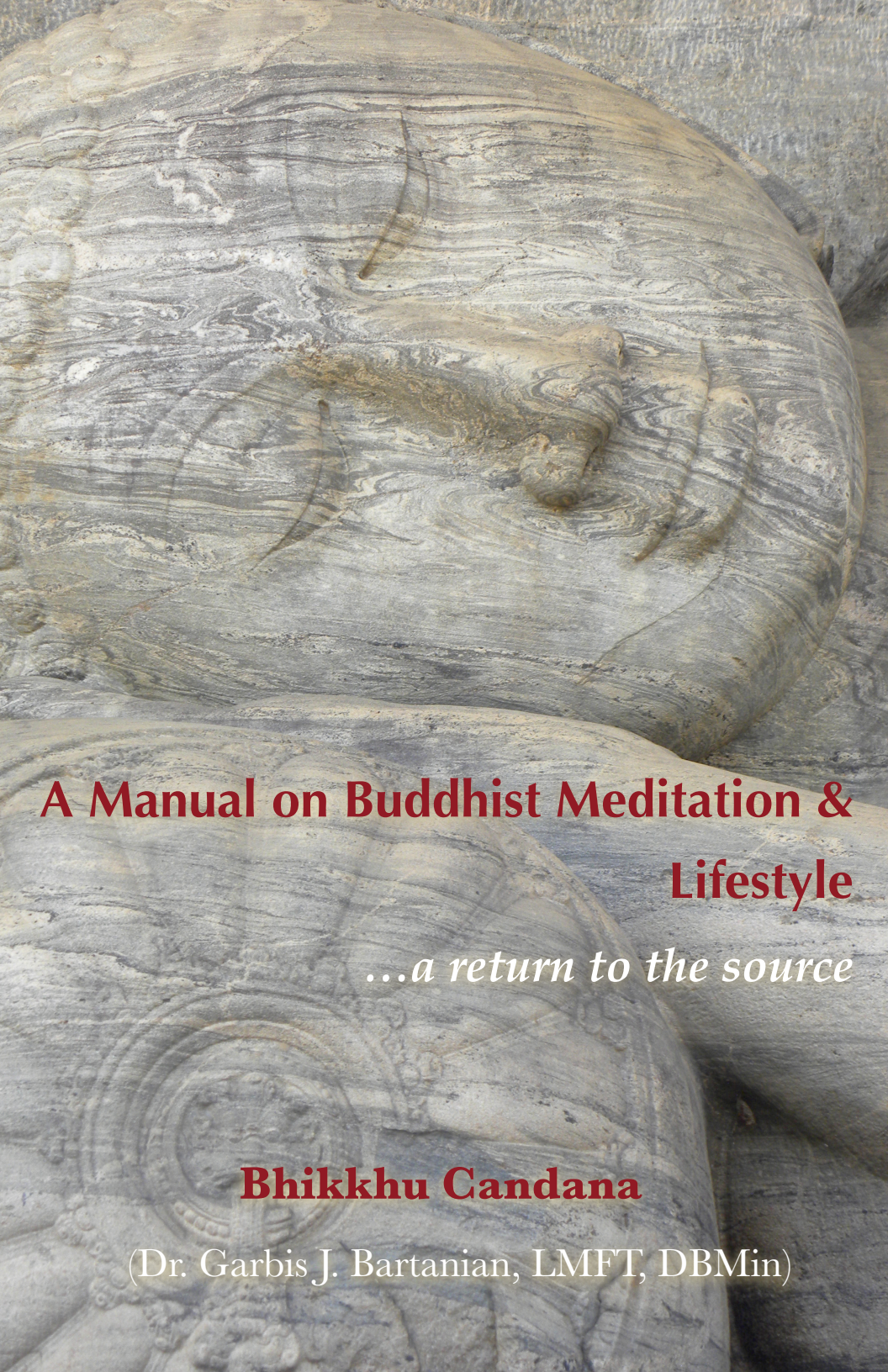

A Manual on Buddhist Meditation & Lifestyle

…a return to the source

Bhikkhu Candana

(Dr. Garbis J. Bartanian, LMFT, DBMin)

Dedicated to my Parents

and Teachers,

....and all those with little dust in their eyes.

Sabbadānaṃ dhammadānaṃ jināti

'The gift of Dhamma surpasses all other gifts.'

The Dhamma is Priceless!

This book is not for sale.

It is a gift of Dhamma to you, the reader.

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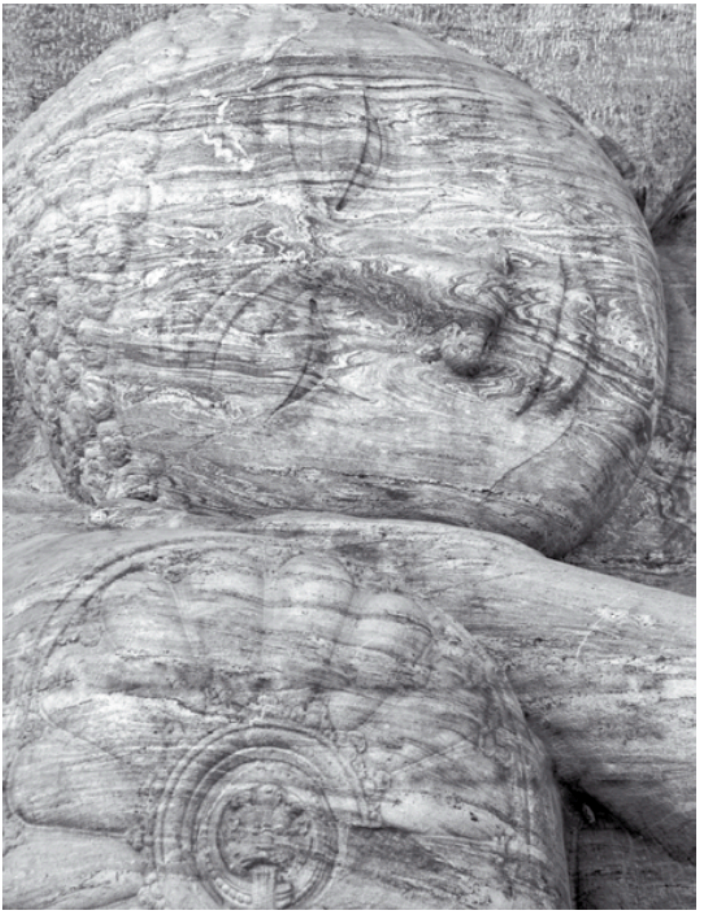

by

Bhikkhu Candana

Dr. Garbis J. Bartanian, DBMin, LMFT

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About the Author

As the grandson of the Armenian Genocide survivors, Bhikkhu Candana (Dr. Garbis Bartanian) was born in Beirut at the time of the 17-year Lebanese civil war during which, as an eight-year-old boy, he was severely injured but survived a near-death mortar attack while at his family home. Having thus tasted both collective and personal trauma, along with their lifelong manifestations as PTSD, Bhikkhu Candana grew up with a keen interest in the workings of the mind and a driven quest for life's true purpose.

This quest brought Candana Bhikkhu to the teachings of the Buddha, whereby equipped with over thirty years of studies in Buddhist teachings, he currently functions as a Dhamma and meditation teacher, as well as a licensed psychotherapist based in Los Angeles, California. Bhikkhu Candana holds a Doctorate in Buddhist Ministry, as well as the title of *Ācariya*, which he was granted by the Sangha Council of Southern California in 1998. Decades later, as a clinician his dissertation, titled *Mindful Grounding and Trauma* (2018) helped reconnect modern mindfulness practice to the Dhamma by developing a practical intervention for healing his trauma patients and guiding other clinicians in their work, while being rooted in the principles of the Dhamma. Now, a Bhikkhu, Bhante Candana continues his work conducting retreats, Sutta explorations for meditation students from around the world, in addition to giving Dhamma Talks both in English and Armenian languages that are available on YouTube, as well as retranslating, narrating, audio recording, and uploading onto YouTube the *suttas* found in the major Pāli *Nikāyas*, in order to make the words of the Buddha easily accessible to modern listeners everywhere, thus making the Dhamma available and preserving it for everyone and for posterity.

Bhikkhu Candana may be reached through his website where you can have access to his research work on *Mindful Grounding*, as well as this book in PDF form, and any updates on Dhamma projects and retreats.

www.mindreleased.com

Aneka jāti saṁsāram
Sandhavissam anibbisaṁ,

Through countless births in the cycle of existence
I have run, in vain

Gaha kārakaṁ gavesanto
Dukkha jāti punappunam.

Seeking the builder of this house;
Again and again I faced the suffering of new birth.

Gaha kāraka! Ditthoʼsi!
Puna gehaṁ na kāhasi.

Oh house-builder! I have now seen you!
You shall not build me any more houses, ever again.

Sabba te phāsukā bhaggā,
Gaha kutaṁ visaṅkhataṁ.

All your beams are broken,
The ridgepole is shattered.

Visaṅkhāra gataṁ cittaṁ,
Taṇhānam khayam ajjhagā.

The mind has become freed from habitual tendencies;
The end of craving has now been reached.

- The Dhammapada, verse 153.

Abbreviations

DN - Dīgha Nikāya (Long Discourses of the Buddha)

MN - Majjhima Nikāya (Middle Length Discourses)

SN - Saṁyutta Nikāya (Connected Discourses)

AN - Aṅguttara Nikāya (Numerical Discourses)

Snp. - Sutta Nipāta (Earliest Discourses' Group)

Dhp. - Dhammapada (Verses of the Dhamma)

Ud. - Udāna (Inspired Utterances of the Buddha)

Itv. - Itivuttaka (*"As It Was Said"* Discourses)

Acknowledgement

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa!

This work, along with my life, could not have been possible without the loving and caring presence of my parents, even in their absence. The inquisitive and investigative mind that was instilled in me by my father, whose rationality, dedication and along with my mother, their generosity to others, especially the elderly, have inspired me to lead more than the last thirty years of my life in the service of those in need. By going back to the earlier discourses, suddenly, everything started making sense as I began exploring the Original Teachings of the Buddha, as found within the Pāli Canon's Nikāyas. It was then that I saw how everything we need to learn, as guidance and instruction, is already provided for by the Lord Buddha and His Āriya Sāvakas (His Noble Disciples) within the *Suttas*. There, with their help I found myself understanding, bit by bit, as I finally began to taste the beauty of the Dhamma. That is when meditation itself (and life), became fun for the very first time.

Over the years, I was able to find myself at the feet of many a teacher, including my very first guide and teacher of the Dhamma, the late Ven. Havanpola Ratanasāra Mahāthera, Ph.D., who took me in at the College of Buddhist Studies, where my journey in the Dhamma began. It is Bhante Ratanasāra who gave me the *Upāsaka* name "Candana," as he became my preceptor, granting me the *Panca Sīla* (the Five Precepts). It is out of respect and

appreciation for Bhante Ratanasāra that I requested during my Upasampadā or Higher Ordination Ceremony, that my Bhikkhu name be kept the same, i.e. "Candana," as he had chosen it for me years earlier, and for its significance. Also, it was due to Bhante Ratanasāra's insistence on the proper use of the Pāli language during my early days, that I fell in love with the Suttas or Discourses, which have carried with them the teachings of Lord Buddha through thecenturies, as captured in the melodic Pāli language. I am indebted to Bhante for his encouragement and confidence in me to start teaching the Dhamma back in 1998 for the first time, when he granted me, a layperson, the title of a "Teacher of Dhamma" or Ācariya, despite my hesitation in receiving such a great honor.

I also pay my respect to my Upajjhāya, Ven. Suvanna Bhivamsa, Ph.D., who kindly accepted to preside over both of my Samanera and Upasampadā Ordinations, wherein I was finally able to realize my dream of becoming a Bhikkhu in the lineage of the Great Teacher, ever since I was 15 years old.

I am also deeply grateful to my other teacher on the Path, whom I have been privileged to study with, namely the late Ven. Dr. Madewala Punnaji Mahāthera, Ph.D., of the Buddhist Mahāvihāra at Brickfields in Malaysia. Venerable Punnaji allowed me to go deeper into my practice given his explanations in studying the Suttas *directly*, beyond the commentaries, by going back to the source of Lord Buddha's Teachings, as preserved in the Pāli *Nikāyas* using the "Harmonious" steps of the Noble Eightfold Path. I humbly pay homage to you, my teachers, for having had the privilege of meeting you, with my head at your feet.

Preface

This book is the result of requests and queries from students and those interested in understanding the core teachings of the Buddha and how the Dhamma could help them, the readers, learn the tools to pierce through the difficulties they face, whereby a level of peace and tranquility may be established in their lives. Therefore, this work is especially intended to relate to the living circumstances of modern readers dealing with the various stressors of life, in all its phases, whether one is a layperson or a monastic.

This is a manual intended for readers who are on various levels of practice on the spectrum, from absolute novices to those seasoned in the practice of meditation with years of experience.

Given the influence Buddhism has had on the various layers of our contemporary society during the past several decades, one can clearly see how many of its principles have become very much woven into the fabric of our collective consciousness being introduced into various disciplines, including science, art, lifestyles, and especially the field of mental health. This comes as no surprise when we read in the early Pāli Canon's *Nikāyas*, such as in *suttas* in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, where the Buddha talks about two kinds of illness: physical illness and mental illness, thus clearly designating mental health as an important aspect of living a happy and healthy life by underlining its importance, something that predates contemporary and Western

psychotherapeutic schools of thought by almost 2600 years. It is no wonder, therefore, that researchers and practitioners in the field of psychology and psychotherapy have often been utilizing principles that run parallel, if not in some cases directly coming from the teachings of the Buddha (although not always paying tribute or acknowledging its contributions to the field). For this reason, we are often introduced to principles of therapeutic modalities that harken many of the principles delineated in the interplay between the mind, emotions, habits, maladaptive behaviors, and a slew of diverse symptomatology.

These are addressed and treated given the introduction of mindfulness principles, reconnecting to the body via somatic experiencing, developing insight, as well as maintaining an investigative approach while looking at the intricate workings of the mind, challenging irrational beliefs and cognitive distortions. This, in addition to engendering a systemic and causally natured approach that looks at the interplay of relationships between individuals, as has been the case with modern and post-modern schools of psychotherapy.

Perhaps this last principle of causality, which has been carefully explored within systemic models of therapy, serves as a clear indication of the uncanny similarity in approaching the human condition and the symptoms that are faced by individuals with what the Buddha had explained meticulously through his forty-five years of teaching. Of course, while looking at the Dhamma that the Buddha taught, we see a much more in-depth analysis and surgical precision in the investigation of the mind while

applying the meditative process that has survived through the centuries and presents itself within the *suttas* of the earliest available version of his teachings found within the *Pāli* Canon, and kept alive within the Theravāda tradition of Buddhism.

By providing a simpler formula of what comes to us through the Buddha's words, I have attempted to bring to the reader the most essential and pertinent information regarding mental cultivation or development of the mind while basing it on the earliest known teachings of the Buddha through the *suttas* and not the commentaries. Unfortunately, this has been a major issue during the last several hundred years whereby the commentaries, while being secondary sources, have replaced the primary ones, i.e., the *suttas*, and the actual teachings of the Buddha in their importance. This has been detrimental to the Buddha's teachings, especially as it relates to these commentaries presenting at times contradictory information and in some cases principles that are nowhere to be found within the *suttas*. The result has been a state of confusion for many a meditator despite their willingness and desire to wholeheartedly follow the path of the Buddha. Often, the simple teaching is the true teaching and herein lies the challenge that many a newcomer into the field of meditation faces due to the lack of proper information. Having studied with teachers in Asia and America and learning from these esteemed monks for the past thirty years, it has been my goal to study the *suttas* with them while also applying the teachings found in them through dedicated practice. Having studied the Dhamma in both academic and monastic settings, alongside practicing the Teachings through

intensive meditation retreats, I have been encouraged by my teachers, all of whom have been Theravāda monks, to come back to the West and teach the Dhamma and its practice to the larger public.

Given the recent interest in mindfulness in Western countries, many forms of interpretations and manifestations of it have been introduced, and on a wide spectrum. These include mindfulness in business, mindfulness in sports, mindfulness in the various sensory enjoyments, where some have even begun advocating for "mindfulness in sex."

Although the magnitude of mindfulness can and does impact the very quality of one's experience of things, and yet going back to the source of it, i.e. mindfulness within the Teachings of the Buddha, one can easily and clearly see how these various incarnations of mindfulness were not what its Founder had in mind. It is here, in the effort of looking at and demonstrating the proper role of mindfulness in the grander scheme of various other, equally important ingredients that I seek to help the readers expand not only their understanding of mindfulness, but also to guide them through the systematic progression of their practice.

If the Buddha's Teachings are followed without adding or subtracting anything, they can and will assist one in the development of deeper realizations of oneself, of experiences, and the world. This is what the Buddha called, "seeing things as they come to be" *(yathābhutaṁ pajānāti)*.

Unlike what some have mistakenly claimed by limiting their focus on the First Noble Truth, that the Buddha

declared, i.e. *dukkha* or "suffering to be the main message of Buddhism," what is often not considered is that the Buddha *also* taught the *ending* of suffering, hence the Third and Fourth Noble Truths (Cessation of suffering and the Path leading to the Cessation of Suffering, respectively), via the understanding of the very cause of suffering (the Second Noble Truth: the Origin of Suffering), which is ignorance that is sustained through craving.

It is my hope that the collection of teachings shared herein will be helpful to you as they have been to many of my students of meditation as they progressed to deeper and deeper states of mind where the dart of ignorance has been removed, with some even gaining the vision of Dhamma.

In addition, several interventions are presented from my work as a psychotherapist with patients that have dealt with various mental health and behavioral disorders, such as stress, anger management, depression, and anxiety, while offering tools and a wider scope of understanding thanks to the Teachings of the Buddha, undeniably the earliest psychotherapist humanity has known, whose interventions are still being "discovered" by researchers, 2600 years later.

The goal of this work is to guide you to a happier state of being, as my intention is to help you gain a better understanding of the vicious cycle of suffering, supported by the practice that will show you how to gain the Fruits of the Dhamma through your personal understanding and wisdom, supported by the tools made available by Lord Buddha.

Introduction

This practice is about ***no more delay.*** After all, this is the urging and the call to action that the Buddha presented to his monks, nuns, and laity prior to closing his eyes for the last time nearly 2600 years ago. For forty-five years his diligent, compassionate, and dedicated work involved explaining and providing us with the specific steps to help us gain not only the freedom of understanding our connection to suffering but also showed us the ways to live happy and wholesome lives through non-grasping. This, while also living in harmony with our surroundings and respecting the environment using the Four Noble Truths, as we learn the value of studying these teachings that succinctly explain the role of ignorance and wrong view in perpetuating a form of existence that is run on the fuel of craving for "the other," "the more," and the next newer experiences. It is the same tone set by the example and Teachings of Gautama the Buddha and his Awakened Disciples that is to be followed in the next pages; that is, to make the most out of our human birth while being direct in no longer prolonging our stay in the realm of pain and suffering, whether physical, mental, or emotional.

The potential for suffering is found in the present moment, as is its cure. Therefore, we suffer in the present *and* we heal in the present. However, we must be cautioned from oversimplifying in such a way as to say that the spiritual life or the Buddhist practice is all about "being in the moment." It is not, unless it includes with it a clear understanding and a sense of discerning involvement throughout the choices

being made in our everyday life, and the moments therein. In the Pāli *suttas* we read how the Buddha, prior to his Enlightenment, realized this and saw how organizing his thoughts into two piles[1], i.e. wholesome and unwholesome ones, he was able to carefully distinguish his thoughts and consistently practiced his mindfulness *(sati)* every moment he spent. This allowed him to apply his selective thinking and choose his thoughts, given their subsequent results, and thereby looking at his actions with awareness and clear comprehension *(sati sampajañña)*, which can only take place within the confines of the present moment.

The Buddhist path is neither about guesswork, wishful thinking, or doing something (albeit with good intentions) while hoping for the best, nor is it about blindly following a teacher, including the Buddha, without some sense of taking responsibility for being alert and considerate of one's attitude towards life, and the desirous curiosity to understand it through wisdom.

This Teaching that comes to us, what we call the *Dhamma,* challenges us to not only be present, but to take responsibility in choosing our very thoughts, observing our feelings, and selectively manifesting actions that are wholesome, taking place in the here and now. But being wholesome or choosing thoughts, words, and actions that are wholesome *(kusala)* is not a passive affair; it requires effort, constant diligence, and heedfulness in not falling prey to old ways of thinking and patterns of behavior that may often be described as reactionary and maladaptive. To this end, this path invites us to choose a new potential for ourselves and the world around us. For when we start

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[1] *Dvedhavitakka Sutta*: Two Kinds of Thoughts. MN 19

practicing the Three Trainings of virtue, mental cultivation, and discernment/wisdom *(sīla, samādhi, paññā)*, we must also be ready to face our hindrances *(nīvarana)* of sensual lust, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry/remorse, and finally, doubt. These obstacles hide our greatest potential and have a great deal to teach us about ourselves, hence they may be considered as our *friends* or *teachers* and not our enemies, as many have claimed in the past, in that they provide us with clues as to where our deepest attachments lie. Therefore, we can learn from them and advance in our practice and wisdom.

In a time-period where past values and systems that have worked for millennia are being questioned for the sake of trying to integrate, negotiate, or leave out such truths into/from our own contemporary paradigms, as we desperately do away with constructive values that require legitimate discipline on the part of the individual to develop into a better version of themselves, it is no surprise that many are seeking a quick way to penetrate or "tap into" and taste the fruits of the Dhamma, but without putting in the necessary work. This means that in our modern consumerist society, our quest to obtain quick results and reach a level of contentment finds its way into our meditation cushion and spiritual endeavors. Here, the legalization of drugs and intoxicants is not helping this situation of a deluded approach in appreciating the value of meditation. Therefore, seeking to obtain such results without being guided by Right View (Harmonious Perspective) [2] ultimately only serves to undermine the values of the True *Dhamma*, as it enhances

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[2] Refer to the Noble Eightfold Path (as described within the Four Noble Truths chapter).

delusion while extending our own suffering, and the eventual demise of our species and the environment into a perpetual state of confusion and pain.

If happiness is important to us, then, much like anything else that is worthwhile, it must have a price. To my understanding, this price is no less than our understanding and diligent practice of the Three Trainings, which include a) maintaining precepts, b) cultivating the mind through meditative practice, and c) developing the mind through insight and wisdom. Furthermore, the last of these, i.e. insights and wisdom, naturally follow as a result of such genuine practice of a working system *without* the need for us to add anything to it, or to try to re-interpret what the Buddha or the teachers "must have meant", in order to satisfy our own contemporary standards of living or worldviews, something that is often led by *micchā diṭṭhi* or wrong view. The Three Trainings, therefore, are the antidotes to the cycle of misery and suffering that beings keep experiencing as they move from life to life. We are fortunate to be reborn as human beings in this life, having the capacity to think and ponder, investigate and explore, and dedicate our energies to reach an ending of suffering, while following a path that delivers. However, this great fortune is greatly experienced not by the maximization of pleasure and the minimization of unpleasant experiences, but by our desire and deliberate effort to get ourselves out of the cycle of suffering, i.e. *Saṃsāra*.

Through his teachings in the early *suttas*, we see how the Buddha, being the surgeon, uses the sharp knife of wisdom to cut the infected wound open, to remove the

poison of ignorance. It is within these wounds that defilements find solace and hide lurking in the dark, underlying most of our identifications with the world within and around us. The hurt or suffering caused by the wound will remain there, so long as there is a sense of identification with it, as we try to sustain a continuous impression of an unchanging self, utterly independent of conditions.

It is my challenge to you, dear reader, that by following the teachings of the Buddha reintroduced here as a manual for meditation, you too will obtain the fruits that countless others have tasted for the past twenty-six centuries and continue to do so in this digital age.

First, a few words about Mindfulness...

When we speak about or try to describe the nature and function of mindfulness, we must be aware of the need to separate our expectations of what we think it (mindfulness) is or should be versus what it actually is, given what popular interpretations of mindfulness have claimed. Thus, we need to consider that mindfulness or the practice of meditation does not have as its goal the state of feeling good, relaxation, being stress-free, or making things to be different than what they actually are.

Mindfulness may bring one a sense of being at peace or a state of no inner resistance, but one needs to consider how these come as side-effects, for it is the wide and accepting way of observing the living experience without attachment or identification that mindfulness facilitates, as it helps one develop the wisdom to see through the habitual

patterns of living, which is anything but a conscious way of living. This of course needs to be firmly grounded in a solid understanding of the importance of living a virtuous life, which in the Buddha's Dhamma means a strong adherence to the precepts. This is the backbone of a successful practice, because without it, not only will there be no progress but, even worse, delusion and wrong understanding of the Dhamma *(micchā diṭṭhi)* may overtake one, prolonging one's presence in the pangs of *Saṃsāric Dukkha*, i.e. suffering in the endless cycle of rebirths.

Everything has its price, which in the Buddhist context we can see to be represented as the causes and conditions that bring about a certain outcome, hence the importance for the individual practitioner to do one's own work instead of relying on or believing in another to do the work for them. Thus, in order to see the evidence of the Buddha's Teaching, we need to provide the necessary conditions for them to bear fruit in us. The Buddha invites us all 'to come and see' *(ehi passiko)*; to examine and apply the principles that he laid out for us, to test them out for ourselves without the need or condition of blind faith. Therefore, *no one* is there to save or grant us salvation from suffering. It is our own effort, understanding, diligence, and trust in our goodness in the presence of an ethically grounded life, based on the precepts as we live by the compass of the Noble Eightfold Path, that helps us witness the truth of the Dhamma. In this, Buddhism remains unequal in the company of other world religions, given its humanistic and realistic approach to bringing about positive and transformative change in people's lives, without the presence of an external source or grace to grant us the Fruit of *Nibbāna*. However, this statement too needs to be tested and applied for oneself, so that one can see its verity.

