the existence of the self—such as that the self exists on one level but not on another, or that to say that the self does not exist is not an annihilationist view because there is nothing to be annihilated—he could have given either Vacchagotta or Ānanda an analytical answer, explained through cross-questioning. But again, he didn't. (3) The qualification, "If I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer…" prefaces not only the first, second, and fourth reasons, but also the third. If it were meant to limit the reasons only to the fact that Vacchagotta asked the questions, then it would apply to the third reason as well. However, no one has ever proposed that it does, and there is no support from anywhere else in the Canon to suggest that it does. (4) Most importantly, there is another passage in the Canon in which the Buddha tells a group of his monks that the equivalent questions, "Do I exist?" and "Do I not exist?" should be put aside in all cases, regardless of who is asking them.

> 'Monks, there is the case where an uninstructed, run-of-the-mill person… doesn't discern what ideas are fit for attention, or what ideas are unfit for attention. This being so, he doesn't attend to ideas fit for attention, and attends

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

'As he attends inappropriately in this way, one of six kinds of view arises in him: The view *I have a self* arises in him as true and established,

or the view *I have no self...*

or the view *It is precisely because of self that I perceive self...*

or the view *It is precisely because of self that I perceive not-self...*

or the view *It is precisely because of not-self that I perceive self* arises in him as true and established,

or else he has a view like this: *This very self of mine—the knower which is sensitive here and there to the ripening of good and bad actions—is the self of mine which is constant, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and will endure as long as eternity.*

'This is called a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views. Bound by a fetter of views, the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person is not freed from birth, aging, and death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair. He is not freed from stress, I say.

'The well-taught disciple of the noble ones... discerns what ideas are fit for attention, and what ideas are unfit for attention. This being so, he doesn't attend to ideas unfit for attention, and attends (instead) to ideas fit for attention... He attends appropriately, *This is stress... This is the origin of*

stress... This is the cessation of stress... This is the way leading to the cessation of stress. As he attends appropriately in this way, three fetters are abandoned in him: identity-view, uncertainty, and grasping at habits and practices.' — *MN 2*

This passage makes many important points, but two are most relevant here. First, it disproves the interpretation that the Buddha avoided the label of annihilationism by holding that there is no self to be annihilated at death. As the passage shows, simply to ask in the present, "Do I not exist?" and to come up with the answer, "I have no self," is just as much a fetter as to come up with the answer "I have a self" that later might be annihilated. Both positions get in the way of attending to ideas that are fit for attention.

Second, the passage shows that such questions as "Is there a self?" "Is there no self?" "Am I?" "Am I not?" "What am I?" all fall into the category of questions that should consistently be put aside, regardless of who asks them. Thus the Buddha's first three reasons for not answering Vacchagotta's questions hold not only in Vacchagotta's case, but in every case where those questions or their equivalents are asked.

4. Two Fetters of Views

Whenever the Buddha put a question aside, there was always a reason why. The above passage from MN 2 gives the short answer to the "why" in this case: Both the view "I have a self" and the view "I have no self"—and, if fact, all attempts to answer the question, "Do I exist?"—act as fetters and entanglements that prevent the ending of stress. In the terms that Ven. Sāriputta uses in SN 22:2, the act of holding to a view that there is a self or that there is no self is a form of passion or desire for the perceptions and mental fabrications that go into forming the view.

That's the short answer. To gain a more detailed understanding of why the questions behind these views should be put aside, it's

worth looking into the first three reasons the Buddha gave for not responding to Vacchagotta's questions in SN 44:10.

• The first reason states that to say "There is a self" is to side with the wrong view of eternalism. Here it's important to note that the Buddha is not stating that all views of an existing self are eternalistic. As we will see, he is well aware of views claiming the existence of a self that is not eternal. However, the statement, "There is a self" conforms with eternalism in that it shares the same practical drawbacks as an eternalist view. It cannot be used as part of the strategy for putting an end to stress because, in holding to this sort of view, there is a double level of attachment: to the view itself, and to the objects the view identifies as self. This is why the Buddha so frequently deconstructed the view of an existing self in order to help his listeners advance along the path.

One of his most thorough treatments of the view that there is a self is found in the Great Causes Discourse (DN 15). There he rejects any and all views that there is a self. First he classifies all theories of the self into four major categories: those describing a self that is either (1) possessed of form (a body) and finite; (2) possessed of form and infinite; (3) formless and finite; and (4) formless and infinite. Then he states that a person whose definition of the self falls into any of these four categories might say either that the self is already that way, that it will naturally become that way (when at sleep or at death), or that it can be made to be that way through practice. This gives, in all, twelve ways of defining the self.

The text gives no examples of the four basic categories, but we can cite the following as illustrations: (1) theories that deny the existence of a soul, and identify the self with the body; (2) theories that identify the self with all being or with the universe; (3) theories of discrete, individual souls; (4) theories of a unitary soul or identity immanent in all things. The Buddha points out that any view falling into any of these categories entails obsession.

He then goes on to show that any assumption of a self, however defined, revolves around one or more of the five aggregates, as

noted above—assuming the self either as identical with the aggregate, as possessing the aggregate, as in the aggregate, or as contained within the aggregate. For example, a formless infinite self might be assumed to contain consciousness within it, or as being identified with consciousness. Because these aggregates, including the consciousness-aggregate, are all inconstant and stressful, the result is that any theory of a self, no matter how defined, entails obsession with what is inconstant and stressful. The obsession itself is also stressful. This is why any view that there is a self counts as a fetter of views. None of them can take you beyond range of Death's King.