Buddha's Path:
Each Individual's *Own* Journey

Be a refuge onto your own selves. No one is there to save us, not even the Buddha, not here and not in any other universe. The teachings provided in these pages come from the Theravāda or earliest available Teachings we have from the Buddha; hence they do not have much to do with the utterance of any mantras nor of following any Bodhisattva vows. Instead, they help the individual to face one's life with complete responsibility of making the most of it as it relates to seeing, understanding, and resolving to cut oneself loose from the grip of continued suffering *(dukkha)*, within this very life.

After carefully looking at what the Buddha taught, we see that as the Dhamma spread into other countries and regions of the world, as well as through temporal changes, influences from other traditions were inevitably added into the Buddha's teachings. Unfortunately, what this resulted in was a minimization of the paramount importance of the *urgency* or *saṁvega* of attaining liberation by the cessation of suffering in this very life, what the Buddha strongly encouraged in his listeners for 45 years. Given the very fact that things are not permanent and therefore always changing, there is and will be suffering, which is at the backbone of our living experience in our conditioned reality, unless one moves away from building more mental proliferations in one's life, be they in the form of new relationships, colorful and diverse experiences, and all manner of distractions. Here, we can remember how once,

while addressing His students, the Buddha picked a tiny bit of dirt with the tip of his fingernail and explained how there is not even *that* much material form in existence that is lasting, not subject to change, constant, or eternal, whereby it could stay like that forever. And because there is no such thing in the universe, the spiritual life is properly discerned and lived, as one seeks out one's own salvation from the repeated cycles of suffering.[3] Thus, the undertone of this work is not to postpone one's efforts to a later possibility, to a later hope of becoming something "other than," instead of removing the poisonous dart of ignorance right here, right now. The Buddha was a realist as well as a humanist, and this shows in every bit of the teachings that he had proclaimed for forty-five years, wherein the responsibility for getting oneself out of suffering was always brought back to the individual.

Being a *bodhisatta* himself for eons, the Buddha offered us a path of liberation in this very life, given the absolute rarity of human birth, something that he never encouraged us to take for granted, and neither did he as he sought to experience Full Awakening in his last birth prior to becoming a Buddha. Thus, the message is clear, as is the challenge: remove the dart of ignorance in this very life and end the cycle of suffering not only for yourself but for others, as a consequence of your own liberation, in helping them become free from their suffering as well *with* your own example. Here, I am reminded of the safety check that flight attendants provide to passengers on an airplane, whereby they clearly emphasize the absolute importance in 'making sure that one puts on *their own* oxygen mask first *before* they

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3 *Nakhasikha Sutta*: The Tip of The Fingernail. SN 22.97

put on their loved ones.' This simple yet very important step has, therefore, a specific purpose that is not *only* to save ourselves but to ensure the safety of others through our own responsibility, by taking charge of our own salvation. Therefore, throughout these pages you will not find a sweet or a magic pill or a secret mantra, but only principles that are intended to help you reduce your own suffering. These principles, nevertheless, will require (as they always have) audacity, honesty, and humility on your part in order to make *Nibbāna* a reality for you.

Finally, dear reader, please remember that happiness is a choice, as is joy, which requires effort to move against the grain of old habitual ways of thinking and reacting to situations. This means becoming able to look beyond our old paradigm of interpreting experiences according to a worldview that is unwholesome at best, with a self-image overtaken by the challenging circumstances life presents us with, where we become their victims. It was this curious but honest attitude in understanding and exploring the causes of one's suffering that distinguished the *bodhisatta* Gautama, and later his students, as they went searching for a level of understanding that allowed them to sever, once and for all, the bonds of ignorance and release themselves from the cycle of s*aṃsāra*.

Enjoy the adventure...

The Four Noble Truths

When He first began to teach, thus setting into motion the Wheel of Dhamma[4], as described in the *Dhammachakkapavattanā sutta*[5], we see how, while explaining the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha starts with *dukkha*, or suffering. Now, many people think they know what suffering is and may wonder where the novelty in what the Buddha teaches resides and, even more so, wherein lies the "nobility" of suffering. What we need to remember is that the reason the Buddha called suffering *āriya saccā*, meaning, a "noble" truth is not because *dukkha* is noble, but because the understanding of it is the qualifier for nobility. What we usually and essentially associate with – and which makes us think that we "know" what *dukkha* is – *is the feeling* aspect of suffering, that is, *dukkha-vedanā*. We know how it feels to be in pain, and immediately want to change the set of events that are causing the pain, thus giving rise to the defilements. Knowing how suffering feels and *understanding* "how it comes to be" *(yathābhutaṁ pajānāti)* are two different things.

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4 All Buddhas are known to teach the Four Noble Truths, appearing at a time when knowledge of these Truths has completely vanished in the world. The first time a Buddha teaches is considered a special and momentous event, wherein the Buddha *Turns the Wheel of Dhamma*, setting it in motion again. Being a Self-Realized Arahant, a Buddha makes Liberation possible by re-opening the door to Nibbāna for beings to experience full Awakening themselves, ending their endless cycles of suffering in *saṃsāra*.

5 *Dhammacakkapavattanā Sutta*: Setting in Motion the Wheel of Dhamma. SN 56.11

People may also equate the Dhamma or the Buddhist Path with pessimism. Nothing could be further from the truth. To say that 'the Dhamma teaches life to be suffering' is an utter misrepresentation of Lord Buddha's Teachings. The Buddha said '*there* is suffering in life,' not that 'life is suffering.' That makes a huge difference: seeing the *Truth of the understanding of Suffering*.

Now, to come to a point where we understand the truth of that statement on a visceral level, deeply, essentially, and see how big of a part it takes in our lives, means that we start to see *dukkha* to be present in other areas of our day-to-day reality, in our relationship with our boss, or teacher, or spouse, the government, and so on. The Buddha constantly mentions that a person who understands *dukkha* is the person who can experience *Nibbāna*. But where does the suffering come from? To answer this, we see how the Buddha gave us the Second Noble Truth: craving *(samudaya-saccā)*, i.e. the *Truth of understanding of the Cause of Suffering*.

In the West, people often tend to equate the Dhamma with science, which is valid to some extent. But science has a long way to go to catch up with the Dhamma. There is so much that science does not have the tools to measure when it comes to what the Dhamma teaches or the Dhamma practitioner experiences, what the mind's capabilities are, and the transformations that take place within the individual. But science is useful to some degree, for in looking at science, we know through a law of thermodynamics that energy can neither be created nor destroyed. If we go by that premise as we look at the Teachings, we see how there must be a cause to suffering. And the cause of that is the ignorance which brings about craving, such as when we find ourselves holding on to

people or memories. When we hold on to a loved one or a child and do not want them to get older, for example, or when we look in the mirror and see gray hair or wrinkles where there was a smooth layer of lustrous and youthful skin in the past, aversion arises in the mind, as we realize the bitter sting of impermanence, quickly followed by suffering. Some may pluck the gray hair, un-seeing them, as if. But you will soon have to pluck them again, more of them, inevitably wasting your time and energy. When we look outside of Dhamma for security, we are in fact going back to the source of the Second Noble Truth; meaning, we are craving for things to stay the same, especially, when it involves something that we gain pleasure from. A teacher of mine, Bhante Punnaji, used to constantly repeat to me, "Life has become nothing more than a maximization of pleasurable experiences and a minimization of unpleasant ones." We do this all the time, for we have misconstrued the nature of happiness, for it is not the same as extracting delight from sense pleasures.

Fortunately for us, the Buddha did not just teach suffering; otherwise we would be stuck. This path is about Liberation, so the Buddha also gave us the remedy, i.e. the Truth of the Cessation of Suffering and the Truth of the Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering (Third and Fourth Noble Truths), which make this path truly special. That gives us not only hope but an understanding, enabling us to move away from the craving (through understanding) and by just looking at the process, which itself brings a significant sense of relief to the mind.

To know that there is suffering and not be able to see that there is a way out of suffering is delusion itself. Everybody at the time of the Buddha, including all his teachers, had come to accept that the most one could attain was the eighth *jhāna* (a highly developed state of subtle mental calm and understanding), which though a sublime state, is nonetheless temporary; one would still fall out of it, and be subject to the cycle of rebirth, thus losing whatever one gains, again and again. However, once a person experiences *Nibbāna* and becomes a *Sotāpanna*, a "Stream-Enterer" (the lowest stage of realization), it is impossible for them to fall back from the certainty of Awakening, being on the sure path, whereby at the most, it will take seven more lifetimes for them to attain the final goal of Full Awakening. That's why they are called stream- enterers, because they have now "entered the stream" that is one directional, taking them straight to *Nibbāna*. One time, someone asked the Buddha what it was that he wished for his disciples, and the Buddha's reply was that he would like all his *Sangha*, laity and monastics alike, to reach at least the first stage, i.e. *Sotāpanna*.

In today's world of materialistic approaches of looking at life, it is often no surprise that even in the midst of Buddhist research, it is difficult for some to see that the very tools used by Lord Buddha and his disciples in removing the "second arrow", i.e. alleviating the suffering of continued existence in s*aṃsāra*, still hold true in their effectiveness to address our modern-day *dukkha*(s). The length of time spent trying to deal with pain often leads a person to remain stuck in the pangs of suffering. This truly difficult state is often perpetuated due to lack of information or curiosity, which

may come to be seen as none other than holding to wrong views *(micchā diṭṭhi)*, which the Buddha warned against, and for which he devised the very first of the eight steps He formulated in the Noble Eightfold Path.[6] In addition, looking at the structure of the Four Noble Truths, and how they address the removal of ignorance and thereby that of suffering, due to craving, is at the base of eradicating our attachment to the way suffering lingers from the past, as it is caught and kept lodged inside the body. This entails looking at our relationship with pain itself, as we reevaluate, moment to moment, our attitude towards our experiences, both good and bad. This is the essence of application of the Four Noble Truths.

In learning to practice properly according to the Dhamma, we start to understand that one who is mindful of oneself, let's say by looking at the body, begins to look at it as being comprised of the five aggregates *(panca kkhandha)*, i.e. mentality/materiality *(nāmā rūpa)*, feeling *(vedanā)*, perception *(saññā)*, generative causes *(saṅkhāras)*, and consciousness *(viññāna)*; one is mindful of the Four Noble Truths. Bringing awareness to the body neutralizes the human drive to crave and hold on to the pleasant, even to the desire to be free from suffering. By becoming centered through reflectively connecting with what is going on in the body, one loses (or loosens at least) the grip and clinging to the concept that this is "my pain," and starts to see what is

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6 The Noble Eightfold Path includes: Right View *(sammā diṭṭhi)*, Right Intention *(sammā sankappa)*, Right Speech *(sammā vācā)*, Right Action *(sammā kammanta)*, Right Lifestyle *(sammā ājiva)*, Right Effort *(sammā vāyāma)*, Right Mindfulness *(sammā sati)*, and Right Collectedness of Mind *(sammā samādhi)*.

truly taking place and being experienced in the here and now.

This step is not an independent one, for it involves first identifying: (a) the fact of suffering (First Noble Truth), then (b) the reason for which one is suffering (Second Noble Truth), i.e. the clinging to an idea or a state that is 'other than' what is happening in front of oneself; when this is understood, then (c) the person experiences the cessation of suffering (Third Noble Truth), as one realizes that there is, in fact, safety to be experienced, as an outcome of loosening of one's tight grip on pain (or past negative experiences). This brings one to the threshold of the realization that they themselves have been contributing to the perpetuation of their suffering *(dukkha)*. This understanding truly launches the process of healing, as they (d) tread the Path (Fourth Noble Truth) with healthy understanding or Right View *(sammā diṭṭhi)*, which inevitably allows them to see their role in choosing between the wholesome and unwholesome, in regards to actions committed through body, speech, and mind.

Thus, by 'seeing the way things are' *(yathābhutaṁ pajānāti),* the individual undertakes the Right Lifestyle that adheres to Right Intention, Right Speech (including one's own self-talk and mental commentaries), Right Action, while applying Right Effort through mindfully reflecting on one's body via Right Mindfulness, as one settles in the calmness of Right Collectedness of Mind, while in full awareness of what is happening in the here and now.

We often lack the consideration to take a moment and look at our own participation in choosing to continue to suffer due to our grip on how things "should be," as opposed to how they "truly are" within the present. Today, as a population, we have to relearn the differences that exist between needs and wants, developing in the meantime the urgency to take care of ourselves as we work on refining our ethics of intention to move forward in life. In addition, it is paramount to learn to exercise generosity towards ourselves, our bodies, and our minds through love and forgiveness. This is the domain for healing the individual that can also permeate outward and thus heal our society at large. True safety can only be found within; it can be experienced not by looking outside of oneself, but within the tranquility of mind that sustains itself despite external factors. This calm and equanimous mental state can become the litmus test by which we can know whether we are established in a state that is not prone to turmoil or further suffering, even though our circumstances and outside conditions might say otherwise. In other words, it is the peacefulness spreading within that one comes back to for the experience of lasting safety and true refuge. *There is nothing more valuable than your tranquility of mind because it brings forth all the other virtues*.

This transformation to better understanding and wellbeing, however, does not happen overnight and, as you might have guessed by now, it does not happen without the necessary effort, and of course not without having the Right View and understanding, imaging oneself (in the mind) as being capable of breaking away from the negative cycles to which one has been adapted or sentenced to.

Therefore, the downward spiral of being a victim to suffering does not have to be the case for us anymore. There is freedom. After all, Lord Buddha did not just teach *dukkha* or suffering, but also the way *out* of suffering, i.e. cessation or *nirodha*, which in Pāli language sometimes is translated as the 'opposite of prison.'

While looking at what the Buddha clearly outlined in His discourse to the monk Mālunkyāputta in the Majjhima Nikāya[7] *vis à vis* craving, as he discussed the implicit removal of the poisonous arrow of ignorance, we are roused by a realization of urgency *(saṁvega)*, as it forces the person to stop delaying action in the present moment versus hoping for something in the future or dwelling in memories of the past. This urgency works beautifully while relating it to the "poisoned-arrow" simile, which the Buddha explained to motivate action and change (from the status quo that the monk Mālunkyāputta had relinquished himself to). We are informed in the *sutta* that the arrow, which is explicit, comes to us from the outside, i.e. via the external sense bases, entering the body through our six senses in the absence of an aware mind, whereby wisdom is lacking. In looking at this *sutta* more closely, we read how a monk (a *bhikkhu*) by the name of Mālunkyāputta approaches the Buddha determined that unless he receives the answers to his questions, he shall leave the monastic life and return to lay life. In response, the Buddha offers him a scenario where a man suddenly gets shot in his leg by a poisonous arrow while walking in the city. His relatives come rushing, and a surgeon is called in too, who recommends quickly removing the arrow and treating the wound, immediately. However, the man refuses

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7 *Culamālunkyā Sutta*: Shorter Discourse to Mālunkyā. MN 63

to be treated by the surgeon until he finds out who shot him, what clan or class they belonged to, what kind of an arrow it was, poison, etc., etc. The Buddha then asks Mālunkyāputta if he would agree that before the man wounded with the poisonous arrow ends up finding out the answers to any of his questions, he will most probably die. Without hesitation, Mālunkyāputta agrees. At this point, the Buddha turns to Mālunkyāputta and says that, similarly, he has come to the Buddha with these series of questions, such as whether the universe is limited or limitless, tangible or intangible, finite or infinite, whether the Buddha exists or does not exist after death, if the soul is the same as the body, etc. wanting to find the answers to these questions before letting the Buddha (the Surgeon) to pull out the poisonous arrow and flushing the wound with the life-giving water of wisdom; in other words, before undertaking the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Now, in this simile, the description of the arrow itself takes us back to the First and especially the Second Noble Truth(s). The Second Noble Truth declares the fact that there is ignorance, and therefore craving in our attitude. In this simile, the Buddha talks about the arrow being none other than craving. But, craving for what? In the Buddhist tradition, we have six sense organs, and therefore six sense objects, where the mental capacity to perceive, process, and experience things mentally, makes it the sixth organ. Now, the craving that one has is something that comes into view the moment we start identifying ourselves *with* the content of these sense organs, i.e. our likes and dislikes, for instance, which are the two faces of the same coin per se. Continuing on, the poison of the arrow is the ignorance, which blocks our understating of the conditionality of all things. Once this understanding arises, identification drops. That's why there is the principle of non- substantiality or *anattā* in Buddhism,

which does not teach that there is "no self,' the way it tends to be represented, but instead that there is no unchanging "substance" that we took upon as "mine," "who I am," or "myself." Thus, we hold on to that which we take as "ours," and feel threatened lest someone breaks our grip on those.

So, it is based on the wrong idea of personhood that craving develops.

Going back to the simile of the poisoned arrow, on the one hand we have the person who is experiencing *dukkha*, having been shot with the arrow, and then the arrow itself, which we have described to be craving, as it is tinged by or dipped in the poison of ignorance. Now, the question arises as to where this poison could be found in our day-to-day lives. That has to do with one's own misconception or misunderstanding of how things work. Imagine for instance sitting in meditation as you hear some noise outside, a loud noise or even the sound of an explosion, which is felt as unpleasant. Here, there is the internal sense-base, the ear, which picks up the sound, leading to ear-consciousness, because of which ear contact takes place, which in turn brings about ear feeling, felt as unpleasant. Now, if there is a perception of the noise as unwelcome, and anger arises even, that would be the poisonous part of the arrow.

The Buddha was quite an ingenious elucidator and educator when it came to teaching such difficult principles, and for that reason, within the tradition, he is also called the ultimate "Medicine Man," as we see in this simile where the surgeon happens to be the Buddha himself, who tries to help the injured person by pulling out the arrow from the person's leg. If allowed, then the Buddha comes in as the surgeon, cuts open the wound, thus exposing the craving to

spew out, and finally washes the wound with the clear, fresh water of wisdom of the Four Noble Truths. As a result of the removal of the arrow, mindfulness is established for the person to *experience the world as it is*, with wise attention. So, mindfulness in essence has the ability or power to curb all kinds of cravings because there might be the subtle temptation for us to want some external force, that which is outside of ourselves, like the surgeon, to come in and do some miraculous feat. Again, we would fall into the same category as Mālunkyāputta, expecting the Buddha to be doing something for us like saving us perhaps, and that would never happen. The Buddha concludes by saying that all that is beneficial and conductive to the removal of suffering has been declared by him through the Four Noble Truths; hence it is up to us to do the rest.

The moment we *realize* we are "shot" with the poisoned arrow, a sense of urgency *(saṁvega)* arises. In reality, it is hard to think of anyone who would be shot and refuse to be treated by the doctor until their questions are answered. However, when it comes to us, and how we live our lives, it is amazing how we delay the pulling out of or at least coming to grips with an understanding, a realization that there is an arrow, i.e., craving. Oftentimes, we are on automatic pilot per se, living on the passenger seat of our lives, so to speak, ignoring what the Buddha is trying to say, which is the need for us to place the spotlight of awareness onto our own living experience. The moment we do that, craving vanishes, much like the darkness in the room when the light-switch is turned on. To do this, we start by adding mini moments of awareness throughout our day. It is this continuity of such small moments lived with awareness that makes all the difference in reducing pain and suffering in our lives. This is essentially the difference between an

Awakened person and a regular person (*puthujjana*, in Pāli), meaning an "unenlightened being" or an "uneducated worldling," as some translators have called them; just an ordinary person who has no true grasp of the Dhamma nor the practice, nor any respectful regard towards Noble Disciples, those who have already tasted *Nibbāna*. This is in stark contrast to the enlightened person, who does not let any moment slip by without having the spotlight of mindfulness upon it, while living a virtuous life. Such a person lives mindfully without judgment towards whatever comes through the six sense doors, thanks to "wise" mindfulness, which is joined with Right View.

The Buddha said that in life, we all have two arrows to deal with: a "mental" arrow and a "physical" arrow. The Awakened person is the one who gets rid of the mental arrow. When we are awakened, we do not experience that clinging or craving which is based on ignorance, since ignorance has been eradicated through understanding. The mind is no longer perturbed by whatever comes in through the sensory sphere. However, we still must live with the physical arrow, and that is inevitable, as long as we have a body. Even the Buddha had to experience the frailties of the body, old age, sickness, and death. No one can escape that, as long as we have this physical body. However, the effects of the body as it atrophies, as it starts to die, and the consequential elements that come into play as a response to that – let's say for someone who has Alzheimer's disease that is so prevalent today; one can just try to imagine the havoc around this person's life – are also part of that second arrow which is unavoidable and has to do with this physical body. So, the Buddha, in his forty-five years of teaching the Dhamma, tried to help us be free from the mental arrow, and

once that is taken care of, the physical arrow would no longer matter.

Another simile, among so many others in the Dhamma, is that of the four mice which also relates to the urgency of practice, the need to take responsibility for one's liberation, as well as to the fact that the Noble Eightfold Path is a personal path. In the *sutta*, the Buddha says that there are four kinds of mice in this world: the mouse that digs a hole but never lives in it; the mouse that goes and lives in the hole that was dug up by another mouse; the mouse that neither digs up a hole nor lives in one; and finally the mouse, which digs up a hole and lives in it. When students asked the Buddha as to what the significance of the simile was and how it related to the Dhamma, he explained how the first mouse is that person who has a tremendous interest in discovering and understanding the Dhamma and who actually starts the journey. They might study for decades, yet they never truly understand nor grasp the Four Noble Truths, or the Twelve Links of Causal Relations (Dependent Origination); they never sit down to meditate and have not experienced a moment of mindfulness, despite a desire to understand the Dhamma. The second type of mouse (or practitioner) is a person who just hears something from the Dhamma, a statement, for instance, and decides to go on faith based on what they heard and tries to practice it. However, when they try to go deeper or to explain it to someone else, they are clueless. That is like the second mouse who went into another's dug-up hole. They never actually went through the process of properly experiencing and really elaborating the practice for themselves or understanding it. The third kind of mouse happens to be the *puthujjana*, the common ordinary worldling, who is just lost in the pleasures of life, gaining more and more pleasures,

and conversely pushing away anything that is undesirable to their sensory perception. That person is truly in danger, because they are neither digging up a hole to understand what is going on beyond what is visible to the six senses, nor relying on someone else's words or discoveries in a sense, like the second mouse.

So, when the moment of death comes, that's one of the worst places to be in life according to the Dhamma, because that person is lost. Oftentimes, most of us take life for granted, as if it is our privilege or something that we have earned, but we may never actually end up considering if and how we are really making the most of this existence, as far as what is coming next is concerned. So, here the principle of rebirth is crucial to the path, unlike some teachers who may treat rebirth as a cultural element and not really part of the Dhamma. As far as the Teachings of the Buddha are concerned, that view is quite erroneous, because it takes away from the person the sense of responsibility towards one's future.

We are usually concerned about what we will do tomorrow, or at least in a few hours. It's no different as we exit this life. So, this third mouse has no idea and concept of what may await them after this life. And finally, there is the fourth mouse, which happens to be the person who goes on studying the Dhamma, practicing the Dhamma, and understanding it for oneself with direct knowledge because one is living it; it unavoidably becomes their life, as they make it their own and can talk about and share the Dhamma. The Buddha obviously wanted us to be the fourth kind of mouse.

We need to have the audacity to live a courageous life, especially when it comes to this practice, because this practice has everything to do with our lives. Whether you have faith or believe in rebirth, is not as relevant as the fact that *all you have is this moment*, this very life. We are all getting older, and will inevitably experience pain and loss, as when we see a loved one in pain, and although we want to help ease their pain and grief, we nevertheless know that that will be their burden to bear, in addition to the one we must face, especially in the case of losing our loved ones. But that is inevitable, because if we are born, then we are going to die, and in between there will be suffering to be endured. This then increases the sense of urgency; after all, how much more evidence do we need to look at the Four Noble Truths seriously, and not just recite them by heart? That is what the Buddha roused his listeners with on his deathbed, before he closed his eyes for the last time. He said, 'so long as the teaching of the Eightfold Path is available and, most importantly, so long as there are people who practice the Eightfold Path, the world will never be short of fully enlightened *Arahants*.' This was his invitation for each of us to turn our own lives into the laboratory that manifests the observable data in order to demonstrate the effectiveness of what he taught and lived by throughout his 45 years of Teaching.

When the Buddha was asked what the purpose of meditation was, he said there were several. He mentions happiness; so that we are not confused when difficult situations occur in our lives; to be free of pain and grief; to develop Right View or right attitude, etc. The main goal of the practice, however, is to develop tranquility and insight or wisdom to see through all the phases and layers of our experience dominated by delusion, and to finally break free

from the grip of suffering. Thus, the principles of the Noble Eightfold Path are to be applied, as we live adhering to Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Lifestyle, practicing our virtue or *sīla*.

In practicing Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Collectedness of Mind, we are cultivating and training our mind for *samādhi* (cultivation of the collectedness of mind) to grow.

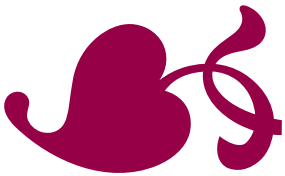
And finally, owing to the gaze of Right View, the first of the Noble Eightfold Path, we gain understanding or *paññā*, as we grow in wisdom. It is in this way that we can *take care of the Dhamma*.

Yet another simile may be useful here: when we don't practice the Dhamma, that becomes equivalent to having a malignant cancer, some serious disease or illness, for which we go to the doctor, get a prescription that could cure it but instead of applying medication into our daily regimen, we make a giant billboard-size copy of the prescription, carry it over our head, and say, "I have the cure for my illness!" *That* is not going to make the *dukkha* go away, as that person will die without becoming free from the illness. Now, are you comfortable with that decision or intention? Or, are you willing to do something about it? That was the challenge that the Buddha left us with when he presented us the Dhamma.

We can take care of and hug the Dhamma every time we get to see the Four Noble Truths, every time we practice the Eightfold path. It is always there. The god of death will never take that away from us so long as we practice with

attention and wisdom, with a kind heart, with deliberate intention, and compassion.

The body will get old, and that is one of the two arrows that the Buddha talks about, but the other arrow does not need to be there, i.e. the poisoned arrow of ignorance, the one we do have control over in completely eradicating. After all, that is what the Buddha taught, that is what he gave us a hope for through his life and the lives of all his monks, nuns, and lay disciples over the course of two and a half millennia, who also experienced what he himself had attained, which is a testament that we too can taste this very quality of liberation from suffering.



The Problem with "Mindfulness" Today

Given the nature of the prevalent interest in the field of mindfulness during the last decade or so, it is no surprise to find how today many disparate areas of human endeavor are using the buzzword "mindfulness" in attempting to pique the readers' interest, in contexts ranging from food to better sex.

The goal of Buddhism or the Dhamma, at least as far as Theravāda Buddhism is concerned, is to understand and transcend suffering while using the tools given by the Buddha, namely the Four Noble Truths, and through them, the Eightfold Path, in whose eight limbs we find Right Mindfulness. Thus, the Buddha did not *just* teach mindfulness, be it in his formulation of the Eightfold Path, the Five Faculties, Five Powers, or the Seven Factors of Awakening. In other words, mindfulness can be seen as a tool; just one ingredient among many others, especially that of wisdom which, when joined together with mindfulness, allows the practitioner to use the six-sense bases [8] as they make contact with the body to liberate the mind through knowing, i.e. seeing beyond delusion. It follows that by not seeing, i.e. not understanding the conditional nature of the way one thinks, processes, and holds on to things and experiences erroneously, suffering persists. Therefore,

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[8] In Buddhism we have the mind as an addition to the five sense bases, i.e. eye, ear, nose, tongue, body.

wisdom born of understanding that is the product of correct mindfulness, *is* the key.

If we are to view the Dhamma as an intelligent way of looking at suffering (First Noble Truth), then we can see this to be the result of the emphasis the Buddha placed on investigating its causes, i.e. origin of suffering (Second Noble Truth). This point cannot be overstressed, given the relation between investigation and wisdom, and how at times we accept certain emotions simply because of habituation, which is another reason why often many treatable illnesses may masquerade as depression or anxiety, if we are to look at mental health and the emotional suffering one experiences. In other words, it is fair to say that given the relationship between thoughts and feelings, we feel the way we think. It is worth mentioning that by extirpating the role of *sīla* and *paññā* from the three-part equation (*sīla - samādhi - paññā*, i.e. virtue/moral discipline, collectedness of mind, discernment/ wisdom), which the Buddha formulated in structuring the Dhamma, one's efforts are bound to be ineffective at best, and dangerous at worst, for the three trainings work to complete each other, as they bring out the potency and full spectrum of functionality of mindfulness. *Sīla* or virtue, therefore, takes the meaning of giving up negative, unwholesome states of mind, where the greed of holding on to what has been customary for the mind, i.e. negative states, is relinquished. Viewed as such, one sees how *sīla*[9] can make one's practice 'beautiful in the beginning,

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9 *Sīla* or virtue, involves the training of oneself to uphold the five precepts. What are the five? Not to harm, not to take what is not given, not to have sexual misconduct, not to speak falsehood, and not to take intoxicants (More will be discussed on virtue in the following chapter).

while *samādhi* makes it beautiful in the middle, and *paññā* makes the practice beautiful in the end,' as Ajahn Chah used to encouragingly say to his disciples. Thus, although they are three separate parts of Mindfulness, viewed thus in its fuller capacity, is not about "reduction of stress," especially when we see how often life with its difficulties allows the individual to gain most out of it, through the very stress experienced. Science in its domains of biology and astronomy, for example, proves how life comes out of intensely stressful situations, as do stars and entire solar systems out of gaseous nebulae. Hence, through mindfulness, wisdom is developed *while* one faces the difficulties and the friction created due to the presence of the three defilements *(kileśas)*: greed, ill will, and delusion. The same is true while looking at another group of stress-inducing states of mind, i.e. the five hindrances or obstructions to meditative practice *(nīvarana)*, which include (1) attachment to sense pleasures or lusting after the pleasant, (2) aversion or anger, (3) sloth and torpor/lethargy, (4) restlessness and worry, and (5) doubt. Through the *suttas*, we see the emphasis put on these principles as being critical to the development and even the very Awakening of the Buddha.

Much like leaving out or removing a crucial part of an equation or a computer code, when factors such as moral discipline or virtue and wisdom are left out from the pedagogical culture that finds itself subsumed under the fashionable lens of mindfulness, we run into problems.

Thus, it is no surprise that given its trendiness within vastly different arenas of human endeavor from sports to business to mental health, mindfulness today often leaves much to be said in providing a sustainable and lasting intervention to help people in dealing with their personal, emotional, and psychological suffering. In a world where scholars and teachers in the secular arena are promoting a mindset of disengaging mindfulness altogether from its ethical backbone, modern teachers of Buddhist meditation have been crucial in bringing mindfulness back to its roots, i.e. the Four Foundations of Mindfulness *(Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta)*[10] where the Buddha introduces it in a step by step process. Here, I have been fortunate enough to have studied under several teachers, all Buddhist monks *(bhikkhus)* who have helped me incorporate a relaxed attitude into my individual practice. The study and application of mindfulness have been key for understanding to develop incorporated with assiduously adhering to living a virtuous life, i.e. via the precepts, along with an emphasis on relieving pain and suffering in the here and now, as emphasized within the Pāli Nikāyas or *suttas*.

In the absence of a virtuous lifestyle that abstains from wrong ways of living, and therefore is missing moral development, mindfulness finds itself doomed to failure. For mindfulness, as often is taught in today's secular culture, often finds itself lacking the factors that lead to wisdom and insight, which enable a person to break away from being a prisoner of unhealthy habits. Much like a highly cherished

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[10] *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*: Four Foundations of Mindfulness. MN 10 (and *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna* Sutta: The Great Discourse on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness DN 22)

heirloom recipe that includes several ingredients, when most of its key and time-tested constituents are removed except for one, understandably, we may surmise that the outcome will in no way be what the recipe originally entailed. This is no surprise, given that we do find such skewed interpretations of mindfulness as a way to gain more pleasure even in the *suttas*, where a monk is described within the *"Simile of the Snake,"*[11] for example, proclaiming how the Dhamma and the pursuit of pleasure are not in opposition to one another. Needless to say, he was severely chastised by the Buddha for his deluded views.

Today, mindfulness is seen as a pursuit to a "feel good" state, which is also generating a backlash due to its relapse rate with patients dealing with addictions, anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses, when not used as part of a thorough protocol including healthy lifestyle choices, i.e. a virtuous life that is wholesome. Similarly, to be able to appropriately apply mindfulness means making sure not to leave out crucial elements of the meditative practice, which arguably require a deeper exploration of mental cultivation through other aspects of one's life, such as one's relationship with themselves, how they view themselves, the inner narratives they carry and repeat to themselves, how they relate to their bodies, all of which are part and parcel of applying a morally healthy position towards oneself, with an expansively loving heart. Thus, while encouraging the individual to slowly and compassionately make space for the experiencing of difficult emotions such as trauma, anger, fear, or anxiety, instead of having them dissociate from the experience of living, one becomes able to learn to self-regulate their heavy emotions, by checking in with the body, the breath, and how they are experiencing the mental intensity of the moment's psycho-physical phenomena.

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[11] *Alagaddūpama Sutta*: *Simile of the Snake*. MN 22

Not understanding the role of greed, aversion, and delusion in what is passing through our six sense doors may very well serve to further confuse an eager-to-learn public. After all, what is often worse than a lie is misrepresenting (or partially revealing) the truth to individuals, or "manicuring" it to fit the palate of a public that is becoming ever so mesmerized by the fashionable theme of mindfulness. This presents an ethical issue that needs to be addressed, especially when we are discussing the possible benefits of a practice while leaving out its proper scrutiny, which includes the method of delivering and administering it to the public. As a comparison, one may think of the way prescription medication is offered to patients as a treatment. First, the individual prescribing it needs to have had extensive training and experience, and secondly there needs to be proper assessment of the patient about to receive it. The same is the case with using mindfulness. If we are coming from the same premise as that of the Buddha, i.e. relieving suffering in the world, unavoidably this very well includes the ethical basis within the practice of mindfulness, beginning with non-harm towards oneself.

Despite their popularity, many of the so-called teachers of mindfulness do not realize the harm they are causing not just to other beings but to themselves, because misrepresenting the Dhamma brings about tremendous negative karmic influences on oneself. That is why one needs to be very careful when using the words of the Buddha, because even the Arahants, who were fully awakened beings, had to check, and double check, and triple check themselves every time they said a word and then they had to go back to the Buddha himself to see if they misrepresented him by mistake.

Instead of looking at mindfulness as a universal panacea, what needs to be asked is whether removing mindfulness from its original context of the three-fold trainings of ethics, meditation, and discernment, makes it *less than* what it is intended to be (or do). Thus, on one end of the spectrum we have virtue or moral development *(sīla)*, and in the far end of it, we have wisdom *(paññā)*, i.e. seeing things as they are, or being able to see different perspectives at the same time without having any kind of a bias towards whatever position. The bridge between the two is mental development *(samādhi)*, which oftentimes has been mistakenly translated as concentration. Mental cultivation means developing the mind to reach states of calmness and serenity, where the mind is stable or collected. That state of collectedness is what allows us to get to a point where we can see with eyes of wisdom. Thus, the Buddhist training of *sīla-samādhi-paññā* is not something we read about only in books. These can manifest in our own lives so long as we use the whole recipe ingredients.

Much like in any line of specialized study that prepares individuals to properly apply that skill, so too mindfulness meditation requires individuals to have proper training and sufficient first-hand experience in it as monitored by experienced meditation teachers. This is lacking in the modern mindfulness pedagogy, as the lack of adequate training in meditation with a clear understanding of the subtle workings of the mind can do more damage than good.

Teaching mindfulness after having attended a weekend retreat and being certified in it can hardly be considered sufficient training for oneself to be called an "expert" or someone "trained in it."

In addition, lacking a core understanding of the Four Noble Truths, or what the main purpose of introducing this 2600-year old science of mindfulness training truly entails, many of today's "experts" invariably are unable to appreciate its various nuances *vis à vis* helping students. This makes it necessary for us to raise the following simple yet important questions: What is mindfulness? Can *anyone* do mindfulness? Does it cost anything? Does one have to be an expert in it to gain from its benefits? Thus, in our efforts to explore the beneficial qualities and practice of mindfulness as such, we need not merely look at the technique itself, i.e. in isolation, but to start with the people wanting to engage in it, either as teachers or as practitioners.

When we speak of mindfulness, often as a public we have become used to taking its meaning for granted, whereas many practitioners and even "experts" are left speechless and unable to define "mindfulness" in clear and simple terms. Some have defined mindfulness as "remembering to remember" or "being aware of the present moment", etc. The definition of 'mindfulness being the ability to be aware while observing how mind's attention moves from one thing to the next,' seems to be quite apt. What is being observed, therefore, is not just the momentary state of mind but also the overall condition of the mind, i.e. the process of thinking, feeling, which lead to action through the body, that which can be called one's true behavior. Unlike the common way of understanding or defining mindfulness, what we understand as mindfulness therefore

is not necessarily about feeling good, relaxing, or having things be a certain way. Mindfulness is the wide and accepting way of observing the living experience with non-attachment. It is working towards gaining wisdom in order to see through the negative habitual patterns of living that disconnect us from living every moment consciously, with fresh eyes.

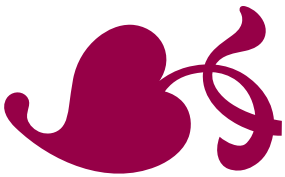
We have to have an internal gauge in our lives, which is missing in today's spoiled society of ours. We have accessorized everything, including mindfulness. Character is often necessary, and this practice builds character. When a person attains *Sotapanna* or Stream-Entry stage, their eye of Dhamma is open, and there is significant personality change that occurs. If there is any alchemy out there, that is it! A genuine transformation takes place. However, with every single moment that we apply the Five Powers of faith, moral shame, moral dread, and energy to maintain a steady course, inevitably, this opens the door for wisdom.

Mindfulness without moral development and wisdom, therefore, is doomed to failure. So, we need to hold ourselves accountable. This path is all about accountability, first of all towards ourselves. That is why it is not for the weak of hearts or minds. We need to practice diligence, which brings about faith, where the trust and confidence in the practice comes in *through* practice. No one needs to convince you of this point; *your own* experience of its truths becomes sufficient. I invite you to look at things in a little bit more cautious or careful way and not just gulp down whatever is out there or is being promoted as Dhamma or even as mindfulness specifically.

In our culture today, we are lacking discipline. We want to get things easy, just like a psychologist acquaintance of mine who said that 'teaching mindfulness was the easiest thing in the world.' But it's not, as it requires many other ingredients for it to deliver what it promises. So, we are not going to get something for nothing, and that is the attitude, unfortunately, in our society today. Discipline is required. If you are going to cultivate a body that is fit and healthy, you need to discipline it; no one can argue that. The same way with food; if you eat junk food, you are not going to get the healthy, fit body. Discipline is necessary. If you want to experience mindfulness and really attain its fruits, you need discipline. There are no if 's and but's about that.

Lastly, as teachers of the Dhamma, we do have a responsibility to keep it both unhindered and undiluted, and even more so, not to dumb it down from its core principles so that it fits the capacity of our readers or listeners, or the times we live in. This also applies to trying to follow current trends of teaching the Dhamma vis à vis attempts at "secularizing" it. Furthermore, there must be a sense of gratitude and humility in one's approach in teaching any subject to others, let alone the Dhamma brought forth by the Buddha, something that seems to be lacking today in many circles. For a teacher of Dhamma to come up with their own interpretation of key concepts without any consideration as to how that may eventually affect others on the path as they continue on their journey, is similar to someone reaching a crossroad on their journey and looking at a signpost, such as the road to Kathmandu or Paris, and deciding to change it to a different name, just because it fits their own interpretation of how it "should be." This not only confuses those traveling on the path, but may even make them lose their way, or even worse, have them give up on their quest.

As mentioned earlier, we need support and guidance from a proper teacher who has tasted these truths for themselves, and as far as necessary support is concerned, this path is further augmented and progress is greatly enhanced through the presence of certain individuals, namely, spiritual friends or *kalyāṇamittas*, who are loving, caring, understanding, and wise friends in the Dhamma that the Buddha always insisted to surround ourselves with, helping us on the Path. These are the friends who are aware of the Dhamma, who we can reverberate with, be inspired and energized by and learn from, and thereby may polish ourselves.



Laying the Foundations: Requesting and Taking the Precepts

The teachings and guidance being offered in this manual are those based within the Theravāda tradition, which is what we have available and what is agreed by practitioners, historians and scholars to be the closest to the actual teachings disseminated by the Buddha himself, nearly 2600 years ago. In order to gain from this manual and develop through the instructions offered herein, it is helpful to consider that although Buddhism may not necessarily qualify as a religion as, say the Judeo-Christian-Islamic or faith- based religions, it may best be seen as "a complete educational system," like Ajahn Jayasaro defines it so well. This educational system or Dhamma helps the person assimilate the information through understanding, thereby developing for oneself a virtuous and moral character, while enhancing one's own understanding of oneself and the world. This way, one's own role in the perpetuation of suffering or *dukkha* becomes evident to oneself, and one makes the choice of moving from the unwholesome to the wholesome in one's everyday life, whether through thought, speech, or actions. To this end, this education system allows the person to experience and reach a state of fruition that comes along with a supernormal understanding, with happiness that is independent of sensual pleasure. Often we have the mistaken notion or belief that pleasure and happiness are one and the same

thing when, in fact, they are not, as one of my other teachers, Bhante Punnaji used to say. In other words, according to this system, i.e. the Dhamma, with the right support and guidance, and through diligence and a clear understanding that maintains a softness and kindness towards ourselves, one can eventually become an Awakened being, or even an *Arahant*, leaving behind a world of misery and continuous cycles of suffering due to the absence of craving. That is the culmination of this path. However, as the first and primary step in following this system, we start by working on our virtue or *sīla*, i.e. our training in upholding the precepts. To develop our virtue, however, we must first start with *taking Refuge* in the Triple Gem.

True practice is directly connected to and with taking of True Refuge, which is supported by our diligent awareness and clear comprehension of the living experience that lead to understanding, as we become more cognizant of the way things are and our own individual role in the state of affairs we find ourselves in. When considering the instability of the world, wars, threats to ourselves and to the environment, and constant worry and dread that place one in a continued state of anxiety, now more than ever, humanity is searching for ways to find some form of refuge, of stability, of peace. In Buddhism, we see how it is highly engaged in its humanistic and environmentally conscious attitude to address the social and worldly unrests going on in the world, as it has been even at the time of the Buddha. However, it also stresses the importance to first address the various states of mind that bring about these calamities in the world. What this means is that by applying the tools

learned from the Dhamma, one looks at the way suffering starts; in other words, our attachments to certain desired outcomes, which often stem from our greed, hatred, and delusion. This understanding itself allows us to next look for the remedy, to address both our wounds and those of the world. And this comes in the form of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Through taking refuge and undertaking the training of maintaining the precepts, a practitioner becomes one who is changing the world through oneself, which is the highest way of bringing about stable and wholesome change in the world, because the person would be working on removing the three defilements from within oneself, which is much more enduring and powerful and wholesome than trying to go outside and change the world through protests, revolutions, or fighting tooth and nail without looking at the quality of one's mind. This brings about the kind of change that lasts, for the qualities that defile the mind, and therefore society, would have already been addressed in the very lifestyle of the person, who becomes a refuge oneself.

What is meant by taking Refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, i.e. the Triple Gem, is not some form of reliance on external forces outside of oneself, i.e. a historical or future Buddha somewhere in the universe, for example. Instead, it is expressing a level of trust, a sense of dedicated consideration to the possibility of one to experience the very thing that the Buddha realized, and therefore, laid the ground and teachings for us to do as well. Thus, True Refuge begins by looking at our innate goodness, which culminates in the possibility for us to taste *Nibbāna*, in this very life. However, to follow on the path laid down by the Buddha, one must be closely in touch with the teachings

themselves, and have the confidence and trust towards what is embodied within the *suttas* found in the Pāli Canon that capture the essence of the Dhamma, via the Buddha's guiding words, as preserved in the Pāli Nikāyas. It is here that one sees the step by step guidance clearly outlined by the Buddha in the *suttas* that one begins to see the purpose as to why we practice the Path, in the first place. This, along with the importance of maintaining one's noble virtue in all one's activities through the body, speech, and mind, whereby the person purifies one's own behavior to the point that purity is developed further and further thanks to the encouraging lessons found from living examples as found in the Dhamma. By looking at the Sangha, one takes refuge in the living truth of Awakening that is embodied in those who are Noble Disciples as well as the monastic community of *bhikkhus* (monks) and *bhikkhunis* (nuns), and the lay-community of devout followers and practitioners, who live pure and virtuous lives by following the precepts.

As mentioned earlier, there are Three Trainings that we undertake in the Buddhist path: *sīla*, *samādhi*, *paññā*, which in English would be equivalent to virtue or ethics, mental cultivation, and wisdom. These are not things that we just need to memorize. Instead, they are practice-based protocols. To help our practice grow, these are indispensable as we apply them in every way, shape, and manner in our daily lives. As lay Buddhists, we take five precepts as our training in *sīla*, whereas Buddhist monastics must take hundreds more. Therefore, while we take the Precepts (or training rules), we address all three major target areas of our lives and our behavior, i.e. our thoughts, words/speech, and actions.

Here, we need to remember that the practice delineated by the Buddha is based on a system, which one can even call a "science" due to its repeatability *if* and *when* applied by following a series of clearly defined steps that are found in the Dhamma or the Buddhist Teachings (as found in the Pāli *suttas*), namely through the application of the Noble Eightfold Path. This, without adding or taking out what does or does not fit our individual likes/dislikes and preferences. What this equates to, therefore, is that the Dhamma is not a blind belief system that we adhere to or treat as a dogma, nor does it present itself as a faith-based religion per se, whereby it may try to coerce us into doing or thinking in a certain way that for all intents and purposes, may be construed as compulsory. Another helpful reminder is to know that there is no conversion in Buddhism proper. To this end, the precepts which are the basis for proper Buddhist practice are not handed down by someone, nor are they commandments, whereby if one is to break any one of them (or all), bolts of lightning would crash down on us as a punishment. There are no such things here, for one has to first *request* to be given the precepts, and this is to be done three times. Here, one is promising the presiding Bhikkhu, monastic, or teacher to give the five precepts, which will be for the welfare and happiness of oneself and the many. In Buddhism, there are no such things as commandments, which is another reason why, in the West, we have a difficulty gulping down the word "morality," given that it has been incorrectly (and to a great extent forcefully) taught to the masses; no wonder that many of us have this sense of disgust towards the term. However, we need not look at it in that way when we are thinking about the precepts.

In Pāli, the word itself is *sikkhā*, which means "training" (through consistent effort and wisdom), and although there are no bolts of lightning that are going to come down on us if we break them, this does not negate the importance of approaching the practice with decency, honesty, and consideration. It is with this in mind that we undertake the training to keep the precepts, i.e. as we abstain from killing or harming beings, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and from taking intoxicants.

In Lord Buddha's Dhamma and Discipline, there is learning and active participation, where upholding our training of the precepts happens to be the first part of this proactive involvement or participation in our Awakening, which comes about through the development of purity in our behavior and character. What is meant by this is that through the practice of developing and maintaining of the precepts in our lives and what the Buddha taught, we are striving to see if what we are doing (in thought, speech, or action) is, in fact, beneficial or wholesome for us (and others) or not, which is inevitably reflected in the quality of our mind that is constantly being cultivated through consistent practice. Consequently, one sees how there takes place a change in one's living experience here and now, as one's character becomes purified daily, and the mind reaches thus far unreachable states of calm and awareness, followed by insights that are continuously experienced, allowing wisdom to grow.

Here, virtue or morality is therefore seen as a way to protect not only oneself, but those around us, giving them a sense of security and safety, whereby we make those around us become at ease, feeling protected and shielded from any possible unwholesome behavior on our part. Thus, those

around us come to know and feel that they are safe, no matter what challenges in life we may face, that we are not going to harm or kill them, or take what belongs to them against their will, or covet something they have, or others have, that we will never lie to them, or allow ourselves to become intoxicated and numb, unaware of ourselves in thought, speech or action. This is truly a sublime state of security, of generosity, and of noble virtue, which we essentially take refuge in and offer to those around us, while at the same time becoming ourselves a refuge for others. This is the foundation for practicing morality or noble virtue in this Dhamma and Discipline.

Once we see this *as it is*, then we don't need any conversion, blind belief, or anyone to convince us of anything or impose any commandments upon us; *it* becomes a reality, validated by our experience and understanding of the principles found within the Dhamma, i.e. Lord Buddha's words. It is this very experience that we take refuge in.

Some people might think that taking the precepts early in the morning or whenever they come to mind, is sufficient. That is not necessarily true. The most important part of practicing the precepts is to become aware when we are right at that fork in the road kind of situation, where it's so easy for us to break the precept. Sometimes we will break it and that's fine. That is why it's called a *training* rule. But your task is to become aware of it, and immediately retake the precept right there and then.

Thus, when we talk about *sīla*, there are two other terms that need to be introduced: *hīri* and *ottappa*, which are Pāli for "wise moral shame" and "wise moral dread." They are part of our training; there are no shortcuts. Shame has an inward movement or momentum to it. It involves self-respect. Imagine you are in the middle of nowhere, nobody is watching, there are no cameras, nobody's Instagram or digital or social app is open, with no "live feed" anywhere, and it's just you, your thoughts, your feelings, the act that is about to be committed, and yet something compels you to say, "No, I won't do it." Why? Because it goes counter to who and what you hold yourself to be or work towards. That is the shame element. In this way, we develop the intelligent consideration of applying wise moral shame[12] and wise moral dread. A further elaboration may be offered through the context of the Buddha's teaching on the Five Spiritual Powers, where we find these last two listed alongside faith, energy, and wisdom.

What is being taught today in secular settings as a mindfulness practice often finds itself devoid of these two: wise moral shame and wise moral dread. Furthermore, energy might be there, or it might not, but wisdom is completely overlooked. Now, when it comes to faith or confidence, many don't even know what it is. Faith or confidence in this practice grows through consistently working skillfully on building the foundations of virtue,

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[12] Unlike what it has come to represent in the West, whether in the fields of psychology, psychotherapy, or any of the social sciences, "shame" is not represented here as a negative emotion, but quite a positive one, because in Buddhism it is used as an intelligent buffer or a point of consideration, whereby a person does not indulge in self-centered choices, but takes into account the elapsing of time, the changing of circumstances, and how the consequences of one's thoughts, words, or actions will impact both oneself and others.

which requires a continuum of awareness that is with us, as much as possible. We have to be very clear in what we understand, therefore, when we speak of presenting mindfulness because it must have with it some crucial elements. Otherwise, it becomes similar to those fake fruits one used to find on grandma's fruit bowl in the kitchen, the ones you tried to grab to eat as a child, only to be disappointed because they were made of hollow plastic. That is not the mindfulness we are taught in the Dhamma: virtue and wisdom *must* be there alongside it.