• The Buddha's second reason for not answering Vacchagotta's questions is that if he were to state that there is no self, he would be siding with the wrong view annihilationism. This is because this statement shares the same practical drawbacks as an annihilationist view. It, too, interferes with the strategies needed to put an end to stress because the act of holding to it can act as a fetter on two main levels.

On the grosser level, a view of this sort can be used to justify immoral behavior: If there is no self, there is no agent who is responsible for action, no one to benefit from skillful actions, and no one to be harmed by unskillful actions.

This point is illustrated in MN 109, where an assembly of monks is listening to the Buddha, and one of them asks the Buddha how to put an end to I-making and my-making. The Buddha responds:

> 'Monk, one sees any form whatsoever—past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near—every form, as it actually is with right discernment: "This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am."
>
> 'One sees any feeling whatsoever... any perception whatsoever... any fabrications whatsoever...
>
> 'One sees any consciousness whatsoever—past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or

sublime; far or near—every consciousness—as it actually is with right discernment: "This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am."' *[See SN 22:59, above.]*

Another monk sitting in the assembly, however, takes this contemplation in an unskillful direction. Instead of using it for its intended purpose—the end of I-making and my-making—he turns it toward a conclusion that action done by what is not-self will not be able to touch oneself:

> Now at that moment this line of thinking appeared in the awareness of a certain monk: 'So—form is not-self, feeling is not-self, perception is not-self, fabrications are not-self, consciousness is not-self. Then what self will be touched by the actions done by what is not-self?'

This conclusion, in effect, denies the Buddha's underlying assumptions about the efficacy of kamma. The Buddha's first response to this misuse of his teaching is to denounce it:

> Then the Blessed One, realizing with his awareness the line of thinking in that monk's awareness, addressed the monks: 'It's possible that a senseless person—immersed in ignorance, overcome with craving—might think that he could outsmart the Teacher's message in this way: "So—form is not-self, feeling is not-self, perception is not-self, fabrications are not-self, consciousness is not-self. Then what self will be touched by the actions done by what is not-self?"

The Buddha then turns to the other monks and leads them through his standard questionnaire of cross-questioning about whether the aggregates deserve to be regarded as self (as in SN 22:59, above). The result is that sixty of the monks gain full awakening by abandoning all clinging. In this way, instead of arguing with the errant monk, the Buddha shows by example how the teaching on not-self should be used: as a strategy for abandoning clinging. To use the teaching as a metaphysical tenet denying both one's responsibility for action and the efficacy of

action in determining one's pleasure and pain is, in the Buddha's words, a sign of senselessness, immersed in ignorance and overcome by craving.

On a more refined level, the act of holding to the view that there is no self contains a fetter in the very act of holding to the view. It can also lead a meditator to become fettered to any experience of peace or equanimity that meditating on this view might produce. As MN 106 points out, the perception of not-self, when consistently applied to all experience through the senses, can lead to a formless level of meditative absorption called the dimension of nothingness.

> 'Then again, the disciple of the noble ones, having gone into the wilderness, to the root of a tree, or into an empty dwelling, considers this: 'This is empty of self or of anything pertaining to self.' Practicing and frequently abiding in this way, his mind acquires confidence in that dimension. There being full confidence, he either attains the dimension of nothingness now or else is committed to discernment. With the break-up of the body, after death, it's possible that this leading-on consciousness of his will go to the dimension of nothingness.' — *MN 106*

On attaining this level of concentration, a person who holds to the view that there is no self would read the experience of nothingness as confirmation of that view. Satisfied that he had found the truth, he would stop there, not realizing that there is more work to be done. That's because in that state, as in all the formless attainments, any contentment with the attainment and the peaceful sense of equanimity it contains makes it an object of clinging.

> When this was said, Ven. Ānanda said to the Blessed One: 'There is the case, lord, where a monk, having practiced in this way—"It should not be, it should not occur to me; it will not be, it will not occur to me. What is, what has come to be,

that I abandon"—obtains equanimity. Now, would this monk be totally unbound, or not?'

'A certain such monk might, Ānanda, and another might not.'

'What is the cause, what is the reason, whereby one might and another might not?'

'There is the case, Ānanda, where a monk, having practiced in this way—(thinking) "It should not be, it should not occur to me; it will not be, it will not occur to me. What is, what has come to be, that I abandon"—obtains equanimity. He relishes that equanimity, welcomes it, remains fastened to it. As he relishes that equanimity, welcomes it, remains fastened to it, his consciousness is dependent on it, is sustained by it [clings to it]. With clinging/sustenance, Ānanda, a monk is not totally unbound.'

'Being sustained, where is that monk sustained?'

'The dimension of neither perception nor non-perception [one level higher than the dimension of nothingness].'

'Then, indeed, being sustained, he is sustained by the supreme clinging/sustenance.'

'Being sustained, Ānanda, he *is* sustained by the supreme clinging/sustenance; for this—the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception—is the supreme clinging/sustenance. There is [however] the case where a monk, having practiced in this way—"It should not be, it should not occur to me; it will not be, it will not occur to me. What is, what has come to be, that I abandon"—obtains equanimity. He doesn't relish that equanimity, doesn't welcome it, doesn't remain fastened to it. As he doesn't relish that equanimity, doesn't welcome it, doesn't remain fastened to it, his consciousness is not dependent on it, is not sustained by it [does not cling to it]. Without

clinging/sustenance, Ānanda, a monk is totally unbound.' — *MN 106*

In other words, to gain freedom from the subtle stress to be found even in the equanimity of the formless attainments, a meditator needs to avoid looking for proof that there is no self, and instead to look for which mental activity is causing the stress. Seeing it in the act of passion that relishes the feeling produced by the attainment, one can gain release from it.