Whereas wise moral shame has an inward movement, wise moral dread is more outwardly directed. It involves asking oneself: *"Would those whom I hold so dear – perhaps teachers, parents, and very close friends whom I trust and respect – look down upon this act that I'm committing to, if they were to find out?"* Or, even better, what if that teacher, parent, or close friend was *right there* next to you? Would they approve of this act or thought of yours? What if they penetrated your mind? Because the training has to do with all three doors: your thoughts, speech, and body. When the Buddha talked about *kusala* and *akusala*, or the wholesome and unwholesome choices that we make, he always referred to the three doors: a) acts that we can commit through this body: such as stealing, killing, sexual misconduct, becoming intoxicated, etc., b) acts that we can commit through speech: lying, harsh words, idle chatter, gossiping, divisive speech, slandering, or the hurting of somebody else with words; and c) acts done through the mind or thought itself. Imagine if the Buddha, or the teacher, or that person whom you hold so dear, is presently aware of your thoughts, as clearly as you are of them; what would their position be? That is the experience of wise moral dread.

The next element in the Five Spiritual Powers, after faith (inclusive of shame and moral dread), is energy, because some level of energy is needed for you to even read these words. The energy that you put in and the wisdom that you gain will not allow you to break the precepts to begin with as you are practicing mindfulness, which, again, is a crucial part (of a greater whole) in helping us to experience *Nibbāna*.

Further, much like in any kind of discipline that prepares and develops a person to a higher level, in order to make the most of what this manual may offer you, the reader, through journeying along this Path and benefitting from the information and guidance being offered here, one is encouraged to "be an empty cup," so to speak, by being receptive rather than "full to the brim," especially while hearing the Dhamma. After all, one must not forget that until the day when we ourselves become *Arahants* or Fully Awakened beings ourselves, every one of us is a student.

Now, let us begin our exploration of the Five Precepts to be practiced, which are listed next.

The Five Precepts (*Panca Sīla*)

1. I undertake the training rule to abstain from killing or harming living beings on purpose.

2. I undertake the training rule to abstain from taking what is not freely given.

3. I undertake the training rule to abstain from sexual (sensual) misconduct.

4. I undertake the training rule to abstain from false speech, divisive speech, harsh speech, and idle chatter.

5. I undertake the training rule to abstain from taking drugs (legal or illegal), alcohol, and intoxicants, which dull the mind [13].

An area of precepts that sometimes has been misunderstood is the one dealing with sexual misconduct, where it is important to remember that this precept falls within the category of *sensual* (or sexual) misconduct. That is, sensual misconduct includes, but is not limited to *sexual* misconduct. It also includes visual, auditory, and all kinds of data coming in from the six sense doors. Eating a lot of food is one example of sensual misconduct. You are standing in front of a buffet in Las Vegas, thinking: "I came all this way for this; so, I am going to consume as much as my stomach and gut could handle." 'Here, I am not committing any sexual misconduct,' you may say, 'and therefore not breaking the third precept.' However, when we look at how the precepts are defined and framed in Pāli words, they do cover the whole gamut of sensual misconduct. This is also where we see the connection between *kāma* (sensuality) and *kamma* (action), i.e., sensuality as experienced via contact through mind, body, or speech.

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13 Here, it needs to be mentioned that medications taken that are intended to help ease physical or mental symptoms may not be considered such that one abstains from, as part of these intoxicants in the Five Precepts. However, one must be cautioned against considering taking recreational substances that have received "legal status," such as the efforts taking place currently on a global scale to legalize marijuana and other substances, claiming them to be "natural drugs." Needless to say, as far as the Dhamma is concerned, these are intoxicants to be abstained from due to the dulling impact they have on the mind, given the intricate work that needs to be done on it through our meditative practice, which such drugs undermine.

In using the example of eating or consuming a lot, we therefore see that it does not necessarily have to do *only* with the tongue. It also has to do with the eyes. How much of eyes, ears, body, or nose do we get to expose to the world around us, yet without any observable intention from our waking hours? If you happen to be one of those individuals who has to get in their car and drive off on the freeway early each day and listen to "talk radio," we may consider how much nonsense there is for the senses to pick up, just from listening. How about our visual perceptions? So much of it is being enamored with information out there that is not wholesome. So, just by being there and putting ourselves within the sphere of all kinds of influences coming in through the six senses, we are creating *kamma* and, unfortunately, the unwholesome kind, making ourselves available to be diluted and contaminated throughout the whole day, as we find ourselves consumed by different things: "*Oh, I love that taste, those donuts, I love this food, I love that sight, I love the way this feels against my skin*, etc."

Where is the state of a tranquil mind at that point? Is there such a thing in the middle of all that chaos?

Now, obviously some might argue that we cannot completely be devoid of information coming in, that we cannot just isolate ourselves, or go on living in sensory deprivation for the rest of our lives. Well, that's why we have these six senses and perceptions, and that's where we come back to the first element of Right Effort, which helps us pause to identify and avoid the unwholesome; even if its initial taste is sweet, through Right View and Right Intention nevertheless, we will see that its root is in fact poisonous. Thus, we can have the intentional capacity and develop the audacity to say "no" to certain (unwholesome) drives and

"yes" to (wholesome) others. That can be considered the first stage of Right Effort.

Sīla or virtue or having moral guidelines, is like having brakes on your vehicle. After all, would you get behind the wheel of a car that you know doesn't have any brakes? Moreover, you would not let someone you love drive one that doesn't have any brakes! Yet, somehow we convince ourselves that not having virtue or moral values is all right, when we know for sure that our life is far more precious and it's an ongoing thing, meaning we must live it "all the time" and therefore, it is with us always, and not as the occasional driving episodes used as an example here.

When we take the precepts daily, we are trying to train ourselves during that day to be mindful of the sensory input coming in and to have some control over them instead of being completely enmeshed or lost. That's what sensual misconduct is, a state where we have lost our state of mindfulness; we are jolted, we are lost, albeit temporarily yet we do damage to ourselves and others, accruing negative *kammic* results or consequences. So, the more a person maintains that state of avoidance, understanding and realizing mindfully the value of avoidance or removing oneself from an unwholesome situation or condition (or state of mind), the more they can refine the ability to overcome it, by developing their resiliency in those moments when these tendencies have not arisen yet or they have just arisen. Thus, through remembering mindfully to come back each moment as to what is taking place inside your thoughts, you are able to see the akusala or the unwholesome tendencies when they are on the move, and just drop them right there. This choice in avoiding or removing oneself is part of Right Effort, and

specifically of its four aspects, wherein it is the first, i.e. a) avoiding, b) eliminating, c) developing, and d) maintaining.

Here, one avoids the arising of unwholesome states at the very door of sense perception, for example: in seeing a visible form… listening to sounds….smelling an odor....tasting a flavor....touching a tangible object....and thinking about a thought or feeling that is or leads to unwholesome *kamma* or action. Next, one eliminates any currently present unwholesome action (through thought, speech, or body) that is taking place. This is followed by the opposite energy of carrying motivation, i.e. developing the new tendency for wholesome actions (through thought, speech, or body), such as paying attention to wholesome objects, be they visible forms, sounds, smells, tastes, tangible objects, thoughts, feelings, or my favorite: a smile!

Finally, one works on becoming grounded in these developing tendencies, through their consistent maintenance, engendering the habit of having a continuous wholesome state of mind, that will inevitably help us create new neural networks in the brain for new habits.

This change, as you have gathered therefore, is not something that falls from the sky or lands in our lap on its own but requires work. This is not meant to frighten us, however, for just like Lord Buddha mentions, "drop by drop, the bucket gets full."

Thus, the first stage of Right Effort is like the sentinel or guardian of protection along with Right Mindfulness, i.e. the crucial act of avoiding that which brings about negative consequences to actions, as we completely say "No" to them.

Surely, whether one believes in rebirth or our conditional infinite lifespans of existence or not, we still have certain tendencies, which we cannot completely uproot right there and then that have been with us throughout our life. We still have some of these *akusala* or unwholesome tendencies rearing their ugly heads, as it were. Hence, we have to make sure that we are mindful of those tendencies that are about to arise so that instead of overcoming us and making us lose our state of mindfulness, we are instead able to come back and say "No" to them before they even manifest and fully agitate the mind, by taking control fully of our choices and therefore our behavior.

On Defilements (*kileśa*)

What we see through the teachings of the Buddha is not that we have to alienate or divorce ourselves from a fully lived experience. You can bite into that six-dollar burger, for example, and really experience the sensory input, that influx of information coming in through all of the senses: smell, taste, texture, sound as you are biting into, let's say, a cinnamon bun, or anything that you love to consume.

However, the key factor is whether we are mindful of these processes taking place. One way of looking at this with more scrutiny and wise attention (Right View), is to see if we are aware whether the three defilements (*Kileśa*) are present or not.

Well, what are the three defilements? Attachment or lust for something, i.e. Greed:

"*Oh, I love this burger, I can't wait, I have just been waiting for this for weeks and weeks!" o*r,

"I can't wait, I just have to bite into that thin crust pizza!"

Are you mindful of the greed present? That's all. Just be mindful of it, and able to stay *with what is happening in the body*, and not the pizza or the burger outside of you. What is the quality of the mind like? This kind of awareness opens up the possibility for a whole different type of understanding as it relates to *kamma*, showing us the way to no longer being slaves to whatever is coming in through the sense doors.

The second defilement is aversion to whatever it is that we are being exposed to, i.e. anger, hatred, or ill will. This is the feeling or thought: *Oh, I hate that noise, ugh! I can't stand it. Oh, there she/ he goes again. Or, why does this thing always happen to me?* This is the experience of aversion or anger. Be mindful of it, even if your response is inaction, because taking that momentary pause and considering with clarity is crucial for the mind to develop deeper than normal understanding, which can be called wisdom. However, already the thoughts are there, the words are there, because meanwhile, there is internal communication taking place. The Buddha said that for the undisciplined individual *(puthujjana)*, the tongue is 'like the ax in the mouth,' and how often we use it to demolish things. However, we can also use it to bring about solace, respite, comfort, an oasis of human compassion, care, beauty, and love, all of which our world certainly needs, especially now.

The third defilement is delusion or ignorance, a state where there is no awareness whatsoever when you are biting into that burger; you are just biting into it, lost in the whole experience or what the experience is bringing up through thoughts and memories. In other words, there is no mindfulness. At that instance, you are the child of *kamma*; it becomes your own parent with you just rolling along. You are completely enmeshed, engrossed by it, hence *identified with it*. This is the reason why delusion is also regarded as the ignorance in seeing the non-substantiality of things, i.e. the *anattā*, what is often termed as non-self. This delusion is the reason why we usually become identified with the object in front of us or the specific experience, taking it as: "*this is me, this is mine, this is who I am*."

As to the burger, well, with the mind being absorbed with ideas and mental proliferations, suddenly we come to the moment, albeit briefly, and waking up we exclaim: "*Oh, did I eat all that? Uhhh.*" Now, how many of our moments during the day are passed and taken for granted like that? And therein lies the dilemma, therein lies the suffering, the cyclical s*aṃsāric* existence, whereby we keep coming back to experience the whole slew of dissatisfaction over and over again. We can see then why the Buddha stressed that the understanding of the three defilements must be present in our training and living.

Now, many people think that Buddhism looks down upon desire. That is not true. Desire itself is a good thing if we know what to do with it. After all, the *Bodhisatta Siddhattha* (before becoming Gautama the Buddha) had the desire to find out how to cut the cord of s*aṃsāra*. That desire allowed us to have the Dhamma. That desire to seek awakening is a wonderful thing. So, desire itself is not

something that we try to push out of our lives necessarily. It is what we do with desire that is very important. We also need to utilize our own capacity to distinguish between what is wholesome and unwholesome (*kusala* and *akusala*), as it relates to our thoughts, speech, and actions. This is yet another reason why the practice of the precepts, in the form of virtuous living, is paramount for any successful meditation.

Something that many people don't consider, or teachers don't shed enough light on is that physical pain, such as headaches, or drowsiness and disinterest in the practice, do occur to meditators often simply because we have broken precepts in the past. This is a usual phenomenon that occurs during meditation, and especially during long retreats. That is where we must be very stringent with our practice of keeping the precepts or *sīla*. I find it comical when hearing people who want to practice meditation and gain its fruits be negligent when it comes to their daily living, when, say after a long retreat, they curse or 'drop the "*F - bomb*" every so often, or engage in wrong speech such as gossiping or slandering, or drinking alcohol, or engaging in sexual misconduct, or harming beings on purpose, or taking things from others without their knowledge. In doing so, you are breaking precepts, whether just one, or more. In short, it might be that you broke the precepts in this life, or it might have been in the past. But what needs to be remembered is that it does bear fruit in your practice *today*, whether in the form of pain or loss of interest in the practice altogether, for example. So, in this sense, we need to look at the hindrances in the grander scheme of things as in their relationship to the breaking of precepts, and therefore the inseparability of our progress from our adherence to *sīla*.

Tranquility Through *Sīla*

Happiness is not a passive state. Happiness is the choice of the courageous ones among us. True happiness is a heroic characteristic because it changes one's life and those of others. In the *Dhammapada* we find the Buddha describing his community of not just monks and nuns, but laity as well, with the following phrase: 'We are the happy ones.'[14]

It is so simple, yet not always easy to be deliberate in the choosing of our thoughts, our words, and our actions. In a brief segment from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, the Buddha defines virtuous behavior in terms of the five precepts:

"What monks, is accomplishment in virtuous behavior? Here, a noble disciple abstains from the destruction of life, abstains from taking what is not given, abstains from sexual misconduct, abstains from false speech, abstains from liquor, wine, and intoxicants, the basis for heedlessness. This is called accomplishment and virtuous behavior."[15]

The Buddha exhorts us to consider thus before acting: Is what I am about to do going to cause affliction to me, or to other beings? Unfortunately, this is a question that we oftentimes do not ask of ourselves. Instead, we jump into our emotional reactions to whatever that is taking place or being "done to us," whether it's a person who is committing a violent, inhumane act, or us standing on the outskirts of that scenario, and just looking and completely judging the

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[14] Dhp. Verses 197 & 199

[15] *Channa Sutta:* Discourse to Channa, AN 3.71

situation, and for many of us, rightfully so. Another pertinent question that may be asked is: "What is the standard of our society or civilization?" 'Without asking questions like these, it would be difficult for me to look at the world and call it "civilized," or even my own life, because that is who I have control over, my own personal life and the choices I make in my thoughts, words, and actions. Throughout his forty-five years of disseminating the Dhamma, that is what we see the Buddha doing, what he keeps bringing us towards, again and again. And one of the best ways he formulated this to help us navigate these difficult waters, is by giving us the Five Precepts.

Sometimes, coming from a Judeo-Christian background, people may mistakenly think that the precepts are like commandments. This is a myth that exists in the West, whereby a certain aversion arises in the mind towards what is perceived as an authority figure pushing them down with you can't do this, *you can't do that*, along with the threat that if you do, punishment will ensue from the outside.

Once the precepts have been given to us, we must practice them daily. Here again, please remember that the precepts are *training* rules *(sikkhāpadā)* and when you train or exercise a certain muscle, for example, sometimes you are able to "hit the target," and sometimes you are not. One of the hardest precepts to keep is the fourth one, *musāvāda*, i.e. the one dealing with false speech, which has several different aspects to it: we undertake the *training* rule to abstain from divisive speech, slandering, angry speech, idle chatter, as well as speaking falsehood. Idle chatter is a big part of it. As people, we do it all the time whether with coworkers, friends, or relatives. Many may say: *"Oh, I'm not doing it. I am just at a party talking to someone, and since there is*

nothing much to talk about, they are forcing me to speak." Soon enough, you will find out that you have gone astray, and now you are talking about things that don't have anything to do with the Dhamma, or your principles for that matter; in fact, now you are beginning to break some of the precepts, if you haven't already. Something else to consider is that breaking of this fourth precept isn't just when we are actively engaged in it, i.e. doing it, but this includes when we are listening to idle chatter going on around us, whereby we open ourselves and our awareness to it.

Here, we see the danger of being exposed to social media, or the news on TV, radio, or the Web, and its constant bombardment of idle speech becomes detrimental to our reservoir of mental energy, clarity in thinking, and especially our virtues.

What I advise my meditation students to do, something that my teachers have advised me years ago, is this: the moment you realize that you have broken a precept, find a Buddha statue nearby, or if there is none available, just visualize the presence of the Buddha and retake the precept right there and then, honestly, and genuinely, keeping in mind that this is something that you would be doing first and foremost, for yourself. In other words, realize that what you have done is not something you would have normally done, had you been more aware. Otherwise, this may open the door for remorse and regret to creep in and haunt us constantly, which is a negative state; in fact, one of the twin hindrances, *uddhacca- kukkucca*, restlessness and worry; they start churning up and now the mind is no longer tranquil. Remember, therefore, if it so happens that you break a precept, no one is going to come and hit you over the head.

But you have to address it yourself, with loving kindness, clarity of vision, maturity, and understanding.

So, instead of skulking in that negative, remorseful feeling of: *"I can't believe I broke the precept; I shouldn't have done that!"* which is damaging to our progress, we retake the precept with the determination to keep training ourselves not to break it again. This then will give you a comforting feeling when you go to bed at night knowing that you didn't break any precepts.

And if you did break a precept, then you come to realize what happened by saying *"it's okay,"* and then you retake them. So, remember, we don't want remorse; however, we are working with determined effort to minimize the possibilities for us to break precepts, thus ensuring our progress in practice, and lessening of our suffering and those of others.

Thus, as you train yourself every day, you are going to become more and more adept and skilled at detecting such instances of weakness, due to the growing strength of your mindfulness. This is done as you quickly abandon the arisen unwholesome or bad states of mind, destroying the lingering unwholesome or bad states of mind, and bring in wholesome or constructive states of mind, such as loving and kind thoughts (towards yourself at least), and finally, turn that into a habit through maintaining it.

Safety in *Sīla*

Sīla or adherence to a virtuous life is wonderful. *Sīla* is very protective and not just of the person who abides by it, but those other beings *around* that person. What is meant by this is that, if you take the precept not to steal or not to commit sexual misconduct, let's say coveting for someone else's spouse or partner, what you are essentially saying to those around you is that they need not fear you, that they are safe around you. In fact, one of the wonderful things that takes place when a person keeps the five precepts is that other human and non-human beings, such as, animals, say dogs or birds, start to feel comfortable coming close to you or being around you. I have seen quite interesting evidence to this effect myself and have also heard stories of people who while sitting alone, suddenly, experience other people coming near and huddling next to them. This especially happens with animals, but is not unique to them of course, because people suddenly want to smile to you or take a picture with you, meanwhile there are other people like you, but these individuals are not going to them; they are coming to *you*. What is essentially happening is that you are directly and pragmatically applying something that is bearing fruit here and now. This immediacy of fruition is in fact one of the qualifiers of the Dhamma, manifested through the usefulness of living through *sīla*.

We talk about safety in a bank account, but the bank can be robbed; if nobody robs it, the government robs it. I know people who buy houses or have a few hundred-thousand-dollar cars parked on the street. I sometimes joke about it saying that having such an expensive car parked on

the street is like putting all that money in an unlocked briefcase, on the street, and then going to bed. Do you feel safe? They may not exactly see it that way, but that's how it is. Meanwhile, in this modern era of ownership of things, we invest so much of our lives into things, objects, our bodies, each other, and therefore into relationships.

We all need healthy relationships, of course. We are social beings. After all, anthropologists, biologists, evolutionary psychologists, and neurologists in their research studies on the brain and neuro-feedback will all agree on this, because there are parts of the brain that re-develop (or really develop) only when we are feeling the warmth, the sustainable, comforting presence of someone who puts us at ease. In other words, social contact/ construct allows parts of the brain to grow, and when you take those things away, namely, the social wellbeing factor, a part of the brain no longer exists. This is due to the safety element having been removed, even if temporarily. However, if this becomes a constant mode of being and experiencing life, we can easily and legitimately deduce that the individual will struggle in feeling safe, comfortable, at ease, contented, but instead be angry, frustrated, afraid, anxious, and depressed. We know from scientific studies on the brain that the limbic system, and specifically the frontal part of the brain, PFC (Prefrontal Cortex), which is the latest part of our development as *Homo sapiens*, does not yet exist for many of us when we are growing, especially during teenage years. I am sure you have witnessed this a lot, where you don't understand why someone is doing what they are doing, despite their bodies being "age appropriate."

This lack is often led by fear and insecurity that for many does not get ameliorated with the sense of safety and loving care, which directly influences the child's development all the way into adulthood and shapes their outlook on building and maintaining of relationships. That in turn is directly linked to their choices in action. Thus, parts of the brain need to be comforted for the person to be settled enough to bring about healthy relationships.

Now, the most important relationship that you can always count on is the one you develop within yourself and towards yourself. That does not mean you need to live in isolation. Even the Buddha used to send his *bhikkhus* out into society, including Venerable Mahā Kassapa, who was known to be the most reclusive among his fellow *Bhikkhus*, who the Buddha would instruct to go back to society and give them an opportunity to gain merits, an opportunity to be kind, to experience humanity, to share the Dhamma, and to grow by that exchange in experience. *Sīla* allows us to do this in a very simple manner, as long as we can maintain mindfulness of the five precepts, or even just one of them.

In a modern metropolitan city like Los Angeles, people are always on the edge of having a nervous breakdown, as if, given the nature of driving on the freeways. They are very angry, even if they were to look calm on the outside. You put them in a car, send them off onto a freeway, and good luck! Everybody is rushing; it only takes a little bit of scratching of the surface for *dosa* or anger to come out. Anger is a powerful emotion; you don't have to be a psychotherapist seeing patients in a clinical setting to attest to this. Both as a Dhamma Teacher and a psychotherapist, what I advise people to do is to at least look at it (anger): Can you observe it? Can you bring in awareness

to see what is happening in and to the body because of the anger? This is a tool you can apply.

When you get angry, different parts of your body start to cringe. It starts in the brain; there is this tightness that happens in different parts of the brain, which then manifests somatically within the body itself. For example, it took me years to realize that when I would get stressed or hold on to some anxiety or tension, it would lock itself in my jaw. The suggestion here is this: When anger arises, you need to be curious and ask: *"what happened before that? And then, what happened before that?"* And so on. Thus, you are developing a sense of curiosity. We often forget that this path *needs* and requires us to be curious in and of our lives. The Buddha was *the* most curious person that I have come across while studying the history of religion. Only a curious mind could come up with the Four Noble Truths, because that means you have sat down and thought, that you have asked questions, the really important ones, no matter how deceptively simple they may seem to be at first glance.

The anger or hatred that is happening is happening in our mind, the tension that is created in the mind when you see yourself caught in traffic, for example, while you have to be somewhere quickly. Relaxing that tension in your mind, in the brain, while looking at it, releasing it, smiling about the whole thing, as to how silly it is, is what links you to the path.

Oftentimes, we are unable to see through our own emotions, especially when we are saturated in them, even though emotions, like other phenomena are in themselves resources of tremendous energy that can boost us up to higher states of being. This inability to see through them

often is the result of being pulled into the story, the inner narratives we carry, which are tinged by our defilements. One of the things that the Buddha said about why we meditate was happiness, and the ultimate form of happiness starts with tranquility of mind, which with practice can become unassailable. That is your refuge. That is where you find the Triple Gem. From there, whenever you open your mouth, you cannot be breaking the precepts, you cannot wish or bring harm upon another person, or tell untruth to someone, because ultimately, we are seeking the type of a lifestyle that is remorseless, where we don't have any regrets towards others as a result of our own negative actions. That is one of the reasons why we take the five precepts. That is one of the reasons why we sit and meditate.

I always ask students and friends and anybody practicing as to why they meditate. Oftentimes, they don't want to answer that question because they realize it is a foolish reason for which they practice, this being generally the result of a lack in sufficient information. For most of us, it's because meditation is the "in" thing currently, like getting on a new diet, a new workout routine, or doing yoga (not for its enormous health and long lasting reasons), or something similar that is in fashion at the moment. Now, I am a yoga instructor too, and I can vouch for the great benefits of yoga. However, the reference here is to indicate the importance of understanding why we are sitting to meditate in the first place, or why we are even here, on this planet.

What is it that compels us to take a moment to just look at ourselves and wonder how we could have had a different response to a given situation, instead of an automatic reaction? This, because a response truly requires us to pause for a moment, to think it over, and then act from a space of serenity. It is this taking of a moment in the unconsciously or habitually run patterns of behaviors that allows us to review our current state and find within it the *Truth of our Suffering.*

This requires a certain sense of nobility, which is the reason why the Buddha called it the "Noble Truth" of suffering; it is *not* the suffering, therefore, that is noble here.

One of the key concepts or principles that we come across in the *Nikāyas* is the importance within this practice of abstaining from argumentation, whether to yourself while being crowded in the head with inner narratives, or having them fanned by and/or engaged with those taking place outside of us. Turn on any radio station, TV series, any channel, and you will see how everyone is trying to put their voice out there, to argue a point, or two, or three. It seems like we can't run away from it. The last time I checked, the conversation that goes on between our ears is all about that anyhow. We are constantly arguing, debating, coming up with justifications as to how this is supposed to be, or why this is happening, what things *should be* changed, what things *should be* otherwise.

As mentioned briefly earlier, all these go back to the defilements or the three poisons of craving/greed, anger/hatred, and delusion, the things that we work to avoid within this practice. These three are at the core of our suffering, according to what we see in the Teachings of the

Buddha. As we meditate and go deeper and deeper into understanding our thoughts, it is inevitable for us to also come across the underlying connection, the ground upon which most of our thoughts thrive and grow, where we see the craving holding hands with anger/aversion and accompanied by their mother: *delusion.*

When we look at *Paṭiccasamuppāda*, dependent origination or the dependent cause of relations, we see that everything is connected, as different causes come to condition others, and so on. It is not just some abstract ideas or notions that this principle comes to describe, supposedly having nothing to do with our daily lives. When we consider how some of the places in Asia or low-lying territories are being flooded regularly, whereas other places are being swept by unforgiving fires that destroy thousands of square miles of forests, how can all this not be affected in some manner by the way we have been treating the environment? Or how do we treat ourselves in the presence of the three defilements?

The precepts are not easy to keep when, for example, someone insults you through harsh words or gestures. What are you doing in response to that? Is it a reaction, or is it a response? Are you taking a moment to process what happened and see where you need to come from to take care of the next second of your life? Are you checking yourself to see what is happening within: *"Oh, my chest is constricted, my heart rate is racing, my fists are clenched, and I can feel my pulse, my arteries are pounding..."* and meanwhile a millisecond has slipped by without you acting out your rage, then a second, then a minute has passed, meanwhile you're cooling down. A few seconds later, you realize that you went through all that process, which felt like an eternity, without breaking a

precept. You don't have remorse, and there is tranquility of mind at its wake. *This* is what you can trust in, which is another word for Faith.

Now that you had this genuine experience, you need no one to tell you to believe in anything, which is why many of us have a tough time with the word "belief " in Buddhism. It is you who has to practice, just like it is you who has to breathe and eat for yourself, which brings the responsibility back to you and puts it right there safely on your lap.

This, then becomes the genuine foundation for understanding our capacity for *Nibbāna*, because it is not based on hearsay, a fairytale, or fiction; *Nibbāna* is real, it is not a let's wait- and-see affair. But only *you* can know it, while teachers can only point their finger in the right direction, so to speak. The inferior mind may have the tendency of looking at the finger and saying: "Ah, I am going to worship you!" That would be unwise, according to what the Buddha taught us. The system of the Dhamma that has been put in place requires us to follow it carefully, to test it and to do the practice, in full. We must walk the path if we want to taste its fruits. Otherwise, we are no authority to declare its outcomes, whether realizable or not. That was the gist of the last sentence the Buddha gave us: 'no one is going to save you; you must do your own work,' and our work is based on *sīla*.

Urgency of *Sīla*

Human birth is so rare! We are extremely fortunate.

According to Buddhist cosmology, there are several hells and even more heavens or divine abodes within the thirty-one realms of existence, of which the human realm is merely one. Below the human realm, there are four woeful realms. These are the ones that the Buddha made a point that his students did their best to avoid being reborn into, and this is why the Buddha gave us the five precepts, plain and simple: the five precepts were given so that we could avoid rebirth in the woeful realms. If we have a tendency of killing, if we have a tendency of stealing, of taking someone else's spouse, lying to people for profit, gain, or harm, and if we are getting intoxicated, unaware of what our thoughts are doing, unaware of what our speech is doing, and especially what our physical actions are doing, and if we are destroying life, there is a place for that conduct, i.e. suffering here and now, and in lives to come. That is what the Buddha called unwholesome or *akusala*, versus wholesome or *kusala*. This important part of the teaching found in the Dhamma needs to be properly appreciated, despite modern day's hesitancy in considering or acceptance of these truths, especially as it relates to some secular Buddhist ideas trying to prune out and explain away such teachings from the Dhamma by claiming them culturally influenced and therefore not the true teachings of the Buddha. Such an attitude of misrepresenting the Dhamma is based on wrong view *(micchā diṭṭhi)* in contrast to Right View, wherein the person tries to bring in their own worldview or philosophical standpoints, trying to forcibly dovetail them into the Dhamma.

This is unwholesome, destructive, and definitely does *not* involve an effort to preserve the Dhamma, and indeed would be misrepresenting the Buddha. All one needs to do is go back to the *suttas* and see the countless instances where the Buddha explains rebirth, its relevance to the Path, and the various realms of existence.

One must be careful not to enter the hall of the Dhamma with the dirty feet of mental distortions or personal narratives or individual lifestyle choices, etc., and instead be humble and curious enough to sit and practice what the Buddha taught *(without believing any of it)*, in order to know *for oneself*, whether these are truthful statements made by the Buddha or not, by putting in the necessary work, going all the way, and experiencing them for themselves.

Now, in describing the hell realm, the Buddha's intention was not to scare us, but to put us face to face with what the outcome of our actions are or could be, in case our tendency is to constantly break the precepts through unwholesome actions. This takes us back to the emphasis placed on developing and maintaining wise attention or wise consideration *(yoniso manasikāra)*, which is another way of describing the application of Right Effort. Thus, by bringing in the necessary consideration into our lives, the chances for unwholesome actions being committed will get less and less, and therefore the frequency of suffering from the pages of our lives will also become less and less, given the wisdom which would be operating in how we conduct our lives. This is what is meant by stressing the importance of having wisdom in the Dhamma, and why it is unlike any other tradition out there. Wisdom, after all, must have a practical and applicable side to it, as far as the Dhamma is

concerned, for it to be considered worthy. So, applying discernment and wisdom go hand in hand with maintaining the precepts, as we take the responsibility to live our lives, while practically applying the principles learned in the Dhamma within our lives. This is what breathes life into what one may call "Wisdom."

One of the reasons why I mentioned that human birth is so rare is because, believe it or not, at one point or another in your past, you have actually maintained the five precepts, and that is what allowed you to be reborn as a human being. We have kept the five precepts, the evidence of which is here. Now, that doesn't mean it is a "set" thing, that now we can't fall back or regress. No, the only way that we don't fall back is through us following the teachings of the Buddha, by practicing generosity, by practicing the five precepts, cultivating the mind, while applying the Dhamma in our own lives. Through living with intentional practice of these principles, we develop the wisdom and understanding, which allows us to attain the First Level of Nobility, i.e. becoming a Stream-Enterer (or Stream-Winner), the state of *Sotāpatti*. It is this individual, who will no longer fall below the human realm, ever again. At the very least, they will be reborn as a human being, while having a maximum of seven more lives before attaining the Fourth Level of Awakening, by becoming an *Arahant*, a Fully Awakened Being.

One time the Buddha was asked how rare human birth was. He said, imagine a one-eyed yoke, one that would be usually attached to a horse or an ox, that somebody tosses (the yoke) into the open ocean, where the yoke keeps floating indefinitely. And imagine there is a sea turtle that is blind. Now, this blind sea turtle is so unique that it rises up once every one hundred years from the bottom of the ocean

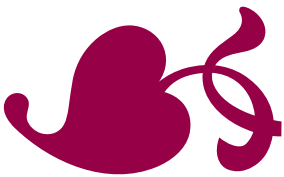
and, not knowing where it is going up to and what it will be swimming into upon the surface of the water as it is floating about, it so happens that the coincidence takes place, and the sea turtle pops its head out of that eye of the yoke floating in the open water! *That* is how rare it is to be born as a human being.

When I first read this, it put things into proper perspective for me. Now, for some of us, looking at a planet that is almost inhabited by eight billion, it is a bit difficult to see this rarity in human birth. However, all you need to do is just take a scoop from underneath the grass outside your front yard and put that under a microscope, and you will see how many different organisms there are, living underneath you, unseen by human eyes. I am not even mentioning the microscopic life forms in your gut, billions and billions of them in a tiny little square inch.

What is crucial is how we use our life on this planet, by practicing the five precepts versus when we lie to our loved ones, thinking that we are getting away; when we take away something and say: *"Nobody saw it, I out-smarted everyone;"* or when we get into powerful positions and take away things from others, or harm people, thinking our wealth and fame make us untouchable: Not exactly. We are all going to die one day, guaranteed. Where are you going to end up? That is the question. How often are we asking that question to ourselves and what are we doing about it? And making a good return on our life on this planet, first while we still have this body, and then while considering how our choices in behavior and actions can have a major impact on our wellbeing and those of others, including the environment, starting with the quality of our mind and its tranquility, in the absence of remorse and suffering. Is the

mind occupied by the three defilements? Are greed, anger and delusion present in my choices?

Sīla or living a morally aware life ensures a lifestyle that makes us responsible members of society, individually, socially, emotionally, spiritually, and so on. In maintaining a virtuous and moral life, therefore, along with generosity, we find ourselves creating the very foundation for cultivating the mind into its purest state. Through mindfully applying the standard of *sīla* and the precepts, we reduce our own suffering and those of others, while gaining true happiness. Our practice in the Dhamma delivers that.



Dealing with Obstacles: Hindrances on the Path

Experiencing hindrances while in meditation can be difficult; being bombarded by these obstacles, we are not able to maintain awareness or mindfulness of our meditation object. That can be genuinely frustrating. But how many of us can pause for a second and, instead of barraging ourselves with insults and judgments, change our attitude to a softer, easier, and kinder touch when addressing ourselves, as we acknowledge where we are on our journey? Isn't that how we would like strangers to greet us, when they come across us in the street, for example? Or when we are ordering food, tea or coffee from somewhere, don't we like to be treated with some dignity? That dignity is very much related with the faith in our capacity to become Awakened. And that is why, to my understanding, the Buddha was the perfect example of kindness, because he would see the potential for so many, even someone like Aṅgulimāla, the *sine qua non* serial killer in history, who had killed 999 individuals, where his one thousandth victim was going to be none other than his own mother!

In fact, he was aiming the arrow at her, about to kill her, when the Buddha saw the potential for awakening even within this serial killer, and went out of his way to intercede, to literally come in between Aṅgulimāla and his mother by dissuading him from turning her into his one thousandth victim. Thus, Aṅgulimāla becomes an *Arahant* before he

passes away. That also tells us about the faith and confidence the Buddha had in this serial killer to be able to go beyond the obvious, and by showing him the way to living a wholesome life, even attaining *Nibbāna*. The question then becomes: "Can we bring that kind of a compassionate, soft, gentle, and loving touch into our life?" This is crucial for our path, given that we will come across many obstacles, as we "un-layer" this onion of an experience called mental development; the many challenges that are to develop, the stronger the muscles needed to overcome and penetrate through our ignorance.

The group of obstacles guaranteed to come up in our meditative practice includes the five hindrances *(nīvarana)*, which are comprised of: (1) Attachment or lusting after the sense pleasure *(kāmacchanda)*; (2) aversion or anger *(vyāpāda)*; (3) sloth and drowsiness or torpor, *(thīna-middha)*; (4) restlessness and worry *(uddhacca-kukkucca)*; and (5) doubt *(vicikicchā)*. Throughout the *suttas*, we see the emphasis put on these five "teachers" as being critical to the development and even our very Awakening. Here, *kāmacchanda*, the hindrance of sensual desire, doesn't have to be sexual but anything that involves the six senses, including the mind. Sensual desire has more of a pulling feeling to it, a state where we carry and want something very strongly, whether it is something tangible or not. The second hindrance, on the other hand, *vyāpāda*, anger or aversion, has more of a pushing feel to it, as in, *"Why can't I fall asleep? I need to get up at 5am tomorrow morning!"* hence we engage in fighting with what is in front of us, trying to change what actually is taking place in the present moment.

The third hindrance, *thīna- middha* has 'two faces' to it, sloth and torpor, that basically involve a lethargic state of mind, which intoxicates the mind with disinterest, especially while in meditation, where we become not so interested in the meditation object and fall asleep. The fourth hindrance, *uddhacca-kukkucca* also has two aspects to it, where thoughts of remorse, for example, keep replaying in our mind throughout the day, or weeks, along with restlessness, which completely disrupt the process of meditation or even living. If you have ever meditated, then you may very well know how difficult this aspect of the hindrances really makes your sitting. And then the fifth hindrance, *vicikicchā* or doubt presents as skepticism towards the teacher, the teachings, the Dhamma, your own experiences or progress, and so on.

These five difficult phenomena are the intimate friends of any meditator, even our 'teachers,' as mentioned earlier. You might think calling them "enemies" would be more accurate, because if you have ever sat down to meditate, when your mind gets filled up with greed, lust, sloth, or sluggishness, you want to get up and leave after sitting for five minutes and thirty-five seconds, but it feels like you have actually been sitting for sixteen hours straight. All those are the aspects of the hindrances. Therefore, it is not a surprise that the Buddha chose to talk about the hindrances as the first of the *dhammas* to be looked at in *dhammānupassanā*, the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness. In my own practice and those of my students, I have come to know the hindrances very intimately. Initially, and for many years my relationship with them has not been a good one, as I used to be in constant battle with them. I used to treat them as my enemies, because just when I thought things were

"going well," suddenly, a thought or other kind of sensations would come up. Then, the following thoughts would arise, *"Yesterday's sitting was amazing. Today, it's just terrible. What is going on? This is not right. I am not trying hard enough!"* By going back to the suttas, and applying them throughout my own practice, I was soon able to see that there is lust or greed, as well as putting in too much energy. When the mind is too intensely engaged (with too much energy in fighting and trying to stay on course) it becomes too hot, too agitated, which goes against what meditation is trying to do by developing the mental calm. Here, we can look at the Buddha again and how he used to give many similes, metaphors, and images to illustrate his teachings. One of them is the image of a bowl of water.[16] When the water is calm and tranquil, you can see your reflection in it. However, when there is restlessness, it's like that water being tossed around by the wind; you won't be able to see your reflection because of so many ripples splashing around in it. So, when there is restlessness in the mind, you have no clarity to really go deeper in the practice. Thus, for example, in the case of lust or greed, we have the bowl of water being mixed up with different dyes and colors, let's say, where it would be impossible again for you to see your reflection. When there is anger, it's like that bowl of water is being boiled and all the bubbles are coming up; again, you cannot see a reflection.

Obviously, pushing the hindrances away is another form of aversion. So many times, meditators come and say, *"I need to get rid of this! I am not trying hard enough. I need to try harder! I need to destroy the hindrance of restlessness,"* for

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16 *Sacitta Sutta*: One's Own Mind. AN 10.5

example, *"I need to fight harder!"* as they cringe their teeth. I have actually brought that up to my meditation teachers in my earlier days, where I would often hear them laugh in their response, and remind me instead to: *"Take it easy!"* while reminding me that there must also be the inclusion of fun and of enjoyment within our meditative practice, for us to come back to; otherwise, we would simply be going to an extreme by becoming too rigid. I smile, every time I think of this, and whenever I have to encourage students to relax their grip. Once, while instructing the Venerable Anuruddha, the Buddha resembled this to holding on to a dove with both hands, whereby 'if you hold it too tight, then the dove would be suffocated and die, but if you leave your hand too lax, it would fly away.'[17]

There is always this slight smile on the Buddha's face. There is a relaxed tonality. It is this state of contentment, of being appreciative of our efforts that is sometimes lacking, as we push and push mercilessly. Soon after my teachers reminded me to "take it easy," then all of a sudden, I found myself sitting with a different attitude, with a sense of ease, a sense of respect towards the sitting and towards my own desire to sit in the first place. My own attitude towards meditation changed as I started to look at the practice with a softer touch and, to my surprise, the aggression or restlessness in wanting things to be different slowly disappeared. I wasn't letting go of anything, but the whole process was being understood, and by the same token, the shackles were coming off slowly, one at a time, without my interference. I simply got myself out of the way.

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[17] *Upakkilesa Sutta*: Imperfections of the Mind. MN 128

In mindfulness practice that we have through the *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta*, the attention is placed on what is taking place whether in our observation of the psycho-physical phenomenon, the feelings (pleasant, painful, or neutral), the mind, or the various mental phenomena or dhammas. Although they are with us throughout our meditative journey, the hindrances, however, show up especially while working with the Fourth Foundation of the *Satipaṭṭhāna (dhammānupassanā)*, where we come face to face with them. What is important to remember at this stage of the *dhammānupassanā* practice is "the relationship" we have with the hindrances, hence how we are holding on to or relating to these principles, or even the Four Noble Truths. In other words, you can walk around thinking all the while that everything is *dukkha* or suffering, or you can look at it as nature, where things are simply happening due to causes and conditions, impersonally. This way, looking at the hindrances as they happen, while regarding them as results that are based on conditions that have compelled them to form into the present shape that they are in, hence nothing to fight or push against, nor to grasp.

By using the word "relationship," what we are looking for is our connection to different phenomena, be it bodily sensations, feelings, or mind-states, which make up the other parts of the *Satipaṭṭhāna* or foundations of mindfulness. Continuing onto the fourth foundation, we begin to see that there are *dhammas* and then there are *adhammas*. Think of the latter as the opposite of *dhammānupassanā*, which is synonymous with the three defilements discussed earlier, i.e. craving after the pleasant, not wanting or being aversive to the painful or unpleasant,

and being in a delusional state while taking things personally as we identify with situations, such as: *"This is my pain; these defilements that I can't get rid of are my defilements; I am the one who experienced this Jhāna!"*

The trick is to develop the tolerance and patience to consider that any time we have the hindrance of restlessness or lust showing up, automatically, the brain reacts with: *"I am not supposed to have this. I need to push this away."* And now we are caught in a loop, much like a dog running in circles trying to catch its own tail, as we attempt to be self-righteous in a way, fighting that tendency of not being restless, or not angry, or non-remorseful, which itself becomes *adhamma*. This, because in those situations you are technically 'pushing away the pushing away,' becoming hateful towards the hatred, angry towards the anger, and aversive towards the aversion, which defeats the whole purpose so long as there is no wisdom and discernment to see all of this taking place. As soon as you begin to see this connection, that is, when you are practicing *dhammānupassanā* or the fourth foundation of mindfulness, the hindrances or obstacles become your very teachers, much like resistance weights that build your muscles.

When hindrances arise, they are like the waves on the surface of the ocean, that appear and then vanish, so long as we are not engaging with them. If we try to hold on to one wave and say, *"I want more of this!"* or, *"Why is this coming up every single time!"* then we are trapped again, stuck in the grips of greed and hatred. Instead of becoming enmeshed, completely engulfed in them, however, we can observe this connection, *"Ah, now I see the relationship,"* and through

understanding this process, the whole thing fades away. That is why this path can be seen as the Path for Wisdom. The Dhamma or Buddhism is all about gaining insight in order to understand and see how things come to be, i.e. *"yathābhutaṁ pajānāti"* the term the Buddha used to describe this state. Therefore, according to this tradition, a wise person is one who understands and sees all these hindrances as they come and go, and the *Jhāna* factors too, along with the Seven Factors of Awakening are used as tools to address them. These we will explore in depth in further chapters.

In working with the hindrances, the important role given to *sati* or mindfulness cannot be overstated. No wonder the Buddha made it the beginning step for so many of his formulas in teaching the Dhamma for forty-five years. You come to realize that all you have to do is introduce mindfulness and the mind is no longer distracted; simple? Yes, but not always as easy as it sounds. Without *sati*, we cannot identify, understand, and most definitely not see what is taking place in the mind, or in our behaviors, hence the primary role it *(sati)* occupies, whether we speak of the Noble Eightfold Path, the Five Faculties, the Seven Factors of Awakening, etc.

In the Dhamma, you will always find five of this, four of that, three of this, twelve of that, eight of this, and so on. That is a very beneficial mnemonic device, given that at the time of the Buddha, repetition served to facilitate memory, since the teachings were not being written down. Every temple had at least one monastic who would know the whole *Tipitak*a by heart. That was their living library.

In looking at properly working with distractions in meditation, as an antidote to the Five Hindrances, the Buddha gave us the Seven Factors of Awakening, which are comprised of: mindfulness *(sati)*, investigation of states, *(dhammavicaya)*, energy or perseverance *(vīriya)*, joy or rapture *(pīti)*, tranquility *(passaddhi)* collectedness of mind *(samādhi)*[18] , and then finally we have equanimity, *upekkhā*, a state of balance.

Mindfulness and investigation of states are some of the best tools to counteract the influence or effect of the first and second hindrances, which are lust or greed, and anger or hatred. Similarly, when feeling sluggish or very drowsy, the joy or rapture Awakening Factor would be the remedy here. The joy comes in when we develop deeper and deeper layers of our meditation practice to experience the *jhānas*, which are profoundly restful states of mind. Joy gives you an extra push when feeling sluggish and with low energy; as soon as you remember that joy factor, the spine gets "lit up like a Christmas Tree," and you are back on your object of meditation, with more vigor and zest. This may very well give you another few hours of good sitting, if you have developed this factor well enough.

In this way, the Seven Factors of Awakening then start to address every single one of the hindrances as antidotes to

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[18] *Samādhi* is, unfortunately, still mistranslated and seen by many people using the English language as: "concentration." However, the term "collectedness," "coming together," or "centeredness of mind" is often more appropriate to convey the experience of *samādhi*, seeing how that is different than getting into a "one-pointed" or "focused" state, which is what one understands through the use of the word: "concentration." That negates the ability for wisdom to come in, contrary to what was intended in the use of the word *"samādhi"* in Pāli, which the Buddha introduced.

them, one after the other. But the key factor here to remember in all of these is the mindfulness factor. After all, 'mindfulness is the ability to observe how the attention of the mind moves from one object to another.' This, because the mind is always engaged in some object or perception coming in through the six sense doors.

Sati is like the conductor of a symphony of an orchestra, seeing exactly where each piece is and how it must be played, how every single note needs to be executed, and by which instrument, and at what time and interval. That is what the mind is becoming more developed and cultivated into, as it learns to become more observant but without being attached. If you have ever seen a symphony conductor in action, you know that they are not sitting by each musician and holding the notes, making sure that each one of these people are playing their respective instrument correctly. Instead, they are upfront, standing without being physically attached to either one, while knowing exactly what is going on and what needs to be happening. So, this relationship between the musicians and the conductor is firmly understood and never taken for granted by the conductor, as he or she knows full-well how the music needs to be played out perfectly. That is why we need to have *sati*. In time, as your meditation develops, you will start seeing more subtle forms of the hindrances.

We choose whether to make the hindrances our enemies, friends, or teachers. Remember, the encouragement here is for you, the meditator, to treat them as your teachers. The hindrances are simply there to let us know that we are still holding on to something, to sleepiness or lethargy for

example. Every time you say you are going to sit for twenty-five minutes, by minute twenty-four you are already giving up; *or* all of a sudden, you have that zest, that energy that rises in you at the twenty-fifth minute mark, and that is when it all starts. Some students have said that the two-hour sitting is short for them because it is only towards the end of the first hour that they get their "second wind," so to speak. Now, sluggishness or torpor comes in and says, *"It's enough; time for me to get up."* Unless you really have to do something, and your body and mind are in such a peaceful state, where you are grounded and restful, all the elements are there for you to go in deeper. So please do and give yourself that gift!

Everyone experiences hindrances. Some of us experience one more so than the others. That simply means we need to just look at those and listen to what is being expressed by their presence. Worry, for example, has been one of the biggest ones for me, having to do with my own PTSD growing up. I wouldn't know this if I hadn't become more and more aware of how my own experience and practice in meditation clarified and unfolded certain things for me, where suddenly I would see causes that were not seen before. Thus, clarity of comprehension is one of the biggest purposes of meditation, leading to higher wisdom. It shuts down the noise, so you see what is really going on.

"Nothing is fit to be clung to," or *"Sabbe dhammā nālaṁ abhinivesāyā"* in Pāli. This is what the Buddha told Venerable Mahā Moggallāna, one of the two chief disciples of the Buddha himself, while he was struggling with the hindrance of drowsiness before becoming an *Arahant*.

As Venerable Mahā Moggallāna was having difficulty to stay on his meditation object, the Buddha appeared to him in the flesh, and said, *'Moggallāna, when you are attacked by drowsiness, do these things...'* He then tells Venerable Mahā Moggallāna to get up from his seat and walk back and forth when mindfulness is shaken because of sluggishness and awareness is no longer there.

The Buddha's approach is so pragmatic. At another time he says if the walking is not enough, go ahead and splash your face with some water. Finally the Buddha says, that if your drowsiness is so bad that you are still feeling sleepy, go ahead and lay down on your right side, make sure you have one leg placed over the other, and with mindfulness allow what is happening to just happen. When you wake up, however, wake up with mindfulness with yourself, while opening your eyelashes. He adds something else when Venerable Mahā Moggallāna turns to him and asks: 'Bhante, what is the shortest explanation you could give me, by practicing which, I would completely be free of all the fetters and become a fully liberated Arahant?' The Buddha replies, 'Pay attention, and I will tell you. Moggallāna, nothing is fit to be clung to.'[19]

Students have asked me how to best overcome restlessness, the fourth hindrance. This is what the Buddha said we would be struggling with until we became an *Arahant*. That is one of the major hurdles. Again, what is important is how well we can *use* restlessness, just like pain, as an aid, as a teacher. I am not a believer in fighting the hindrances because you cannot let go of them that way.

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[19] *Pacalāyana Sutta*: Dozing Off. AN 7:61

I have often heard this idea about '*letting go of the hindrances,*' but you cannot really "let go." When the moment is right, the fruit falls from the tree but *only* after the necessary work has been done; when the moment is right, the dead leaves fall from the tree. This is not purely a waiting game either; there is work to be done, work that involves the Three Trainings *(sīla, samādhi, paññā)*, mentioned extensively in the last chapter.

When a person has restlessness or any of the other hindrances, *sati* of course has to be there all the time. Restlessness is there to "encourage" us to induce more of the tranquility, collectedness of mind, and even the equanimity factors (of the Seven Awakening Factors). The Buddha and my teachers have always pointed out, that a moment of *Nibbāna* is in fact a moment when the Seven Factors of Awakening are completely well balanced, in harmony. The investigation factor is what identifies restlessness as such. Now, we jump over *vīrya* (or energy) and *pīti* (or joy), and go directly to *passaddhi*, which is tranquility; and then to *samādhi*. These special factors come into play to balance the mind, for the restlessness to slowly diminish. So, if a person is experiencing restlessness, I will not suggest them to bring up the factor of joy, because that is going to fan the flames of restlessness even more.