5. "Self" & "Not-self" as Skillful Strategies

Avoiding the question of the existence of the self not only allowed the Buddha to sidestep an issue that could prevent a student's progress on the path to the end of suffering; it also allowed him to focus directly on the kamma of self and not-self. In other words, it allowed him to look at the mental activities of I-making and my-making *as activities,* and to examine them in the terms that are appropriate to activities: When are they skillful in leading to the end of stress, and when are they not? If he had held to the doctrine that there is no self, there would have been no space in his teaching for the possibility that the notion of self could actually play a skillful role on the path, for it would have been a lie. With no room for I-making or my-making, the question that lies at the beginning of discernment—"What, when done by me, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?"—would have been aborted.

If, on the other hand, he had held to the doctrine that there is a self, then whatever he identified as self could not be regarded as not-self, and so would have been left as an object of clinging, and thus a remaining area of limitation and stress.

But to treat I-making and my-making purely as activities allowed him to give precise, helpful advice on when and where the perceptions of self and not-self—and what kind of self—are skillful strategies and when not.

We have already seen several examples of the Buddha recommending the perception of not-self as skillful. Here are a few examples of when he and his disciples recommended the perception of self as a skillful strategy along the path.

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

> Evil is done by oneself.
> By oneself is one defiled.
> Evil is left undone by oneself.
> By oneself is one cleansed.
> Purity and impurity are one's own doing.
> No one purifies another.
> No other purifies one. — *Dhp 165*

> You yourself should reprove yourself,
> should examine yourself.
> As a self-guarded monk with guarded self,
> mindful you dwell at ease. — *Dhp 379*

'And what is the self as a governing principle? There is the case where a monk, having gone to a wilderness, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty dwelling, reflects on this: "It's not for the sake of robes that I have gone forth from the home life into homelessness; it is not for the sake of almsfood, for the sake of lodgings, or for the sake of this or that state of [future] becoming that I have gone forth from the home life into homelessness. Simply that I am beset by birth, aging, and death; by sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, and despairs; beset by stress, overcome with stress, [and I hope,] 'Perhaps the end of this entire mass of suffering and stress might be known!' Now, if I were to seek the same sort of sensual pleasures that I abandoned in going forth from home into homelessness—or a worse sort—that would not be

fitting for me." So he reflects on this: "My persistence will be aroused and not lax; my mindfulness established and not confused; my body calm and not aroused; my mind centered and unified." Having made himself his governing principle, he abandons what is unskillful, develops what is skillful, abandons what is blameworthy, develops what is unblameworthy, and looks after himself in a pure way. This is called the self as a governing principle.' — *AN 3:40*

Ven. Ānanda: '"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-and-such, they say, through the ending of the effluents, has entered and remains in the effluent-free awareness-release and discernment-release, having directly known and realized them for himself right in the here-and-now." The thought occurs to him, "The monk named such-and-such, they say, through the ending of the effluents, has entered and remains in the effluent-free awareness-release and discernment-release, having directly known and realized them for himself right in the here-and-now. Then why not me?" Then he eventually abandons conceit, having relied on conceit. "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 this was it said.' — *AN 4:159*

These passages show that the idea of self can play a useful role on the path by creating a sense of self-reliance and clear motivation to practice. Without these skillful forms of I-making and my-making, a meditator would find it hard to get started and to stay on the path. Only after these skillful uses of the idea of self have done their work in leading the meditator to strong mindfulness and concentration can they be abandoned with the perception of not-self applied to the path, as we have seen above. Ultimately, even this perception can be abandoned when passion

and delight for all five aggregates—including the aggregate of perception—are put aside, and the mind reaches total release from stress.

6. The Strategic Use of the Knowledge, "All phenomena are not-self"

As the above discussion shows, the Buddha's first two reasons for not answering Vacchagotta's questions have many strategic implications and show the wisdom of taking no position as to whether there is or is not a self. This leaves us with the Buddha's third reason for not answering Vacchagotta's questions: that to say there is a self would not be in keeping with the arising of the knowledge that "All phenomena are not-self." To understand why the Buddha saw the arising of this knowledge as so important, we have to understand (a) what the statement, "All phenomena are not-self" means and (b) what strategic purpose it serves on the path.

In the Buddha's vocabulary, both the words "All" *(sabba)* and "phenomena" *(dhamma)* have very precise ranges of meaning. First, "All":

> 'What is All? Simply the eye and forms, ear and sounds, nose and aromas, tongue and flavors, body and tactile sensations, intellect and ideas. This, monks, is termed the All. Anyone who would say, "Repudiating this All, I will describe another," if questioned on what exactly might be the grounds for his statement, would be unable to explain, and furthermore, would be put to grief. Why? Because it lies beyond range.' — *SN 35:23*

In other words, the range of the word "All" goes only as far as the six senses and their objects—sometimes called the six spheres of contact. Anything beyond that range cannot be described, even as remaining or not remaining when those spheres of contact fade and cease.