When the hindrance of sloth and torpor arises, that is an indicator that we have lost interest in the practice. It also means you are simply not interested enough in the meditation object. Now, again, whether you are practicing the breath, watching the sensations of the body, or *mettā* (that is, radiating it like the flame of a candle and *not* pushing or

forcefully "sending" loving-kindness) to your spiritual friend, the same principle applies, which involves being vested enough in the object. That is where we always must check in with ourselves, with our own attitude: *"Am I interested in the object the way it comes, the way it is, versus what I would like it to be? Do I want to reach that state of tranquility or equanimity? Is that my drive?"* Now, that requires some major attitude checking, and honesty to consider: *"And when I am not getting that state of equanimity, I feel discouraged. When I feel discouraged, I lose interest because it didn't happen the way I wanted it to."*

Thus, all the conditions have been laid out for sloth and torpor to come up. Then the meditation becomes a chore, as the meditator is no longer enjoying the practice, and perhaps now even hating it. This is something you will often see while being on retreats, where by the first, second, third, fourth, or fifth day, some people are just trying to push themselves through the days because they are not vested enough in their object of meditation, and it becomes a battle of will for some to finish the retreat, where many more don't even know why they are on a retreat, in the first place. Meanwhile, however, the objects to be observed are always there. The hindrances are always there. They are like signals to point you back in the right direction. Are you still radiating *mettā* or loving-kindness? Are you still on the breath? What is going on? So, being curious enough, at least in the beginning, is crucial for the success of your practice. This is when meditation can become fun, if we know where and how to look.

Working with the *bojjhaṅgās* or the Seven Factors of Awakening is like being on a seesaw. If you get that seesaw to come to a state of equilibrium, where instead of being

lopsided or up and down in either of the positions, they come to balance each other, where each one of them is working interdependently, and when they do come together, that is a moment of *Nibbāna*. A person who is enlightened is a person who has got all Seven Factors of Awakening working together in unison. There are no more hindrances in a fully enlightened person, none, which is an *Arahant*. So long as we have not reached that state yet, we are always in this dynamic state. So, restlessness could be translated as a person who has too much energy, like earlier I was mentioning how a person might try harder in this sitting versus the last sitting where they did not try enough. That trying harder presents the mind with more opportunities to become restless. Too much energy is going to bring about restlessness. To counteract that, we need to inculcate the factor of tranquility.

Studying the Dhamma closely, one can see that it is about understanding with wisdom (Right View), a very important quality to develop while being fully engaged in one's day-to- day activities. Through right view and right understanding, one acquires the ability to see and recognize the various states of mind that arise as a result of calm observation. By allowing them to come to the surface thus, one is able to gain insight through *working with* the hindrances, instead of pushing them away. This attitude of "allowing" makes room for *samādhi* to take place, as the mind becomes more and more collected.

This allowing is very much related to the sense of curiosity that needs to be there in our practice, as we turn *toward* our experience rather than *away* from it, and with an accepting attitude. This, in contrast to looking at *samādhi*, the sixth Factor of Awakening, as one- pointed concentration,

where we see how there is a rejection of the completeness of human life, where experience is amputated by focusing on a single object as one is being engrossed in it, which is what concentrating strives to do through the *suppression* of one's hindrances.

If we agree that the Dhamma is truly "immediately effective" *(sandiṭṭhiko)*, in other words, that it is able to address life's vicissitudes and struggles, and therefore not something that works "some" of the times, being only partially effective, then, the value of our practice begins to bear fruit in our everyday life. This brings for us a sense of freedom; a lucid state of calmly observing in an engaged way with whatever is taking place, but with insightful clarity. This, because in Buddhism we are taught that all phenomena must be correctly understood, which leads us to use insight throughout all sorts of experiences that occur within this mind-body process *(nāma-rūpa)*. After all, reality as it is seen, is none other than experience, beyond which there can be no absolute certainty. By not fighting against the hindrances and other obstacles, through modifying our attitude towards them and with the practice of relaxing the body, one relaxes the mind and vice versa, one discovers 'a great purity of mind due to the absence of mental defilements *(kileśas)*.' This purity becomes none other than the result of growth in our understanding of the role that hindrances play in our development.

Therefore, much like a doorkeeper, relaxed awareness of the object of our meditation, allows us to guard the doors of our senses against unwholesome *(akusala)* states, while admitting only the wholesome ones *(kusala)*.

Forgiveness Through Wisdom

It is never about the other person or the world outside of us.

Every time I heard the word forgiveness since I was a child, I would cringe in protest, as if: *"It's not fair. Why do I have to forgive?"* When my father would discipline us in "old school" fashion, i.e. corporal punishment, my mom would always tell us at the end: *"Go ahead and kiss your father's hand."* Meanwhile, I had to negotiate with my feelings of resentment, anger, frustration, powerlessness, and I would exclaim: *"That's not fair! That's not right!"* These were some of the narratives playing in the background of my mind, and I'm sure for you the reader, you have your own ways of reacting to the word "forgiveness." It is a sensitive subject, like walking on a sharp Japanese *katana* sword: you must be careful treading on it, for it can easily be a stumbling block, and cause harm. We can easily fall into either one of two extremes: to utterly relinquish wisdom or discernment, giving up ourselves completely without thinking much about it, or to just go ahead and hold that grudge, despite saying "I forgive you." Of course, the latter doesn't work because we know all too well that it will eventually cause a major havoc within us. So, how then do we get to work around this strong emotion?

There are so many examples in the *suttas* where the Buddha is giving instructions or exemplifying forgiveness

through his own acts and behavior towards others, who had or were engaged in the act of committing a wrongdoing. One can see the subtlety with which the Buddha responds to such situations, whether through his silence or behavior. And the same goes for a great multitude of his *bhikkhus* (monks) and *bhikkhunis* (nuns), who were sometimes exposed to ignorance and cruelty by others, in the manner they reacted to those situations. This is yet another reason for learning to adopt these same qualities by familiarizing ourselves with the countless stories depicted in the *suttas*, that tell us so much about the everyday lives of these fellow human beings who existed in the past and who had to deal with the same kind of injustices, ignorance, and frustrating situations that we do now nearly 2600 years later. I use these stories in my life, and not only in my teaching of the Dhamma as examples, as an anchor to my practice. I highly encourage you, the reader, to explore these resources as well.

As children, we are very passionate about life with a wide- eyed and fully aware presence. Then, one way or another, something happens and we move away from that kind of an approach to life; we become rather jaded and more cautious about how we respond to certain people's behavior, especially to their actions that are in some way hurtful to us, be it a look, a gesture, a physical act, or a word, or even an absence of these, as the case may be. Usually a word has such an impact on us, to the extent that even fifty, sixty years later, we still recall what was said to us, yet the person who said it might have already been dead, decades earlier; meanwhile we suffer.

Once, I asked a fellow meditator who was dealing with such a situation, whether deep down, she wanted or was expecting for that person, who had wronged her and caused much turmoil in her life, to crawl on both hands and knees, begging for her apology. As soon as I said this, a smile appeared on her face, which immediately turned into: *"...but I know it's not going to happen. I know, I'm being foolish."* But the smile was there, which said it all.

I have noticed that many times we have a secret agenda within us to hold onto the grudge until that person comes to us, rings us up, or sends us an email saying: *"Oh, I must have been such a fool to have done this to you. I was so blind!"* etc. That day might come (with a slim chance though), or most probably it might not. But one thing is guaranteed to be taking place, and that is the example which the Buddha himself gave, where trying to hold onto anger is like holding on to a red-hot piece of coal. Remember how practicing *sīla* allows us to give a sense of protection, of safety, to others. Well, if we are practicing them, then firstly we would be giving these states of comfort to us. The same level of tolerance and acceptance is there when we are engaged in forgiving, which is another form of *sīla* because we are now at least abstaining from causing harm to ourselves, the first precept.

In my own journey, I have often found it encouraging to go back to the *suttas*, where one can find so much information that is relevant to one's own particular situations or difficulties faced in life, as well as those around oneself, while looking at the daily lives of the Buddha and His disciples.

One example in particular involves the Venerable Sāriputta, who was considered second *only* to the Buddha when it came to wisdom. The incident involves a certain individual, who in wanting to prove that the Venerable Sāriputta was like anyone else as it relates to his forgiveness, unable to deal with painful situations, hence susceptible to anger, wanted to test the venerable one's patience. Thus, while the venerable was on his alms round, this individual, unbeknownst to anyone, comes and strikes the *Arahant* from behind. The assaulter, in seeing the calm and tranquil demeanor of Venerable Sāriputta, suddenly realizes that he has just struck a Holy person, one whose contaminants and defilements had all been destroyed, and he falls onto his knees and begs for forgiveness. Venerable Sāriputta, although physically shaken from the experience, had already moved on without ever so looking behind him as to who did what to him, and continued on his path. While in tears, the man keeps apologizing, and the Venerable Sāriputta forgives him immediately, but his own students are not so forgiving towards this man who assaulted their teacher. Later, when this incident is related back to the Buddha, he turns to the Sangha and declares that the Venerable Sāriputta '*is just like Mother Earth, taking in everything and rejecting nothing, whether rubbish, feces, blood, dead bodies, or sweet scented sandalwood, gold and treasures, etc.; it makes no difference to Sāriputta, whether respect or abuse it is that he receives.*'

This level of patience exhibited by Venerable Sāriputta is par excellence, the kind of forbearance that embodies the Buddha's teaching, lived out through his Chief Disciple, Venerable Sāriputta.

Forgiveness is a process; it is not a one-time act. Some of us have gone through major trauma because of others' unwholesome actions. And in many cases, trauma is not something that happens once: it reoccurs often, though not in the objective way that we might understand it. Given our cyclical choices due to ignorance and not knowing or understanding of the Dhamma, we are often re-traumatizing ourselves, as we keep getting into various forms of anguish and pain. This usually occurs when we point the finger at someone outside of us, and blame them for our hardship, saying: *"If only this had not happened; if only you had not done that to me, etc."*

I always go back to my own self or body for examples. Sometimes I catch myself in front of the mirror with my shoes off and notice the differences between my feet. You see, I don't have most of my toes on my right foot due to the Lebanese Civil War, during which I was injured and spent nearly a month in the hospital at the intensive care unit (ICU) recovering from shrapnel wounds I had received to my head and lower extremities. When I do see my foot through a mirror, it's a strange surprise. Now, the injuries mentioned happened many decades earlier, yet the brain remembers it as if it was only yesterday. Upon seeing it, immediately I recall all the pain I went through. I do know, however, that the trauma or the incident itself took place sometime in the August of 1978. It happened then, but the sense of anger and resentment, disguised in the form of helplessness, and vice versa bring with them all the fears, anticipations, anxieties, the dread, and the constant threat of all of it somehow re-occurring. As psychotherapists, we have names for these different traumas, whether PTSD

(Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) or complex trauma (a combination of traumatic events that are seen affecting a person). But, what do we do with these or other painful experiences that one may be plagued with? An image may serve to provide an answer.

When we sit to meditate, I encourage students to start with a beginner's mind. This requires being like a forgiving parent to yourself. Of course, this need not be reserved for the meditation cushion, but extended to your driver's seat in your car, in the bus, at your office desk, at the dinner table, etc. Unfortunately, though, we don't know how to go about doing this, at least on a consistent basis, because of this thing called "the judgmental mind." As human beings, we have "sticky fingers:" we like to hold on to things, to memories, whether we want to or not; this often occurs due to the brain's tendency for "negative bias." We oftentimes see ourselves leaning towards negative anticipatory dread, towards a fear of the worst- possible scenario about to ensue and, out of a multitude of other (even more plausible) possibilities, we pick the worst one! But what are the odds for this thing to happen? Hardly ever, seeing that we seem to never question its feasibility, nor address it honestly.

While taking things for granted, we follow certain maladaptive leanings, tendencies, the emotional weight of certain thoughts, or negative experiences that have left their mark on us. This is not using a beginner's mind, or starting with a clean sheet of paper, with every encounter, every new situation. What this also demonstrates is that we are basically "crowded in the head," or top heavy in the head, with so many memories, thoughts, and possibilities. Fear

and confusion usually play a big role in this, which rub shoulders, further draining us of our positive and playful attitude. Unfortunately, so long as we are crowded in the head with thoughts, regrets, or remorse, even if we mouth the words: "I forgive you," and even when the inner narrative might be playing that tune, viscerally speaking, however, we may be completely detached from a feeling tone that truly feels the forgiveness taking place. Why? Because the brain itself is saturated with other thoughts, other storylines.

The Buddha used the word *vipallāsa*, which are distortions of the mind. There are a few doorways for the *vipallāsas* to have an impact on our lives. One is through *saññā* or perception, while another is consciousness. That is also tinged by our wrong views, which allow us to carry these negative, distorted perceptions in the first place. So, they manifest in the form of four usually: 1) seeing the impure as pure, 2) seeing the impermanent as permanent, 3) seeing the unpleasant as pleasant, and 4) seeing the non-substantial as substantial, that is, seeing *anattā* as *attā*, as "me, mine, this is who I am, my individuality, my thoughts," etc. When our mind is thus crowded with so many distortions, it's very difficult to see what is taking place in front of us. And how can one become appreciative in such a big intellectual and emotional mess? Thus, without wise consideration *(yoniso manasikāra)* memories, associations, and so on, will pretty much tie your hands behind your back when it comes to being constructive in living your life.

And living on this planet today, we are getting plenty of toxic elements that further nail us into this negative bias, of anticipating worse and worse scenarios, which usually starts with ourselves. This is because our attention is unwise

in its application, which the Buddha called *ayoniso manasikāra*, the opposite of wise attention or wise consideration, as we are not guarding the six sense doors; anything the environment sends our way is going in through our line of defense, which is non existent in this case.

Resentment presents as yet another obstacle to forgiveness; resentment towards ourselves and situations, and thus becoming unable to forgive ourselves because of it. This might have been the result of just a memory from our childhood. Many of us are scarred in childhood, maybe because of a teacher, a caretaker, a geopolitical situation, or an adult in a powerful position, whereby this little child lost his sense of safety and security which we all need, because such a deficit in one's sense of protection directly impacts the nervous system, the way the brain develops, the way the relationship building-blocks are going to be put into place, which is now on a very shaky ground, if that child did not have the sense of safety inculcated in them, to be supported by them.

It is worth mentioning here that it is very easy to point the finger at others, situations, etc. That's one of the best tools Māra has. In Buddhist teachings we have Māra, who is also called the Evil One. Why pointing the finger outside of oneself is considered "evil," in this case? In the Dhamma, we are taught to take responsibility for our intentions or volitions *(cetanā)*, choices, behaviors, actions, and therefore consequences, which is why we are strongly encouraged to have a solid ethical foundation or *sīla*, all in order to minimize outside influences from disrupting our progress.

Pointing the finger outside of us is very reminiscent to starting a revolution, outside of oneself, i.e. trying to change the world, trying to change what's in front of us. Does this sound familiar? Remember the defilements? Anger or aversion, i.e. *"I don't like this!"* joined closely with greed, i.e. *"I want this instead!"* But humanity has gone to many wars, which it has justified from all angles, showing one's revolt against a situation, a status quo that did not agree with one's ideals and beliefs. Essentially, there's nothing wrong with that *if* one is coming from a solid wholesome place, after which comes the step of doing what can be done, so long as one's virtue or *sīla* is being kept intact. The Buddha never taught complacency, but he also stood firmly in relation to contention.

The Dhamma is a revolution, whereby you're revolting against your own three defilements, saying: "I am better than them, I can actually start with a new sheet of paper with every single encounter that I have with myself." That's the first encounter, by the way: the one we have with ourselves.

Forgiveness is all about you and what happens to you in this limited time that you have on this planet and how you want to live it. So long as there is smelly trash and dirty things tossed around in your safe place - let's say perhaps your home or specifically your bedroom or dinner table, it will be an undesirable and unsafe place to be or stay in, for long. You will not find yourself truly able to enjoy the time that you spend in that space, so long as there's foul smelling trash all over. Here the "bedroom" or "home" is being used as a metaphor for your entire life. Forgiveness then is, you

cleaning up this precious space of yours from the piles of dirt; it's more about you than anyone else. So, clean up your space and let's no longer have any trash in the bedroom! But the unwillingness to relinquish past actions (whether ours or others) is one of the obstacles to forgiveness. So, before we forgive anyone, we need to start to ask ourselves where do we stand about 'this whole forgiveness business' and whether we think it's even possible. Do I have enough love for myself to look in the mirror and say, *"You know what? I know you've tried, and I want you to try again today. I trust you. I'm not going to put a bull's-eye on my head and walk around like that."* Yesterday's experiences will allow you to become stronger and wiser and you can actually apply the lessons from the past, today, by choosing differently. Thus, responsibility becomes another factor in forgiveness.

When forgiving, I'm also taking responsibility for my actions, speech, and thoughts, which I will be choosing, as well as the interactions I will be placing myself and us in, instead of tossing the responsibility on this outside situation, thinking, *"If only the world or this person is no longer there, or if this person is there versus the other one, only then, will my situation get better, and I'd be happy."* That again takes us back to the three defilements. And so long as those three are there, we haven't done our work right.

A wonderful simile comes to mind from the Dhamma, for which we should be so grateful to the Buddha, including his disciples in having provided us with so many relatable and helpful examples in the form of similes. In this simile, the Buddha describes three types of people. The first type

resembles a line, or a groove made in stone or granite, let's say. The second one resembles a line made in sand. The third type of person is similar to a line made on the surface of water. Now, as it relates to forgiveness, some of us have used a bulldozer or a jackhammer to put our groove in that granite and we have spotlights on it to show where that line is, so that we recall what happened to us, that we will never forget it. The other person is that line in the sand; it's still there but sooner or later events happen, time passes, people age; because it's a line drawn on sand, to begin with, forgiveness happens. This person was not prone to taking it so personally; the delusion for that individual was far less severe than the previous one. Eventually, the wind or the blizzard comes and wipes it clean. Now, when it comes to the third type of person, we are talking about a line drawn on the surface of water! It might create a ripple, but the ripple will just expand, and after a while completely disappear.

The interesting thing is that the Buddha also described a *fourth* person. He said for this person, events taken place are like the footprints or the trail of birds flying in the sky: you won't even know they were there!

That fourth type of person is the *Arahant* that he always spoke about, the fourth stage Awakened one, a person who has completely exhausted or destroyed the three defilements, for whom there's no attachment, no hatred, or anger, despite what's happening around them, and there's no delusion or ignorance as to *"this is mine, this is happening to me."* Because of this understanding, in essence, when experiencing different things and people in life, your

experiences are purely based on certain conditions that have come together at this point in time, under certain circumstances and for this time period. Change one of those conditions and bang, everything falls apart, like a deck of cards.

As far as the Dhamma is concerned, we start by applying the tools given to us by the Buddha, such as the Noble Eightfold Path, while engaging the person by offering them our genuine presence, understanding, and capacity to hear them as we apply the medium of our wisdom and understanding gained through our own practice. And sometimes we need to literally talk ourselves through the whole process of all those anxieties being experienced. It all starts with being honest and willing to look at and see the parts that we play in the perpetuation of *our* pain, for it's never about the other person outside of us, ultimately. Here, we need to see the connection that exists between the suffering being experienced and the involvement of the person through attachment. The holding onto the things desired is the very reason that creates suffering; the outside world is always going to invite us to engage, to take things seriously and latch on, cling, and grasp, or conversely push away the undesired situation or circumstance, leaving us in a state of pain and dissatisfaction. This also indicates our lack in understanding and adequately appreciating the three characteristics of existence: impermanence *(anicca)*, suffering *(dukkha)*, and non-substantiality *(anattā)*, where we would otherwise stop to consider the fact that things arise, linger, transform, and vanish; nothing is meant to stay the same and unchanging, which most have a trouble accepting, hence our struggles throughout life to change things consistently.

But let's take a moment and go back to the role of communication here, especially the one that has to do with ourselves. Remember, forgiveness is the other side of love. Formerly, as their psychotherapist, I would tell my patients, "show me a person who can forgive, and I'll show you a person who can really love." So, trust too must be there because there can be no love without trust, with trust in yourself, being the first step, which has everything to do with how you communicate with yourself.

During retreats, some teachers instruct meditators to abstain from talking. There are teachers who use some other techniques, such as some talking here and there or practicing noble speech. For example, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, always insists on talking but doing so mindfully. He doesn't stop there. He instructs his students not to pay any attention to what the other person is saying (reading this, you are probably laughing, thinking that to be so cold) but to experience or become aware of what is happening inside of you, between your ears, when you are listening to the other person talk. In essence, we have forgotten the art of listening.

Today when we listen, we are simply gathering our forces, coming up with a new plan of attack, for a major assault at the speaker(s). We rarely listen to the other person except for loading up the gun or "the axe in the mouth," as the Buddha would say.

How in the world will there be any Harmonious Communication or Right Speech, a key part of the Noble Eightfold Path? Because, if this negative conversation is already going on within us, even when we do come out and say to the other person that we forgive them, or ourselves, then too we might turn it into a mantra, saying it a thousand

and eight times a day, which is not going to do much, other than adding more resentment in us. The process involves, to start with, a sense of dislike that soon turns into a sense of resentment, which also has a lot to do with the second poison or defilement; namely, aversion. At this point, it gets tricky because it becomes very difficult for us to dislodge ourselves from that sense of hatred, due to the storyline or narrative that runs parallel to the emotion, that legitimizes it, as it were. This is another reason why anger or hatred is a heavy-duty emotion, literally being heavy to move like a massive boulder, and it does refuse to move simply because we have so many excuses and explanations as to why it needs to and *should* be there. Often, we have memories involved, or at least associations made in the mind that get carried into our own bodies, and the body is the perfect witness to all that we experience, good and bad, with all the five senses (plus the mind) associated with it.

Here, I am also looking at forgiveness through the lens of the perfections or *pāramī*.[20] In Theravāda Buddhism we have ten perfections. Looking at the act of forgiveness, I started seeing how it absolutely needs to have patience *(kkhanti)*. We need to be patient with ourselves; we need to be patient with the experience of pain, whether from a trauma from long time ago, or being mistreated by someone only a few minutes earlier. If it was something that took place and left its mark on the body, whether metaphorically or in real life, forgiving our body is what we need to do first.

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[20] *Pāramī* or perfections are special qualities for a person to embody that get more and more refined until they reach a sublime state of purity. They are ten in number, including: generosity *(dāna)*, virtue/ethical life *(sīla)*, patience *(kkhanti)*, wisdom *(paññā)*, truth *(sacca)*, loving-kindness *(mettā)*, energy/perseverance *(vīrya)*, renunciation *(nekkhamma)*, strong determination *(additthāna)*, and equanimity *(upekkhā)*.

"But, how can I forgive my body for having been abused?" In my case it was something that I could not even point my finger at as to who the perpetrator was. It was just a mortar attack, a bomb that blew up in front of our home, and that was it, without anyone that I could point at as the culprit. That itself is another form of trauma, which makes it a complex trauma. But with other individuals it might be an actual person or persons that have done them harm. They might even be alive, or even worse, someone they would have to encounter here and there. Then, the question becomes: *"How can I gather the strength and softness to actually forgive that person, if I don't have any patience to first of all deal with the pain, and secondly to be generous with myself, by listening to my body, and thus begin the process of healing?"* Here is where we need to inculcate the power of patience through the awakening factor of equanimity *(upekkhā)*.

Please be mindful that forgiveness through wisdom is not about blindly accepting the person and the act and saying, *"Yes, I am just going to ignore what happened. I am just going to forgive it because of my practice demanding it,"* or that *"my spiritual leanings dictate that I do,"* along the lines of having to turn the other cheek, as in Christianity. If you are going to turn the other cheek without resolving these issues deep down, or leaving yourself open for hazardous situations to reoccur without any protection for yourself, then you won't be practicing wisdom at all; you are in fact opening the door for major havoc both within you and possibly even from the outside. This turns into yet another trauma that now you would have inflicted upon yourself because you have not been honest and truthful to the pain; you have not respected the pain enough.

Harmonious communication or Right Speech with yourself again becomes key here, as is trust in your goodness.

Forgiveness requires an abundance of generosity. And generosity comes in when you allow it the space and not just become identified with the whole act. We have all been harmed or wronged in so many ways. There is no way around it. You must really go through it by at least accepting it. That acceptance requires much room for being generous and trusting, which is another element of patience, which is again one of the manifestations of the awakening factor of equanimity *(upekkhā)*.

Another *pāramī* or perfection is that of *nekkhamma* or relinquishment. Relinquishment does not mean that you are denying the fact that this event happened; you are simply refusing to hold on to that red-hot coal. You are not being blind; you are fully aware of what took place, but you are simply refusing to put that in the crosshairs of your life and continue living life with that giant boulder in front of your eyes, because wherever you turn, that's what you see. *That* is what we are relinquishing.

Now, we often don't have that luxury in such circumstances. For example, sometimes, the people or situations that have done us wrong are nowhere to be found, they don't exist on this planet anymore. What do we do then? In therapy, there are different techniques that we can prescribe to people in such cases. One of them is the "empty chair" technique, once the individual has already learned to self-regulate through various relaxation exercises and, therefore, is able to de-escalate themselves when emotions get high. Using the "empty chair," you visualize this person

sitting right across from you in the room on an actual empty chair, as you "tell them" how it felt and exactly what it was that you went (or are still going) through. Another technique involves writing a letter to the person who is no longer around, but whose presence in the past has been quite significant to us emotionally. Once the letter is written, the person may choose to either destroy it, toss it away, or keep it. These are only a few ways we can deal with pain, whether it involves forgiving someone for hurting us, or having left us, as in the case of death.

It is important to note that you cannot just do this in a vacuum by yourself from one day to the next and expect yourself to completely heal. That would not be reasonable to expect to happen, especially in the case of trauma related issues, which may be there even post-forgiveness. What matters is what we do with it, and that is where acceptance comes in. That is also where the passionate, wide-eyed approach to life that a child has comes in. Acceptance then becomes synonymous with surrender.