Ven. MahāKoṭṭhita: 'With the remainderless fading and cessation of the six spheres of contact, is it the case that there is anything else?'

Ven. Sāriputta: 'Don't say that, my friend.'

Ven. MahāKoṭṭhita: 'With the remainderless fading and cessation of the six spheres of contact, is it the case that there is not anything else?'

Ven. Sāriputta: 'Don't say that, my friend.'

Ven. MahāKoṭṭhita: '...is it the case that there both is and is not anything else?'

Ven. Sāriputta: 'Don't say that, my friend.'

Ven. MahāKoṭṭhita: '...is it the case that there neither is nor is not anything else?'

Ven. Sāriputta: 'Don't say that, my friend.'

Ven. MahāKoṭṭhita: 'Being asked... if there is anything else, you say, "Don't say that, my friend." Being asked... if there is not anything else... if there both is and is not anything else... if there neither is nor is not anything else, you say, "Don't say that, my friend." Now, how is the meaning of this statement to be understood?'

Ven. Sāriputta: 'Saying, "... is it the case that there is anything else... is it the case that there is not anything else... is it the case that there both is and is not anything else... is it the case that there neither is nor is not anything else?" one is objectifying the non-objectified. However far the six spheres of contact go, that is how far objectification goes. However far objectification goes, that is how far the six spheres of contact go. With the remainderless fading and cessation of the six spheres of contact, there comes to be the cessation of objectification, the stilling of objectification.' — *AN 4:173*

The dimension of non-objectification, although it cannot be described, can be realized through direct experience.

> ‘Monks, that dimension is to be experienced where the eye [vision] ceases and the perception of form fades. That dimension is to be experienced where the ear ceases and the perception of sound fades… where the nose ceases and the perception of aroma fades… where the tongue ceases and the perception of flavor fades… where the body ceases and the perception of tactile sensation fades… where the intellect ceases and the perception of idea/phenomenon fades: That dimension is to be experienced.’ — *SN 35:116*

So the word “All,” even though it may cover the entirety of experience that can be described, does not cover the entirety of what can be directly experienced.

Similar considerations apply to the word, “phenomenon.” As the last quotation indicates, “phenomenon” applies to objects of the intellect or mind *(manas).* Iti 90 shows that these objects can be either fabricated—conditioned, willed, put together—or not. Thus in the teaching, “All fabrications are inconstant; all phenomena are not-self,” the term “not-self” applies to a wider range of phenomena than does the term “inconstant.” Only fabricated phenomena are inconstant; both fabricated and unfabricated phenomena are not-self.

The highest unfabricated phenomenon is dispassion *(virāga,* which can also be translated as “fading,” as in AN 4:173 and SN 35:116, above).

> ‘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. Those who have confidence in the phenomenon of dispassion have confidence in what is supreme; and for those with confidence in the supreme, supreme is the result.’ — *Iti 90*

Some of the terms following "dispassion" in this passage are its synonyms; some are not. Those that aren't are events that follow automatically on it. However, because *dhamma* can also mean "event," all these events come under the classification of the highest unfabricated event.

However, even though the realization of unbinding *(nibbāna)* is classed as a dhamma, several passages in the Canon indicate that unbinding itself is not. This point is clearest in the following exchange, where the young brahman Upasīva describes the goal as a dhamma, whereas the Buddha is careful to say that it is where all dhammas are done away with.

Upasīva:

One who has reached the end:
Does he not exist,
or is he for eternity free from affliction?
Please, sage, declare this to me
as this dhamma has been known by you.

The Buddha:

One who has reached the end has no criterion
by which anyone would say that —
it does not exist for him.
When all dhammas are done away with,
all means of speaking are done away with as well. — *Sn 5:6*

Given the range of the words "All" and "phenomena," the knowledge, "All phenomena are not-self" would apply to all objects of the mind, fabricated or not, registered through the six senses. This would include unbinding as an object of the mind, as in the realization of unbinding. However, it would not apply to unbinding itself, because that is where all dhammas end and are done away with. This point, though subtle, has an important bearing on the strategic use of the knowledge that all phenomena are not-self.

In fact, that is the first point to note about this knowledge: It is meant to be used strategically. Instead of being a description of what is learned upon attaining the goal, it is part of the path leading to the goal.

> 'All dhammas are not-self' —
> When one sees [this] with discernment
> and grows disenchanted with stress,
> this is the path to purity. — *Dhp 279*

This knowledge is especially useful at a very advanced stage of the path, for it can help a person who has already attained a partial awakening to attain total awakening.

There are, all in all, four stages of awakening described in the Canon: The first three involve seeing the deathless; the last, a total plunge into unbinding. This point is indicated in the following simile:

> Ven. Nārada: 'It's as if there were a well along a road in a desert, with neither rope nor water bucket. A man would come along overcome by heat, oppressed by the heat, exhausted, dehydrated, and thirsty. He would look into the well and would have knowledge of "water," but he would not dwell touching it with his body. In the same way, although I have seen properly with right discernment, as it has come to be, that "The cessation of becoming is unbinding," still I am not an arahant whose effluents are ended.' — *SN 12:68*

The implied analogy here is that the arahant is like someone who has plunged into the well and dwells touching the water with his body.

Another simile compares the path to total awakening to the act of crossing a river. In this case, the water stands for craving and for the flow of suffering in the wandering-on of repeated rebirth. The first three stages of awakening correspond to the point where one gains a footing on the far side of the river; full awakening, the

point where one has climbed to safety on the bank where all dhammas have been brought to a final end.