Growing up in today's world, we have been given so many preferences, through parents, society, schools, degrees, and through the people we interact with. We have lists of things that indicate who we are or who we are supposed to be with, our likes and dislikes. As you grow older, the list keeps getting longer: you are getting more "refined" in your preferences. Thus, for life to be acceptable, beautiful and loving, cozy, and comfy, it needs to meet certain criteria for us, hence the preferences. Oddly enough, that is exactly why we have moved away in an opposite direction from what we used to be as curious little children, fully aware of the life

that was taking place around us, the juiciness of it. This is not to say that we need to trust or surrender blindly. That would be like throwing a boat into the sea with a hole in it. We know what is going to happen to the boat: it will sink. So, being forgiving or exercising forgiveness through wisdom is like that boat but with all the holes having been nicely patched up in it. That is the way we can cross the sea. My invitation to you is to remind yourself whether you are aware of the boat having holes in it. And the way to patch the holes, in this case, happens to be through using our discernment, the faculty of wisdom, which absolutely needs to be there.

Along with patience there must be love as discussed earlier; forgiveness cannot function without having held hands with loving- kindness. We need to take care of our love; we need to take care of our awareness, as we care for our loved ones, if not more so. We need to take care of our bodies, our emotions, our loved ones, but most importantly we need to take care of our mindset, because that is what we are functioning with, the communication that goes on between the ears. What is its nature? Is their aversion there? Or a loving acceptance? Many of us are living life so seriously, with so many preferences, most of which fail miserably in coming true. Then, we suddenly see a child who is laughing, running across the lawn, or even a pet or an animal doing something, and think how cute and lovely that is! We want to go and hold them, as if to get some of that spontaneity on us. Although it may seem simple, but not necessarily so easy, as we soon find out.

Acceptance has all the elements of loving kindness in it. But we often forget that loving-kindness itself is like bread: you have to make it every single day. You can't just

wait for it to happen on its own; sitting there like a rock and thinking that if you did it once, it's enough, it should do it on its own the next time around. It will not work that way. The author Ursula Le Guin mentions how 'love is not like a stone. Instead, it is like bread that you have to make and remake every single day.' How many times do we look at someone we care about and feel like we don't need to put in as much energy into that day, to show or express how we feel? You may think: *"I got them this gift yesterday; that should suffice!"* But we know that it doesn't.

I invite you to carry the same loving attitude towards yourself because, again, it is not about the outside world that has wronged or harmed you. Ultimately, it's how you hold yourself to yourself. I used to despise my body, because my security was shattered by the experience of the trauma I described earlier. There was no way that even my parents, with all their love and attention, could have ever given back to me that sense of security, not even one-sixteenth part of it. It was all gone. So, I had to come to grips with the fact that the trauma had happened. Now, is it wise for me to hold the grudge against my own body? Or against anyone? Because it's no longer about the outside world, but *how* I look at myself and the world. For many people who have been wronged by others, whether it's our bodies, our dignity or integrity, the question is this: *How do we view ourselves after the fact? Though the incident took place in the past, have we been repeating that assault on ourselves ever since that day?* That is the problem. Thus, "*Can we be forgiving towards ourselves? Can we maintain that forgiving attitude?* As you might have already guessed, forgiveness tries to amend and fix our sense of security, our sense of safety, which has (for some

reason) been torn. It's very important to remember that whether through having a healthy body, good looks, acceptance from others, wealth, companionship, a family that loves you, a relationship, a warm welcoming smile from someone, a job, approval from others, being a valuable and important part of a community, workforce, or society, all these and many others are examples of us trying to establish a sense of safety, whereby we can feel OK with ourselves. However, all these are impermanent and based on various conditions, destined at one point or another to fall apart in the absence of the right conditions, as they disintegrate given the unstable nature of existence. That impermanence makes each of these to also be a source of suffering. In other words, through practicing the path of the Dhamma we clearly see how true safety comes from the unshakable serenity of mind and the tranquil contentment that spreads out from it into the fabric of our very lives and interactions with others. This is where every step we take would bring with it a sense of forgiveness, or a curious acceptance of the next moment that is to unfold, while we unfold a virtuous life, with a wise mind that is sharply aware, a heart that is warmly open, and a loving smile on our face, that invites others to come out of their suffering as well. This is my understanding of what the Buddha promised should we uphold a virtuous lifestyle, cultivate the mind, as we develop our higher wisdom, all of which together lead us to *Nibbāna*.[21]

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[21] This is the epitome of engaged Buddhism, the way I understand it; a far cry from what Theravāda Buddhism has been wrongly accused of in the past as being "self-centered," where a disciple 'seeks only their liberation, forgetting others.' If that were the case, then the Buddha would never have taught the Dhamma, the very foundation whereupon the Theravāda tradition is based, in the first place.

In applying these principles in a more practical way, I would invite you to consider this: The moment you have an angry feeling arise when you are driving, for example, or sitting with someone, or when somebody says or does something displeasing, and as you feel this anger, resentment or hatred, can you catch yourself through mindfully becoming aware? Can you maintain that sense of: *"It's okay, I just got ticked off at this person for doing this."* Not that you would try to convince yourself that what they did was okay, but what really matters is how you are looking at yourself. Again, we are not forgiving the repeatability of the act, as if letting them get away with it. What we are doing is in fact setting ourselves free.

We recognize that it is the other person's own issue that caused them to harm us in this or that way. They might have even done it to other people or perhaps are continuing to do so, now and even in the future; that is up to them. But your responsibility lies between how you hold that bond between yourself and the other person, situation, or incident. So, removing that knife again, the *katana*, and then cutting the umbilical cord, that bond, from *your* side. By doing so, what you would be saying is this: *"Thank you very much; what you do with this is your problem. I am done. There is no more linkage between us."* Because, so long as we are holding on to the fears, painful memories, the trauma of the past, whether major or a micro trauma, or even to lovely memories, we will not see what is in front of us. Therefore, after you have chosen your path, how the other person deals with the situation then is not up to you, for that is their own freedom to choose however they wish. We can only be responsible for *our* own thoughts, speech, and actions. That is what we must deal with. Ultimately then, the first step in forgiving starts with us, as does the very last step, and what you do in

between, all of which will make sure you use forgiveness wisely throughout, as you keep a close eye on your *sīla*.

Again, please remember that forgiveness does not necessarily mean that despite the presence of fear you have to force yourself to reconcile with a perpetrator, hold the person, hug them, etc., or even live with those who harmed you. That's not necessarily what forgiveness entails. In fact, that would be an unwise way of going about this. Forgiveness is giving yourself some soothing with love and care, by letting go of whatever that was holding you back from moving forward, such as thinking about and reminding yourself of the pain that was caused by another. You cut that chain which, by the way, will even pull you from life to life. And then you open your heart and accept without necessarily reconciling with them.

How have we treated ourselves, how much love have we given to ourselves today? or

How much forgiveness has there been in my heart, today?

These are very important questions, because 'the way I treat myself today is how I am going to treat you tomorrow, and for the rest of my life.'

A person who is tranquil and calm with themselves, has the space to forgive, because they have learned how to be kind to themselves, and everything else flows out from there.

Forgiveness As Part of Right Effort

Forgiveness, when done correctly, becomes part of Right Effort. It entails avoiding and overcoming the unwholesome, while introducing and cultivating the wholesome: a genuinely warm smile, to begin with. Or, the ability to listen to someone even when they are not giving you an opportunity to speak, forgiving them and yourself for being physically there experiencing the unpleasant, while you develop clarity of mind through compassion and a bigger heart that could hold both you and the talker safely in it. Compassion thus becomes one of the many forms it can take, which is also a manifestation of loving kindness, patience, acceptance, forgiveness.

Mettā or loving-kindness, which will be covered in detail in a later section, needs the nutritious soil of forgiveness for ourselves and for those around us. This nutritious soil, the atmosphere, and all the wonderful things that are necessary for the sprouting little plant to turn into a mighty tree and bear fruit, requires first love and kindness for oneself. After all, no one who is pondering or is about to do something unwholesome or harmful can do so if they have within them even a tiny little speck of forgiveness, even a tiny little speck of genuine loving-kindness or compassion towards themselves. That is how powerful it is.

One must not forget that the Buddhist path is about attaining *Nibbāna*, the release from the cycles of rebirth and suffering. Buddhism is not just about compassion as many have described it to be. Of course, compassion is certainly a big part of it; the Buddha himself had *Mahākaruṇā*, or Great Compassion, but the whole path of the Dhamma is about

gaining wisdom through experience. This experience requires the person to be involved *in* life, to witness and work through the mire of one's own defilements and hindrances, which are the nutriment for discernment to flourish, so long as in doing so one also develops the capacity to forgive. Thus, we can see the relationship between forgiveness and cessation or liberation, which is another word for *Nibbāna*.

With the wrong attitude or wrong effort, forgiveness is shunned, downplayed, criticized, suppressed, and in some cases forced, causing one to bury oneself into feeling further remorse, which happens to be one of the major hindrances, blocking one from gaining calmness and tranquility of the mind. In such cases, the meditator won't even be able to reach any of the *Jhānas*, let alone attain the First Stage of Awakening (Stream-Enterer) or *Sotāpatti*.

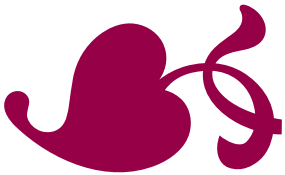
Applying forgiveness as a form of Right Effort involves understanding and, as mentioned earlier, forgiveness is about oneself, above all else: 'I am releasing the person and their action *from* myself.' It is never about the world but always about this person. Here a good question to ask yourself is this: *"When I forgive you, am I feeling a little bit better?"* You can start with that question.

At times, you cannot forgive. Some people have hurt us so badly in life, and our inability to forgive at that point may be understandable. You need to appreciate and give it some time and weight, but not enough for it to pull you down and bind you from really blossoming and turning into the better version of yourself. Forgiveness, therefore, is a refusal to be a victim to what they chose to say or do to you. It is the view that "my happiness does not depend on your

choices." Such a view completely shifts the attention *and* the old destructive narrative, whereby through suppression, the hurt would only bellow out like a bursting volcano. However, when there is insight and understanding, then you can see that you have choices, one of which includes relieving yourself of the excess baggage. Like everything worthwhile, this takes practice.

The invitation here is for us to take charge of our lives and start forgiving the past, and how things unfolded in our life; forgiving the present, and how things are unfolding; forgiving the future, and how things would be unfolding.

Finally, please remember that forgiveness is part of a personality change, which must take place within, first, much like true activism, which first must begin from within. The Dhamma teaches us this beautifully, showing us the way of courage, including the courage to forgive.



Brahmavihāra: Higher States of Being

Current science teaches us that we are social beings, and that one of the best ways we learn and engage in life is through relationships. These come in many forms and have many sorts of nuances to them, but one thing is certain as common truth, that we learn through relationships. But how does one do that, 'learn through relationships?' We use the language of relationships: feelings, which allow us to connect with, understand, empathize and relate. This last ability is key to understanding the deeper layers of our connection with and to others, i.e. our relatability, or ability to relate using the power of emotions.

Unlike how they are understood and interpreted by modern science, feelings and emotions are seen to be quite different from each other when we are discussing the Dhamma. Lord Buddha described three major types of feelings [22] for example: pleasant, painful, and neither painful nor pleasant; meanwhile, when it comes to emotions, they are represented in far greater numbers. Here, my attempt is

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[22] In addition, given the context, through the *suttas* we see the Buddha describing numerous other categorizations of feeling, i.e. two, three, six...even 108. The threefold category for feelings described here is the usual one used to explain the various aspects of phenomena, especially as it relates to understanding experience and how the Teachings of the Dhamma can unfold, allowing one to attain higher states of being, as in the case of the *brahmavihāras*.

not to elaborate on these differences, but to help you apply the principle of relatability via feeling and connecting with the body in order to expand your awareness beyond the confines of the limited sense of "me," "mine," "this is who I am."

Aside from encouraging his students to practice generosity, whether through sharing of merits or sharing of Dhamma, one of the very important teachings the Buddha gave was the set of *brahmavihāras*, usually translated as the "immeasurables" or "divine abidings." These are qualities of the mind that help the person to slowly erase that silver lining between oneself and others, between one's own needs and wants and those of others, etc. But first, let's look at the word *"brahmavihāra"* itself.

The term *"Brahmā"* comes from the Indian subcontinent referring to the Aryan philosophies' idea of a supreme god or Divine Being, usually understood as the Great or Supreme God or *Mahā Brahmā*. Later, when Buddhism came along, the Buddha clarified this by saying that in fact there are several *Brahmās*, not just one, as it had been believed, and that they are not eternal, albeit Divine Beings, yet with a lifespan that has a beginning and an end. In other words, they too are subject to birth, decay, old age, and death.

Here in looking at the *brahmavihāras*, we can think of the Buddha's application-based approach, given their superior quality in enhancing a person's capacity to experience higher states of mind, versus the inferior, self-centered view to life that living in ignorance promotes. Within the Nikāyas, we see how on numerous occasions, the

Buddha teaches us about these qualities of mind which correspond with the mind-states of *devas* living above the human realm. These *devas* or Divine Beings are the ones living in the higher *Brahmā* realms, far superior than most *devas*, as they reside contemplating the sublime qualities of loving kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, and equanimity *(rūpa loka)*, therefore beyond the confines of sense pleasures *(kāmā loka)*.

The *Brahmavihāras* are realms, and in this case qualities to be experienced while we are living in this body, in this shape, in our thoughts, words, and actions *in* this life. They are the basis, columns, or beams that support our practice of being Buddhists, while maintaining a life that is oriented towards relating with those beings around us. This is where we can bring in the feeling tone of experience to augment these principles, and in doing so we look at the pleasant feeling that these states, for a lack of a better word, "vibrate with." The *brahmavihāras* then are intended to serve as tools to help us weave the principles of the Dhamma into our own lives. Interestingly, compared to the *brahmavihāras*, there are far fewer mentions of the breath meditation in the whole of the *Tipitaka* or the Pāli Canon of the Teachings. So, in what is traditionally called the "eighty-four thousand teachings" of the Buddha, we only come across a few mentions of the breath, in contrast to the Buddha giving teachings on the use and application of the practice of loving-kindness or the *brahmavihāras*. That makes sense, given the fact that the *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* were always involved, in one form or another, with the society around them, given the engaged nature of the *Buddha Sāsāna* (the

Buddha's Dispensation) where aside from their alms rounds, they were often coming in contact with others within and outside of the Sangha, where they had to apply the principles of forgiveness, forbearance, understanding, and acceptance, all of which come to manifest within the practice of the *brahmavihāras*. Therefore, engaged Buddhism is not something new, for it had its start with the Buddha himself and his community of monastics 26 centuries earlier. This is truly eye-opening, because we see how Lord Buddha understood that we are, after all, relational beings, that we are social beings. We are forced, in one way or the other, to live with others (human or non-human), starting with ourselves, the person we see in the mirror.

But, the reason for the Buddha's encouragement for his students to learn and apply the *brahmavihāras* is not merely for their enormous social impact, but especially because of the capacity of this practice to take an individual even to *Nibbāna*. To do this, the Buddha introduced a gradual progress through the *brahmavihāras*, as he explained to his students how they could expand their mind's potential, by going into deeper states of awareness and understanding, by attaining the *Jhānas*, which themselves become springboards to attaining the four Stages of Awakening, i.e. Stream-Enterer *(sotāpanna)*, Once-Returner *(sakadāgāmin)*, Non-Returner *(anāgāmin)*, and *Arahant*.

So, how can we relate the teachings of the Buddha with ourselves and society at large? The Buddha ingeniously came up with the *brahmavihāras*, the practice of which gives the practitioner the experience of being god-like, a divine entity while living in this flesh and blood.

How so? And what are the *brahmavihāras*? There are four of them: *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā*, and *upekkhā*.

In English, *mettā* is roughly translated as love or loving- kindness. Some teachers have translated it as loving friendliness, but love is the essence, and lots of it! The second one is *karuṇā*, which is compassion. The third one is *muditā* or sympathetic joy. And the fourth one is *upekkhā*, which means a state of balance or an unperturbed equanimity of mind.

Traditionally, a practitioner is taught to begin with *mettā*, which in essence is what the other three fall back into. Practicing *mettā does not entail* a series of words that we necessarily have to say to bring about *mettā*, however. *Mettā* starts with an actual, real time experience of love (not having anything to do with desiring or lusting after anything or anyone). So it is, in a sense, self-generated. Now, how do we go about doing this? The technique involves going back to oneself and preferably to a genuine experience of truly unconditional love that we felt at one point or another. Maybe it was this morning, maybe it was way back from our childhood, but something that was warm and so fuzzy, right here in the center of your chest.

It's inescapable, undeniably there, with such innocence to it, and so full of life, color, texture and flavor. We start from there, instead of sitting down and repeating like a mantra, *"May I be well, May I be well, May I be well,"* which doesn't work in the long run nor is truly effective, especially when we come to that moment in the day when it's so hard to maintain that wish given the conditions we are

in. The Buddha, being such a pragmatic individual, would only give tools that people could utilize and benefit from, and what better way than actually applying it through *mettā*, through love.

Once we have generated that experience of feeling love within ourselves first, then we think of someone who is very close to us, and eventually expand that in a directional manner. We can look forward and just generate *mettā* in that direction for a little while, which is basically a technique of stabilizing and giving a sense of intention to the mind, because ultimately everything starts with the mind. When we feel comfortable with this direction, we switch over and go to the sides. Once we have radiated *mettā* about the same amount of time to each side, we switch over to radiating *mettā* behind us, and then above, zenith, and nadir. Eventually, you will become so adept at this that just the thought of it will generate the feeling and suddenly you start radiating loving-kindness like a sphere that keeps expanding, as if in supernova explosion.

It's all up to the practitioner as it relates to how far you can send it out. Nobody escapes your love, think of it as such; nobody, nothing. No time, no space. Sound, for example, does not get to be transported in a vacuum. Light, however, does. That's what we learn from electromagnetic spectrum. However, that's not the case with love. It's all over the place. The energy has to do with you. How much energy are we putting into this? Interestingly enough, as we progress in the practice of *mettā*, it also leads us to experience the first *jhāna*. *Jhānas* are not something that are left in the *Tipitaka* as designated for unique individuals or somebody who must be practicing meditation for forty years or so. That's not the case. Everyone has the capacity to

experience *jhānas*, and the wonderful thing is that with the practice of *mettā* we have that opportunity. *Mettā* is one of the ways we can experience *jhāna*. Another one would be the breath meditation, for example.

Now, the second *brahmavihāra*, which invariably occurs as the meditator reaches a state of fullness, is *karuṇā* or compassion. It's like those glasses that are placed like a pyramid, that when you pour some liquid from the top, it starts trickling down, filling up all the way to the brim, and then it starts to overflow. Similarly, one starts experiencing *karuṇā*, or compassion. At that point, the walls that separate us from other human beings, that sense of separation between ourselves and the other is no longer there, or not as much as before. Our intentions, goals, feelings, our sense of fulfillment with the experience of this thing called life that we all aspire to, no longer remain so isolated. The needs of other individuals or beings around us become as important as our own. We feel for the other individual, no matter what color they are, no matter what background they come from, what they look like, whether they have two legs versus four versus no legs; whether they have wings or no wings; whether human being or other beings. All of that no longer matters. We don't see that separation anymore. Those differentiations do not become so present in our experience. And that corresponds to some degree to the second *brahmavihāra*.

Then, as the cup gets filled up, the third *brahmavihāra* comes in, which is sympathetic or altruistic joy. This is when we experience the joy of another being as if it was ours. Let me give you an example. Sometimes it happens so that we want to attain certain things, goals, and achievements, and we try to do our best to reach them, but they remain

unattainable. Yet, you see someone who has not even tried, not even lifted a finger and suddenly they experience that which you worked so hard for but did not attain. Now, a person who is experiencing the third *brahmavihāra*, which in this case is *muditā*, is someone who will look at that individual full of love and joy, a sense of, *I am so happy you achieved it*. At that point, there is no difference between "us" having attained it versus "them" having attained it. Their joy and happiness become ours. This is not to say, however, that we are meanwhile struggling against our own leanings or habitual patterns, forcing ourselves to say, *"That's bad if I feel angry; how come they got it and I didn't? No, I have to bring about sympathetic joy."* It's nothing like that. *Muditā* flows out of our hearts naturally; there is no forcefulness to it. In this practice we are not forcing anything into us or into our mind. And everything starts with the mind, for it is "the forerunner of all states." This is beautifully represented in the very first verse of the *Dhammapada*:[23] *'... Just like the cart, which always follows after the hoof of the draught ox.'*

The same is true of our deeds, i.e. the wholesome and unwholesome acts are always preceded by the mind. So, practicing the *brahmavihāras* is a very wholesome activity that we can engage in.

Trickling down even further into the fourth stage or level of the *brahmavihāras*, we come to a state of calm that pervades everything we experience: no matter what is being

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[23] The first chapter of the Dhammapada's very first section, *Cakkhupalatthera Vatthu*: *"Manopubbangama dhamma manosettha manomaya manasa ce padutthena bhasati va karoti va tato nam dukkhamanveti, cakkamva vahato padam."* Dhp. 1.1

experienced, the mind remains still, unperturbed, and totally unforced in this quality of stillness, though it does rely on the other three *brahmavihāras*. This is *Upekkhā* or equanimity, which is the fourth *brahmavihāra*. This equanimity was there from the start but very faint and not yet strong, even when we were experiencing the *mettā* in all of its intensity, but now it comes to the forefront of the experience. *Upekkhā* or equanimity allows us to maintain a state of balance no matter what conditions we are surrounded by without being "dead," cold, indifferent, or unengaged with the responsibilities one may have in life or situations that require a blameless response. It is a state of full awareness but without leaning into experiences or perceptions, as it is especially aloof from identification with any state. As one can imagine, that is not easy, especially when we think of life today, how difficult it is to even take a step outside our door and not be confronted with conditions and set of situations that really challenge us. *Upekkhā*, therefore, helps by giving us the silent audacity and fortitude to maintain our course, despite being in a world that wants us to think things that are unwholesome, to say things that are unwholesome, and to do things that are unwholesome. As you can see, the *brahmavihāras* are not just about having us experience their lofty spiritual states while we are in a sitting posture, in meditation, or while being on intensive retreats. They are very much a part of life, an engaged life where we share the fruits of these "divine-abidings" with others as we constantly radiate ourselves and the world with them, no matter what we may be doing throughout the day, and not just while during sitting meditation.

My encouragement here is to invite you to bring these qualities with you back into the world, which is the actual testing ground or laboratory of life, where real experience

takes place, where the truth of the Dhamma shines, in *your* life. To do this, please remember that while the *brahmavihāras* are not something that are forced upon us (or upon the mind), nevertheless, they do require intentional activity or *cetanā* on our part, whether mental, verbal, or physical, to start.

As we progress on the Path, we begin to see how it is not so much of a "forcing" of our lives into this mold or template of the Dhamma, as much as having a moment to take an honest look at our lives, while juxtaposing the teachings and trying to see where and how the teachings fall or trickle down into the different areas of our lives, through the development of a deeper understanding, while maintaining a virtuous life through undertaking the precepts.

This would be followed by us just letting it be, as we "quietly move along" without identifying with anything to simply observe the process, without being taken in by the component parts or contents. Needless to say, at some point or other, we need to have a good understanding of the theories. While we are living our lives, however, we will begin to see how the teachings blend in beautifully, just like molten wax on any surface you can think of, where the substrate will just be draping itself with the molten wax. Similarly, the Dhamma takes its shape into the different crevices of our own unique lives, as we begin to see for the first time the relationship between choosing actions that are habitually dictated, and how these lead us to more suffering.

As we continue to practice the *brahmavihāras*, understanding develops and there is clarity; the "nooks and crannies" get filled up in the mind but this time with wholesome thoughts that includes the welfare of others, which comes naturally to the mind, becomes soothingly inescapable, and beautifully so. And as is the case with anything worthwhile, this requires consistent effort.

Some years ago, I took a course in the local mountains of Los Angeles on how to survive in the wilderness, learning outdoor survival skills. There, a group of us were taught how to make fire in the event of being left in the wild, where without any access to civilization or modern resources one would need to make a fire for the night. Making a fire starts with the tiniest little frictions, just rubbing two pieces of dry wood together in a certain way, at a certain angle, with a certain consistency, while leaving enough room for the air current to go in through the rubbing motion of the pieces of wood. It requires such patience and deliberate, intentional action, and all of that in a certain fashion and for a certain time period. But once done correctly, you can see the white smoke coming out gently, after which we can start putting tiny little ambers or pieces of soft cotton, or some tissue, napkin, anything that is soft, and then you add a bit heavier material, maybe some dry grass, dry leaves, and then finally you get some tiny little twigs and put that in there. Meanwhile, your eyes are fixed on it throughout, making sure you will not blow away or make all that work go to waste. Suddenly, you have a fire which will keep you warm at night. All of this required effort.

Everything requires effort, for you to even be reading this book. However, there is better life waiting through and within that effort, which is what wise attention or wise consideration *(yoniso manasikāra)* again helps us with. Once we get this glider all the way up, then it will take off on its own. What this means is that we are now putting *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* into practical use in our lives. This is what we mean when we say that 'in this practice we are after wisdom.'

Bringing *mettā* into your own life inevitably brings about a state of understanding and wisdom that was not there previously. Things that used to bother us previously no longer have that effect on us, which is wonderful. And then you will start seeing how equanimity in fact plays along with the fabric of life; you cannot avoid seeing how its weaved with all the intricacies that we feel in our daily thoughts and feelings and interactions with people. Life becomes not just more tolerable but enjoyable. And then you start to see this new quality added to your experience of life. You did not force anything, in a sense; however, you are seeing your understanding. One of the qualities or characteristics of the Dhamma is *"ehi passiko."* In Pāli, it means "come over here and see," or "test it out for yourself," meaning, practice it. The proof, as they say, is in the pudding. Twenty-six hundred years ago the Buddha invited us to do that, and it's quite a remarkable achievement for us to experience this not at a certain time in the future, but now.