> ‘All dhammas gain footing in the deathless.
> ‘All dhammas have unbinding as their final end.’ — *AN 10:58*

The practical difference between gaining a footing and climbing the bank lies in how one reacts to the experience of the deathless —and this is where the knowledge, “All phenomena are not-self” comes into play:

> ‘There is the case where a monk… enters and remains in the first jhāna: rapture and pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation. He regards whatever phenomena there that are connected with form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness, as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a disintegration, an emptiness, not-self. He turns his mind away from those phenomena, and having done so, inclines his mind to the property of deathlessness: “This is peace, this is exquisite—the resolution 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 wasting away of the five lower fetters [self-identity views, grasping at habits and practices, uncertainty, sensual passion, and irritation]—he is due to be spontaneously reborn [in the Pure Abodes], there to be totally unbound, never again to return from that world.
>
> ‘[Similarly with the remaining jhānas and the formless attainments up through the dimension of nothingness.]’ — *AN 9:36*

As this passage indicates, the act of perceiving the five aggregates as not-self is, for some people, enough to gain full

awakening. If any passion and delight arise around the experience of the deathless—taking that experience as an object—such people can detect the passion and delight as coming under the fabrication aggregate, and so they can apply the perception of not-self to that passion and delight as well. Other people, however, focus too narrowly on the experience of the deathless, and so when passion and delight arise for that experience, they misperceive them as part of the experience. This would lead them to assume that the passion and delight are unfabricated. Because the unfabricated does not fall under the aggregates, and because they have been applying the perception not-self only to the aggregates as they perceived them, they would not apply the same perception to the passion and delight that they wrongly perceive as part of the deathless.

It's precisely this misperception that the knowledge, "All phenomena are not-self" is meant to cure. When this knowledge is applied even to the experience of the deathless, it can help detect the fabricated passion and delight around the deathless as actually separate from it. After all, these fabrications are dhammas, and they come from viewing the deathless as a dhamma. Thus the perception of not-self applies to them and to the aspect of the deathless experience that still takes that experience as an object of the mind. When this perception fully removes the last remaining act of clinging to these subtle mind-objects and events, all activity at the six senses ceases. Full awakening occurs with a full plunge into unbinding.

It's because the knowledge, "All phenomena are not-self" can lead to this goal, and because the Buddha wanted to prevent anything from getting in the way of the arising of this useful knowledge, that he remained silent when Vacchagotta asked him if there is a self.

7. The Abandoning of All Strategies

Once the goal is attained with the ending of action, all strategies are dropped. As we have noted, even the knowledge, "All phenomena are not-self" does not apply once there is a full plunge into unbinding. However, that does not mean that what lies beyond the range of that knowledge should be perceived as self. To believe that it does would be to fall into the wrong view that the Buddha avoided by not answering Vacchagotta's first question. As the above passage from Sn 5:6 indicates, there is no way of describing the person who has reached the end: a point that applies both to descriptions that use "self" and those that use "not-self."

In saying that the awakened person cannot be described, the Buddha was not simply being lazy in his use of language. He had a very clear notion of what defines a living being.

> As he was sitting to one side, Ven. Rādha said to the Blessed One, '"A being," lord. "A being," it's said. To what extent is one said to be "a being"?'
>
> 'Any desire, passion, delight, or craving for form, Rādha: When one is caught up *[satta]* there, tied up *[visatta]* there, one is said to be "a being *[satta]."*
>
> 'Any desire, passion, delight, or craving for feeling... perception... fabrications...
>
> 'Any desire, passion, delight, or craving for consciousness, Rādha: when one is caught up there, tied up there, one is said to be "a being."' — *SN 23:2*
>
> 'If one stays obsessed with form, that's what one is measured by. Whatever one is measured by, that's how one is classified.
>
> 'If one stays obsessed with feeling... perception... fabrications... consciousness, that's what one is measured by. Whatever one is measured by, that's how one is classified.
>
> 'If one doesn't stay obsessed with form, monk, that's not what one is measured by. Whatever one isn't measured by, that's not how one is classified.

> ‘If one doesn’t stay obsessed with feeling… perception… fabrications… consciousness, that’s not what one is measured by. Whatever one isn’t measured by, that’s not how one is classified.’ — *SN 22:36*

With nothing by which he/she can be measured or defined, there is no way of describing the person who is free from passion and delight for the aggregates. That is why the Buddha kept insisting that an awakened person cannot be described as existing, not existing, both, or neither (DN 9; MN 63; MN 72).

This point applies not only to what other people might say about the awakened person, but also to what the awakened person would say about him or herself. After all, in the attainment of the goal, all six sense spheres have ceased; when they have ceased, there is nothing felt. When there is nothing felt, not even the thought, “I am” would occur.

> The Buddha: ‘As for the person who says, “Feeling is not the self: My self is insensitive [to feeling],” he should be addressed as follows: “My friend, where nothing whatsoever is felt at all, would there be the thought, ‘I am’?”’
>
> Ven. Ananda: ‘No, lord.’
>
> The Buddha: ‘Thus in this manner, Ānanda, one does not see fit to assume that “Feeling is not my self: My self is insensitive [to feeling].”’ — *DN 15*

The fact that nothing is felt through the senses, however, does not mean that the experience of the goal is a total blank. It contains its own inherent *sukha:* pleasure, happiness, ease, and bliss

> ‘Now it’s possible, Ānanda, that some wanderers of other persuasions might say, “Gotama the contemplative speaks of the cessation of perception & feeling and yet describes it as pleasure. What is this? How is this?” When they say that, they are to be told, “It’s not the case, friends, that the Blessed One describes only pleasant feeling as included under

pleasure. Wherever pleasure is found, in whatever terms, the Blessed One describes it as pleasure."' — *SN 36:19*

It's because of this supreme pleasure that when an awakened person, after experiencing the goal and returning to the realms of the six senses, no longer feels the need to feed on the feelings that the six senses provide.

'Sensing a feeling of pleasure, one senses it disjoined from it. Sensing a feeling of pain, one senses it disjoined from it. Sensing a feeling of neither-pleasure-nor-pain, one senses it disjoined from it. This is called a well-instructed disciple of the noble ones disjoined from birth, aging, and death; from sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, and despairs—disjoined, I tell you, from suffering and stress.' — *SN 36:6*

With no need to feed off the six senses, the awakened person is freed from any need to read a "self" or "other" into sensory experience. This is what liberates such a person from any passion for views. As a result, experience can occur with no "subject" or "object" superimposed on it, no supposition of experience or thing experienced. There can be simply the experience in and of itself.

'Monks, whatever in this world—with its devas, Māras and Brahmās, its generations complete with contemplatives and brahmans, princes and men—is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, attained, sought after, pondered by the intellect: That do I know. Whatever in this world... is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, attained, sought after, pondered by the intellect: That I directly know. That has been realized by the Tathāgata [the fully awakened person], but in the Tathāgata it has not been established...

'And so, monks, the Tathāgata, when seeing what is to be seen, doesn't suppose an (object as) seen. He doesn't suppose an unseen. He doesn't suppose an (object) to-be-seen. He doesn't suppose a seer.

‘When hearing… When sensing… When cognizing what is to be cognized, he doesn’t suppose an (object as) cognized. He doesn’t suppose an uncognized. He doesn’t suppose an (object) to-be-cognized. He doesn’t suppose a cognizer.

‘And so, monks, the Tathāgata—being the same with regard to all phenomena that can be seen, heard, sensed, and cognized—is “Such.” And I tell you: There is no other “Such” higher or more sublime.

Whatever is seen or heard or sensed
and fastened onto as true by others,
One who is Such—among the self-fettered—
would not further assume to be true or even false.
Having seen well in advance that arrow
where generations are fastened and hung
— ‘I know, I see, that’s just how it is!’ —
there’s nothing of the Tathāgata fastened. — *AN 4:24*

A view is true or false only when one is judging how accurately it refers to something else. And one needs to do this as long as one has not yet fully reached full awakening. But when awakening is fully reached, one no longer needs views as guides to the highest happiness—for that happiness has already been attained—so one is free to regard every view purely as a mental or verbal act, an event, in and of itself. And when this is the case, true and false can be put aside. Thus for the Tathagata—whose lack of hunger frees him not to impose notions of subject or object on experience, and who can regard sights, sounds, feelings, and thoughts purely in and of themselves—views don’t have to be true or false. They can just be phenomena—actions, events—to be experienced. With no notion of subject, there are no grounds for “I know, I see”; with no notion of object, no grounds for, “That’s just how it is.” Views of true, false, self, no self, etc., thus lose all their holding power, and the mind is left free to its Suchness: untouched, uninfluenced by anything of any sort. Although the Buddha, as a teacher, used views as strategies to help his students gain release, his Suchness—

having gone beyond the need for such strategies—was something beyond.

> 'Does Master Gotama have any position at all?'
>
> 'A "position," Vaccha, is something a Tathāgata has done away with. What a Tathāgata sees is this: "Such is form, such its origination, such its disappearance; such is feeling, such its origination, such its disappearance; such is perception... such are fabrications... such is consciousness, such its origination, such its disappearance." Because of that, I say, a Tathāgata—with the ending, fading, cessation, renunciation, and relinquishment of all supposings, all excogitations, all I-making and my-making and obsession with conceit—is, through lack of clinging/sustenance, released.' — *MN 72*
>
> 'This, monks, the Tathāgata discerns. And he discerns that these positions, thus seized, thus held to, lead to such and such a destination, to such and such a state in the world beyond. And he discerns what is higher than this. And yet discerning that, he does not grasp at that act of discerning. And as he is not grasping at it, unbinding *[nibbuti]* is experienced right within. Knowing, as they have come to be, the origination, disappearance, allure, and drawbacks of feelings, along with the escape from feelings, the Tathāgata, monks—through lack of clinging/sustenance—is released.' — *DN 1*

* * *

The Canon thus contains plenty of evidence that the Buddha meant his most frequent teaching—that all phenomena are not-self—to be used as a strategy for putting an end to clinging. Because the end of clinging leads to the end of suffering, this teaching thus serves the overall purpose of why he taught in the first place. He did not mean for this teaching to serve as part of an answer to the metaphysical question of whether or not the self exists. That's because no answer to this question—either a categorical Yes, a categorical No, or an analytical Yes and No—

could serve as an effective strategy on the path to the end of stress. In fact, these latter views are all obstacles in the path. At the same time, they do not correspond to any view held by the awakened person once the path has achieved its goal, for such a person cannot be described in these terms, and indeed lies beyond the sway of any view at all.

The metaphysical question that the not-self teaching *does* respond to concerns the efficacy of action: that human action is the result of choice, and that those choices can lead either to stress or to the total ending of stress. When viewed in this light, questions of self and not-self become questions of action and skill: when choosing to use a perception of self will lead to long-term welfare and happiness, what kind of perception of self is useful toward that end, and when it's skillful to apply the perception of not-self instead. By avoiding the question of whether there is or is not a self, the Buddha was freed to focus on the most effective way to use perceptions both of self and of not-self as tools on the path. In particular, he was freed to employ the teaching that all phenomena are not-self as a tool leading his students to drop subtle forms of clinging without, at the same time, creating even subtler forms. That's why this strategy can help them reach full awakening.

Because the path to awakening leads to a total happiness, the need to think in terms of self and not-self ends when the path reaches its goal. And because the path is a set of actions leading to the end of action, all aspects of the path—including perceptions of self and not-self—are strategies: actions adopted to serve a purpose, and then put aside when that purpose is served. Although an awakened person can still use these perceptions for strategic purposes when dealing with others, the fact that they are perceptions—and thus included under the aggregates—means that they are transcended in the plunge into unbinding.

That, of course, is simply what the Canon says. Whether it's true—i.e., actually useful in putting an end to stress—cannot be proven simply by quoting the Canon. The ultimate test of this

interpretation is to put it into practice and see if it truly leads to the aim of the Buddha's teachings: the total ending of all suffering and stress.

The Buddha's Last Word

On the night of his total unbinding, as he was lying on his side under a pair of flowering trees, the Buddha gave his last instructions to his followers. His final sentence was *appamādena sampādetha:* Reach consummation through heedfulness. English syntax requires that we place "heedfulness" last when we translate the sentence, which may explain why so many discussions of this passage focus on heedfulness as the Buddha's parting message. There's nothing really wrong with that—after all, as he said elsewhere (AN 10:15), heedfulness is the source of all skillful qualities—but in the original Pali sentence, the verb for "reach consummation" actually comes last. Because the Buddha probably gave careful attention to choosing the whole of his last sentence, it's worth looking carefully at the word that usually gets overlooked: to gain a sense of what it means, how it connects with the rest of the Buddha's teaching, and why he would emphasize it by making it the last word he would ever speak.

Consummation is a state of fullness or perfection. As the Buddha recognized, some forms of consummation come with little or no effort, as when you're born into a large, well-connected family, consummate in good health and a wide range of possessions. But as he noted, this sort of consummation doesn't put an end to suffering; when you lose these things, it's not really a serious loss. The serious losses are when you lose your virtue or your correct understanding of which acts are skillful and which ones are not, for if you lose these things, your actions will lead to more suffering for yourself and for others, now and into the future (AN 5:130).

This is where the concept of meaningful consummation comes in. If you want to end your suffering, you need to develop

consummate mastery of the skills that allow you to see the cause of that suffering and to perfect the inner qualities required to bring it to an end. As with the mastery of any really important skill, this calls for concerted effort.

The cause of suffering is *avijjā,* a word that means both ignorance and lack of skill. There is no way we can trace back to a past point in time when ignorance began (AN 10:61), but we can learn both to detect the mental qualities in the present that sustain ignorance and to master the skills that put an end to them here and now. As Ajaan Suwat, one of my teachers, once said, even though ignorance has existed since time immemorial, consummate knowledge can end it in an instant, just as light can instantly end darkness regardless of how long that darkness has reigned.

Consummate knowledge is the knowledge that sees things in terms of the four noble truths, plus the skill mastering the task that each truth entails: comprehending suffering; abandoning its cause—i.e., the craving that sustains ignorance; realizing the cessation of suffering; and developing the path to its cessation.

Attaining consummation is part of developing the path, and in particular the path factor of right effort: making the effort to give rise to skillful mental qualities and to bring them to the culmination of their development. Although the idea of consummation could logically apply to any skillful quality, the Buddha associated it with specific lists of qualities that relate to two distinct stages of the path. And even though consummation in these areas isn't fully reached until the path arrives at the noble attainments, you can work toward consummation, and reap the benefits that come from heading in that direction, from the very beginning of the path.

The first level of consummation deals with qualities perfected when a meditator reaches the first level of awakening, called stream-entry. Such a person is said to be consummate in view *(diṭṭhi-sampanno)* and consummate in virtue *(sīla-sampanno)*—the two forms of consummation that the Buddha, in AN 5:130, said

are of utmost importance. Consummation in view comes when you drop ignorance long enough to see how, when the mental fabrications dependent on ignorance also fall away, all suffering ends and there's an experience of a deathless dimension outside of space and time. Consummation in virtue comes from stepping out of time long enough to see without a doubt how your own actions have sustained suffering for an immeasurably long time—it didn't start just with this lifetime—and, as a result, you never want to act in grossly unskillful ways ever again.

This experience of the deathless radically and permanently alters many things in the mind, but the experience itself is only temporary. And it's not enough to end craving, because many more qualities of mind need to be brought to consummation for awakening to be full, leaving no possibility of any further mental suffering.

One standard list of qualities that stream-enterers need to develop further is mentioned in MN 53: the fifteen types of conduct *(caraṇa),* which are divided into three sets. Some of the qualities in the first two sets are actually mentioned elsewhere in the Canon as qualities already brought to consummation on the first level of awakening. Their inclusion in the caraṇa may relate to the fact that even though they are already perfected, they still have to be put to use to complete the tasks of meditation.

The first set of qualities contains four factors: virtue, restraint of the senses, wakefulness, and moderation in eating. These qualities deal with practical issues in how you manage your day-to-day activities so that they are conducive to awakening. Although these qualities may seem extremely mundane, if you're intent on awakening, you can't afford to neglect them.

The second set of qualities contains seven factors: conviction, shame, compunction, learning, persistence, mindfulness, and discernment. This is a list that the Buddha in AN 7:63 compares to a frontier fortress, indicating that when they're mastered they protect the mind from being invaded by unskillful habits. Conviction in the Buddha's awakening is like the foundation post

for the fortress; shame and compunction at the thought of acting in unskillful ways are like a moat and road encircling the fortress; learning the Dhamma is like stocking the fortress with weapons; persistence is like a troop of soldiers; mindfulness is like a gatekeeper who recognizes who should and shouldn't be allowed into the fortress; and discernment is like the fortress wall, well-plastered so that the enemy can't find any handholds or footholds to climb up and invade the fortress of your mind.

The third and final set of caraṇa consists of the four jhānas—levels of strong concentration—which the Buddha compared to the provisions needed to keep the gatekeeper and the soldiers of the fortress well-nourished and strong in performing their duties.

These fifteen qualities, when brought to a consummate level of mastery, counteract the craving that sustains avijjā. This is why they lead to the three cognitive skills or knowledges *(vijjā)* that bring about full awakening: knowledge of your own previous lives; knowledge of the passing away and rearising of beings in line with their kamma; and knowledge of the ending of mental effluents—deeply rooted unskillful qualities that "flow out" of the mind. The first two of these skills affirm the principles of kamma and rebirth and the interconnection between the two. The third skill, however, is the most crucial of the three, as it clearly sees experience in terms of the four noble truths and completes the duties appropriate to each, so that the effluents no longer flow. In this way, this third skill leads directly to the ending of kamma and rebirth, and to full release from suffering and stress.

The Buddha himself was consummate in these fifteen types of conduct and in the three cognitive skills they engender, which is why "consummate in knowledge and conduct" *(vijjā-caraṇa-sampanno)* is included in the standard list of his virtues chanted daily in Buddhist communities throughout the world. By concluding his teachings with "reach consummation," he was encouraging his followers to develop these same virtues as well.

What's remarkable about these forms of consummation is how unremarkable they are. As the Buddha once said, he wasn't a close-

fisted teacher, saving a secret or esoteric doctrine for last. Instead, the word "reach consummation" simply reiterates the main teaching he had stressed open-handedly from the very beginning of his career: Develop the eightfold path—which is the same thing as training in virtue, concentration, and discernment—so as to release the mind from its effluents and the suffering they entail. The forms of consummation that don't fall directly under this teaching are practical, down-to-earth steps for keeping you on the path, moment-by-moment, day-by-day.

Shame and compunction develop the healthy sense of self-esteem and heedfulness that sees even the slightest unskillful actions as beneath you and as carrying fearful consequences. When you master these qualities, they prevent you from doing things you would later regret.

Sense restraint: When you look at anything, notice why you're looking and what happens to the mind as a result. If unskillful qualities are doing the looking or flare up from the looking, change the way you look at things. Apply the same principle to all your senses, and it will protect your powers of mindfulness and concentration from leaking out your sense doors in the course of the day.

Wakefulness: Sleep no more than is absolutely necessary, and spend your waking hours in cleansing the mind, regardless of whatever else you're doing.

Moderation in eating: Keep careful watch over your motivation for eating, and eat only enough to maintain your strength and health for the practice.

By including these issues under the term "consummation," the Buddha was emphasizing the point that no possible opening for craving to sneak into the mind, however small, should be overlooked. Perhaps it was because he knew how easy it is to become complacent and to rationalize carelessness in these fundamental areas that he wanted his disciples to use heedfulness in viewing them as consummate skills, worthy of scrupulous attention.

By ending his teachings with the verb *sampādetha,* "reach consummation," he was using a shorthand term to give these basic principles the last word in the Dhamma. And he was encouraging us to give them the last word in our lives.

Glossary

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

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

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

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

Deva: Literally, "shining one." An inhabitant of the terrestrial and celestial realms higher than the human.

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

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

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

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

Nāga: A magical serpent, technically classed as a common animal, but possessing many of the powers of a deva, including the ability to take on human shape.

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

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

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

Saṁsāra: Transmigration; the process of wandering through repeated states of becoming, entailing repeated birth and death.

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

Saṅgha: On the conventional *(sammati)* level, this term denotes the communities of Buddhist monks and nuns. On the noble or 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.*

Tādin: "Such," an adjective to describe one who has attained the goal. It indicates that the person's state is indefinable but not

subject to change or influences of any sort.

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

Uposatha: Observance day, coinciding with the full moon, new moon, and half moons. Lay Buddhists often observe the eight precepts on this day. "Uposatha" also refers to the ceremony in which monks meet to listen to the recitation of the Pāṭimokkha on the full moon and new moon uposathas.

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

Abbreviations

AN	*Aṅguttara Nikāya*
Dhp	*Dhammapada*
DN	*Dīgha Nikāya*
Iti	*Itivuttaka*
Khp	*Khuddakapāṭha*
MN	*Majjhima Nikāya*
Mv	*Mahāvagga*
SN	*Saṁyutta Nikāya*
Sn	*Sutta Nipāta*
Ud	*Udāna*

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

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