The *brahmavihāras* invite and encourage us to open up, with every breath and step. There is an ongoing "effort-ing" to observe to see if there is any tension in the body, in

the mind, whether we are grasping onto anything, including the idea that "we are doing something" by sending or radiating the *brahmavihāras* to others. The whole process is intended to feel more like a long-distance swimmer who looks over at the target to be swum to, and takes off in that direction, with every so often lifting his head to check whether his trajectory is steady or off, and fixes it accordingly.[24]

As discussed in the previous chapter, forgiveness is often not easy, especially while knowing how we all have done some unwholesome deeds, and so long as we cling to the past, we would simply be maintaining the idea of an identity of a personal self, even though we see thanks to the Dhamma that there is no such thing.

That's what life is giving us constantly: an opportunity to allow every single moment to unfold, while we live it truthfully, fully, with loving-kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, and equanimity, as best as we can. And if we don't live those moments in such a way, that's fine too. Relax. Just remind yourself to come back to it and live your day. Relax, but maintain that sense of intentional observation. Years ago, one of my past teachers, a Tibetan Lama, the late Lama Geshe Gyaltsen once told me that 'the very important part of maintaining a meditative lifestyle is its consistency; much like the very straight beam that holds up the roof of a structure, so is maintaining intentional awareness through consistent practice.' This determined

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[24] This is a wonderful image that I heard from Ajahn Jāyasaro in one of his Dhamma Talks, where he describes the gist of the deliberate and intentional drive to be and stay on the path, without "over-checking" oneself constantly, but only doing so, at intelligently synchronized intervals.

consistency is like those very "determined," straight lines of the beams holding up the roof. However, you can do anything that you like in between the spaces of the beams, and that is what the intention is in us wanting to maintain that state of awareness throughout the day. And the *brahmavihāras* are simply tools that allow us to maintain awareness with a softer touch, with opening instead of being isolated into tiny little islands of "me," "mine," of "who I am," which are all based on delusion. But when we open up through the practice and experience of the *brahmavihāras*, there are no borders. Our sense of identity becomes very porous.

Having personally used the *brahmavihāras* as my main objects of meditation for nearly a decade, I was able to not only develop these qualities within myself, but also have them permeate my therapeutic work with patients as their psychotherapist. Thus, under the guidance of an experienced teacher or therapist, mindfulness, when practiced in a dedicated manner, has the quality of loving kindness within it, in addition to compassion, altruistic joy, and equanimity towards oneself and others, thereby decreasing suffering in a very substantial and undeniable manner with a measurable outcome of individuals' mental anguish, hopelessness, depression, anxiety, and other symptoms being drastically reduced. This can be seen as synonymous with a fully lived experience of the moment, which the Buddha is seen explaining in the Shorter Discourses' or *Khuddaka Nikāya's Udāna,*[25] how one is simply to live experiencing the objects of the six sense doors, yet *without* adding one's own interpretation or identification with them. You are basically

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[25] *Bāhiya Sutta*: Discourse to Bāhiya (of the Bark-Cloth). Ud: 1.10

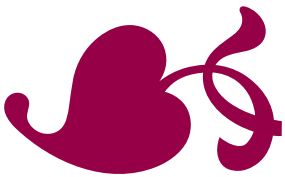
encouraged 'to take up, only to give up,' without any clinging or grasping on to anything, i.e. *ādānapaṭinissagga*.

But much like any ability, skill, or modes of helping others, before radiating the *brahmavihāras'* qualities outward to those around us, naturally they need to be permeated within oneself first, as a meditation teacher guides the student through the "divine-abidings" or *brahmavihāras*. This, therefore, makes it necessary to know how to utilize the tool of mindful living, a key factor generally missing in how mindfulness is taught today by individuals who have not tasted the fruits of the practice, perhaps in their eagerness to share or teach it. When practiced in the right way, however, mindfulness leads the practitioner to calmly notice what is taking place in the mind not just in the presence of the three defilements or poisons *(kileśa)*, but especially noticing the sublime states of mind.

I invite you to see if you can actually generate that *mettā* even now as you are reading these words, by bringing in a sense of relaxation into your mind and body, where there would be a lack of tension, one that will show up on your facial expression. That will tell a lot. When you sit down to meditate or even during your daily activities, such as driving, the moment you feel you are frowning, the moment you feel some tension, remember that everything starts in the mind. If, on the other hand, you hold that tension in the brain, it will affect the rest of your body, *and* everyone else you come across, including the quality of your work. No wonder we have so much stress and so many cases of cancer today, which is truly mind boggling, unless we take into account the constant worrisome and fearful thoughts we have, picked up from all the sensory stimuli seen and heard in the Media.

Many of us hold so much stress within us and it starts with the mind! So, notice if you are tightening up your facial muscles and just relax, starting with the area between your eyebrows. Sometimes, while I am giving meditation retreats, I almost want to come around and just tap people in the forehead, reminding them to relax!

The Buddha encouraged His students to always develop an uplifted and wholesome mind, where there is gladness, wisdom, happiness, and contentment. This, after all, was coming from someone who actually did six years of intense austerities and mind-bending meditative work through ascetic and torturous practices. He saw that all of that never got him anywhere. We read in the *Tipitaka* the Buddha's description of his body such that he could see his backbone from the front, while his eyes had sunk in so deep that they looked like deep wells. He had reached to the point where, had he taken even a single step further in those austere practices, he would have died. And then he saw that such torture did not allow for any spiritual awakening or insight to take place. That's why this path is called the Middle Path.



Mettā:
Loving Kindness Meditation

The practice of *mettā* is oftentimes introduced in such a way that it becomes a verbal or cognitive activity. What this usually means is that *mettā* (or Loving-Kindness meditation) has somehow found its way to being used as a mantra practice of some sort. To avoid confusing here, *mettā* practice does have some steps which, once a person learns while understanding their purpose, greatly enhance one's progress with undeniable wholesome results. This understanding is very important, for it helps a person practice meditation without being caught in a one-pointed focus, which is what typically is practiced while engaging in mantra or the traditional way of repeating statements, such as: *"May I be happy, May my friends be happy, May my loved ones be happy, May my enemies be happy,"* etc.

Much like with all aspects of the Buddhist practice, there's a science to the practice of *mettā*. This, given the repeatability factor in demonstrating certain outcomes, so long as the individual practicing it does so fully and without taking away or adding anything to the instructions given by a proper teacher, whose guidance is based directly on the Dhamma through the *suttas*. Similarly, you can't just go on repeating certain words as stated earlier, while forcing yourself to feel a certain way and then "share" those thoughts by sending them to others. They might at best be seen or experienced as no more than lip-service, hence lacking any sustainable, long-lasting, and effective results,

due to their one-pointed nature, which is more of a "heady" endeavor than a "feeling" one. These are the type of outcomes that need to be manifested first within the person, and specifically in the body, i.e. we must *feel* the *mettā* first.

I have practiced various forms of one-pointed meditations for years and, whereby after some time, I realized that what these practices ultimately ended up doing was to create tension in the brain and the body, where one becomes more perplexed, unable to be alert, aware, wise or discerning, leaving the person in a not so happy of a state or feeling. As you might have figured out, such practices often have nothing to do with *mettā*. After all, if there is strife and tension in the mood of the mind, or if there is an emotionally agitated state of being, then the calm state to be brought in through *awareness* with *clear comprehension* that are absolutely necessary for our meditative practice, are simply absent. This means that the practice won't be successful. Thus, these last two ingredients are crucial for a successful meditative practice.

So, it's not unusual to not be feeling so good after doing such a practice that is not wisely thought out, lacking the right components. It's no surprise, therefore, to even come across meditators, who have been practicing *mettā* legitimately, in their mind, but unfortunately with effort that is misplaced, which at best may simply make them feel unaided by the power of experiencing the loving-kindness practice, growing more tense; or worse, in meeting such individuals, one may see and feel their angst, frustration, and even passive aggressive behavior, even while being on long meditation retreats!

Mettā practice was one of the most loved practices of the Buddha himself, so much so that it is mentioned in the *suttas* nearly a hundred times, if not more. But, for some reason or other we lean towards the breath meditation, which is also wonderful and quite practical. After all, the breath meditation enabled the *Bodhisatta Siddhattha* to become a Buddha, as he used it as his meditative anchor to go into a relaxed mode of being, an unforced and open state of *Jhāna*,[26] by just watching and observing the breath. And that's one of the reasons why many people say, *"the breath meditation is going to take us to Nibbāna."* It does have that possibility of course. But we are also "feeling" and social beings, which means that growth happens at its best in us through our ability to relate, i.e. connect with others.

Also, given the numerous publications on instructions for using the breath in meditation, and given that *mettā* is the object that I have used and seen to be very successful both for myself and many of the students who have used it with equal success, I decided to introduce it here instead of another technique. Whatever the method of practice, however, please remember that the Buddha taught the *Satipaṭṭhāna*, which is at the backbone of all techniques he used with students. What is key to remember is to apply Right Effort, and especially keep gladdening, opening up, and relaxing the mind, and maintaining consistency, along

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[26] This was a different approach altogether to the practice of *jhānas* that the *bodhisatta* had encountered in his tutelage under his two teachers, *Ālāra Kālāma* and *Uddaka Rāmāputta*, wherein he was used to a one-pointed and focused type of meditation, by forcefully placing the mind on an object of meditation, and thereby penetrating into the *arupa* (formless realm) *jhānas*. These, he realized soon, were not able to get him the insight and wisdom necessary to penetrate through craving for sense pleasure, craving for becoming, and ignorance.

with an abundance of forgiveness whenever you forget to stay on your object of meditation.

Now back to the practice itself.

We can connect with nature and with each other without necessarily engaging in cognitive exercises or even trying to practice saying a few sentences or phrases. We connect to each other in the feeling realm, and *mettā* has the potentiality to allow us to first feel in the body what we are generating within us, that is, the *mettā bhāvana*.

"*Bhāvana*" here means cultivation, of the mind, but through the "feeling aspect of the heart," whereby you can connect with everything around you. If we had done *mettā* through the mere repetition of words, it would never give us that. To help while using an image, I always give the following example to students. Let's say you are in need of money and, with all good intention, I want to give you $100, but when I reach into my pocket and try to give it to you, I have nothing in my pocket to begin with. How could I possibly give you the money you need? Do I sit down and try to "generate" money, which I don't have? It's the same here; no amount of repeating on its own will give us *mettā* unless we begin with the feeling of *mettā*. When it comes to *mettā or loving-kindness* practice, fortunately, we've all had some experiences of love with beautiful texture and feeling tones that have wonderful flavorings to them along with the associated memories. This is crucial, because it's where our practice of *mettā* begins.

So, we go into a memory of ourselves where we've had the experience of something that has a loving feeling tone to it, what students have often described as "unconditional love." This memory might be from five minutes ago, from five years ago, or even 50 years ago but it is a memory that when allowed to come up by giving it the time and patience, it suddenly brings us a sense of warmth and a soothing safety. This experience takes you to a sense of being at ease when you close your eyes while recalling it, as you anchor yourself in the body, which remembers all the details it has felt when this feeling first occurred, and that now is being brought back to the forefront of awareness. Inviting this actual experience of the feeling of loving-kindness that has been locked in the body and mind to come up, is what allows us to center, strengthen, and eventually radiate outward to others.

Thus, once you have pinpointed the memory of this loving experience, next you are encouraged to notice what is happening within the body while you're recalling this memory. Usually, this manifests as tingling sensations and a fuzzy, warm feeling around the heart area.

The reader has to be reminded that different meditators starting at different stages when first practicing *mettā*, the way it is being introduced here, may feel the sensations at different parts of the body. But typically, most meditators feel it around the heart, the feeling organ as it were, which is why it is being described and elaborated as such.

Just a short caveat here: Sometimes, depending on the life that we've lived, some of us might have a lot of tightness around the heart; meaning, we have this very unapologetic hurt related to things that have happened to us where we have tried to protect our heart by becoming firm, tight, and thick around the "walls of the heart." In that instance, I encourage the meditator to allow themselves to carve out a safe space where they can practice forgiveness towards themselves and towards situations, because every time they sit to meditate and try to recall those memories of one instant in their past, negative thoughts and images come in and they shut down. Therefore, the forgiveness towards oneself becomes a priority, as well as towards situations, circumstances, and other individuals. It is important to note that this process might take a while.

Having had a background in practicing breath meditation, including *Zen* and "dry" *vipāssana,* I knew how the practice of constantly observing the sensations taking place in the body, or "noting" the thoughts that would arise or just sitting while watching the breath, would inevitably and easily turn into one-pointed concentration, but now, I began to forgive myself every single time the mind circled into and around that habit, by gently forgiving myself and bringing it back to *mettā*, while relaxing the mind and opening it up. So, please go back to the forgiveness chapter as often as necessary, as you work on releasing the tightness around the heart in order to make it more pliable and softer for *mettā* to grow strong.

Coming back to recalling briefly the memory from the past to generate the feeling of *mettā* within us, please

remember that the point is not to dwell on the memory or turn it into an anchor for us; the memory is simply there as an instigator to create that "$100 in your pocket," i.e. the presence of the feeling that will eventually grow powerful enough to be radiated out. Once you do bring out feeling, it now gets localized and anchors itself by switching into the body, and this is one of the reasons why we call it a feeling meditation given the pleasant sensations that are generated, wherein the nervous system becomes more relaxed, as it feels safe and secure.

This is what the Buddha was talking about in the *Satipaṭṭhāna* where he is seen repeating the 'tranquilizing of the bodily *saṅkhāras,*' i.e. formations or generative causes, which inevitably lead you to 'experience a gladdened state of mind, that brings about the experience of joy.' The body is therefore an extremely important part of this whole practice, which I hope you are able to see by now, and especially getting the body out from a state of tightness to an open and tranquil state of gladness.

The Buddha describes this experience beautifully and in numerous places within the Nikāyas, as my late Venerable Teacher, Bhante Punnaji used to recite the poetic phrases from the *suttas*:

'Pīti manassa kāyaṃ passambati.
Passaddha kāyo sukhaṃ vediyati.
Sukhino cittaṃ samādhiyati.
Samāhite cite dhammaṃ patubhāvo.
Samāhite cite yathābhutaṁ pajānāti.'

'With the mind experiencing joy, the body relaxes. When the body relaxes, one feels comfortable/glad. When the body begins to feel comfortable, the emotional/mood of the mind enters a state of deep collectedness of mind. When this takes place, Dhamma appears in the mind, whereby 'how things come to be' are revealed to the happy mind.'

Once you are feeling this tranquil and glad in your body, you are actually feeling the impact of mettā within you. What this practice allows us to do then is to enhance it.

See, therefore, *what* kind of sensations you are feeling in the body. As I mentioned earlier, for most people the feeling starts to generate around the heart and in a few others, it may already start to radiate outward. You can even feel it tingling around your fingertips, all around your body, or the tips of your hair. While it's slightly different for each person, the feeling aspect is always there, common for everyone doing the steps correctly and without changing anything. Also, as you are observing the feeling, you are beginning the process of practicing insight because you are *observing* what is taking place, instead of being absorbed in it, which would then be similar to what happens with one-pointed concentration, where there can be no insight or wisdom.

Next, we bring in our Spiritual Friend.

The practice of *mettā* does not end in us feeling these unique sensations in the heart, or elsewhere in the body, as a result of a memory that we recalled. This is merely the launching pad or the beginning point of our journey to

eventually send it out to the world around us, as we share and give away that "$100" that is now in our pocket![27]

As you choose a spiritual friend, remember that there are a few requirements for this.

One, they must be alive. This allows the radiating of *mettā* to that specific Spiritual Friend to take place more easily, given that the mind feels more secure and confident in that activity due to the person being alive and present in a tangible way.

Second, the Spiritual Friend must not be related to you, meaning, not a biological relative. This is because oftentimes we might have had issues with family members or blood relatives, and while these issues may not surface immediately, the negative aspects of our interactions with them from the past might show up later as powerful blocks, as we try to go deeper into the practice.

The third requirement is very important in that we must not have even an inkling of physical or sexual attraction toward this Spiritual Friend. Furthermore, people have asked me if they could use their pet as a Spiritual Friend. The answer is no, because you are on a different plane of existence than your dog or cat. No matter how much love you might generate towards them, it's still not strong enough to give you the capacity to understand what it feels like to be a dog, for example, but you do know what it feels like to be a human. Don't worry though, this is a

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[27] Albeit a superficial image, the intention here is not to trivialize the practice with this metaphor, but sometimes, as teachers, we must use imagery to convey meanings in a much more tangible way that people could relate with.

requirement that stands for only this stage of the practice; eventually you'll be able to spread that love to your dog, cat, ants, iguanas, fleas, giraffes, ticks, and to all beings.

Once you have these requirements in place, then you can choose one Spiritual Friend. I emphasize it being one because this is critical to the practice, given that the mind has a tendency to jump from one friend to the next as it makes arguments why one works while the other doesn't and then switches back again. Meanwhile, what is happening is that the mind doesn't get settled, no tranquility is experienced, and definitely no insights. I remember when I first started *mettā* practice years ago, I used to go back and forth in my mind, trying to choose between two of my very close friends. My teacher at that time, Bhante Vimalaramsi, however, quickly advised me against choosing more than one Spiritual Friend as it was an exercise for my inquisitive mind or a manifestation of Māra, basically, the deceptive quality of it. This, because I was also wasting valuable time trying to dedicate one day sending loving-kindness to this very close friend, and the next day to the other one, and so on, since there were different and unique qualities about each of my friends. This is where your wise and intentional dedication needs to come in.

Therefore, I advise you here to only focus on one Spiritual Friend for a few weeks (or however long you decide to practice), and then no worries, like the case with pets, you'll soon be able to embrace the whole universe with *mettā*, including all your close family and friends!

Here is an example for how this might affect your practice. Imagine you are driving to Big Sur (in Northern California) and suddenly, halfway on the road, you change your mind and decide to go to San Diego (in Southern California) instead: so, you turn the car around and head to San Diego. Not too long after, you change your mind again, thinking: *"Big Sur is great at this time of the year!"* So you turn back, thus going back and forth. Therefore, having one "target," "destination," or Spiritual Friend, at least in the beginning, is mandatory in order to gain many benefits from this practice.

Now that you have chosen a Spiritual Friend, the next step is to go back and recall the original memory and feel what it generates in this body, and soon you'll find yourself anchored in that warm, fuzzy feeling: all this is done in the present moment. To help you with visualizing your friend and for keeping the feeling of *mettā* grounded, I recommend bringing to mind some unique quality about your friend; perhaps the way their nose looks, their hug feels, how they laugh or look at you, how you sit next to them or back to back and feel so safe. In other words, some aspect of your friend that gives you a certain feeling tone that is so personal and undeniable. Remember, however, we are not engaging here in creating a major mental interaction or storyline because for now, you are simply using your spiritual friend as a "target" or goal, and a temporary one.

Then you take that friend and, just like a tiny seed, drop them tenderly into your heart and keep them safe there. To me, this makes the radiating aspect of it much easier and the feeling more natural.

Thus, we see how the *mettā* practice is far more engaged than just saying, *May I be happy*, in a formulaic structure and going through four or five pages of recitations.

Now, you might think that this needs to happen every single time from now until you experience *Nibbāna*, and the simple answer to that is: no.

Once, you do this practice a few times, the body and mind will get primed to quickly getting into that warm space, whereby you will feel the radiating of *mettā* happen on its own, with you just having to fan the flame, every once in a while, of that tingling feeling emanating from the heart area, by going back to either your friend or to the original memory.

As you start this practice, it is important that you sit for no less than 30 minutes, to get the engine rolling, so to speak. Soon, within a day or two, it is best that you start to go up to 45 minutes. Typically, the average duration needs to be an hour, but we get there slowly. As far as moving the body while in sitting meditation, many students struggle at first to sit still, something I see happen a lot, but it is important to understand that this simply is the mind trying to not get bored because the mind loves distracting itself. Remember the hindrances from a few chapters? Well, this is them, coming to visit you, and they will be your companions for some time, especially restlessness. So, the key thing to remember is that <u>we are neither resisting nor pushing, just opening and softening.</u>

Here, I am reminded of the late Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw's mentioning of the Burmese four-fold saying learned: *"not too forcefully, not controlling or manipulating, nor trying to make it*

happen, and not causing tension: JUST observing things as they are!"

It's a very powerful thing to be able to hold your position. When you study stories of armies, soldiers, warriors and battles or what constitutes a noble knight or a Spartan warrior, let's say, you see that they were very astute, resolute, and stable in their position, especially when the enemy would approach: they did not budge. It's a very powerful position. The Buddha himself describes the position of sitting in meditation as the most *kammically* powerful position to hold, because at that point you are in fact facing the mightiest armies you could ever face: your hindrances. So, being shaky or unsure is usually manifested in the way you move your hands when you're right there in a nice zone in meditation, and suddenly you want to scratch an itch, or move a toe. The sensation could be there; the body wants to go ahead and scratch, but the instruction here is clear: just observe it. When you move, however, that itself is a cut-off in the stream of awareness you were holding throughout the *mettā* practice. However, there are those few instances when the body is in physical pain or something happened to it, and you must move; then do so, but please move with intentional and steady awareness, following every move of the mind and body.

A Note: Students have often asked as to how much time do they need to spend on recalling the past memory, thinking about the Spiritual Friend's attributes, and then radiating the *mettā* to them. The rule of thumb is to not spend more than 3-5% of your time on recalling the memory in order to generate the feeling sensations in the body.

Next, in thinking about your Spiritual Friend, you can spend about 5-8% of your time on imagining a certain attribute of theirs, to anchor the feeling some more. Finally, for the radiating of *mettā* that has thus been generated and as you have a good "lock on" your Spiritual Friend (as the "target" of you radiating), you can spend most of your time radiating the *mettā* or loving-kindness to them (in your heart). Of course, when the hindrances show up and you find yourself off your meditation object, i.e. radiating *mettā* to your Spiritual Friend, please don't worry. This is all part of the practice; you're building the mental capacity thanks to the other tools, especially that of the 6R's to get yourself back on track. The key is to always remember to have fun and be forgiving of yourself!

The "6R's" Formula

Now, I'm going to introduce you to the 6Rs, which Bhante Vimalaramsi introduced to me. Once you place the Spiritual Friend in your heart and keep radiating that happy uplifted feeling from your heart, many distractions are bound to arise. Oftentimes we get lost in our thoughts or memories of other things: these, as mentioned earlier are the hindrances. They are very important for the practice. Distractions can also arise in the form of physical sensations as when you feel uncomfortable after sitting a while.

The 6R's is a mnemonic device that is meant to help us work *with* the hindrances and any other challenging mind states that affect us, not only during the meditation practice, but also throughout our daily lives. They are intended to

support our understanding by disentangling us from *identifying ourselves as the very states that arise* at any given time. During the meditative practice especially, this becomes particularly important to keep the meditator on course, instead of being overtaken by the various mental images, concepts or feelings that may arise.

In breaking down the 6Rs, we first:

1) *Recognize* that there's a distraction or hindrance occurring, perhaps it's an itch or a sound that the mind just got carried away by. Thus, see how attention was pulled away from your primary meditation object. Whenever this happens, it means you have a distraction, which also indicates that there is a slight "tightness" in the brain, due to attachment to something. By "recognize," we mean becoming aware of this tight mental feeling, i.e. suffering, which, when looked at through the lens of the Teachings of the Buddha, indicates the presence of craving, via ignorance. Here, you see that you are directly working with the Second Noble Truth, i.e. *craving*. Then, if we were to ask what the connection is here with the First Noble Truth, we would see that it is the distraction itself. And as you go deeper into your practice, you realize that every distraction that shows up is in fact a very fine and subtle form of *dukkha* or suffering. Recognizing this subtlety can be seen as advancing in your practice.

It is also important to notice the craving that was mentioned, by identifying the presence of tightness or the uncomfortable feeling in the brain whenever it's there.

Admittedly, it can be very difficult for the beginner to recognize this craving when it first arises, but it does have its resonance taking place in the form of a bodily sensation, which is the tightness that happens within the very tissue of the brain. With consistent practice, the more awareness you develop, the more you will start noticing that 'there's tightness here, there is tightness in the back, etc.,' thus becoming more acquainted with the physical manifestations of craving. This is another reason why before we begin a meditation retreat or when I give direct instructions to meditators, I always insist on saying the words: *"Check your attitude!"* In other words: *"What view or attitude are you holding in the mind? Is it Right View?"* In other words, are you starting your sitting practice with greed (another word for 'craving')? Because when we sit, many of us want "the other," i.e. to change things, or desire something to happen that is *other than* what we have in front of us, right here and now.

Therefore, whenever there's a hindrance, there is craving, resulting in tightness in the mind and the body, all of which happen very fast. But craving is what starts this process, as craving itself comes from ignorance. Thus, the first "R" of the formula stands for *Recognizing* that there is a distraction in the mind. In summary, whenever there's a distraction, there's craving, and whenever there's craving, there's a physical manifestation of it as tightness in the body, including the brain. Here, we need to remember that the physical body is not just up to the neck but everything that you see in this 'fathom-long body.'

Next, we are introduced to the second "R", which stands for:

2) *Releasing* that tension or tightness, once we have seen and identified the mind being caught with the hindrance, or seen our attachment towards a certain object, an outcome, or a desire to change, i.e. wrong view. Thus, we go ahead and release that craving, by consciously relaxing the mind, relaxing our hold of the desire to change, forgiving the craving (without any narratives). This then quickly leads us to the third "R," which is:

3) *Relaxing,* as we allow for a fuller scope of that release to take place by relaxing the attitude of the mind further, breathing into the body. In a sense, relaxing also has forgiveness within it, for when you are relaxing, you are forgiving yourself and opening and gladdening the mind and body further.

4) *Re-smiling* is here added simply to keep the "R" formula rolling. Whenever I say that to students, they laugh! So, *Recognize* the hindrance, *Release* the tightness or the tension of the craving as you *Relax* your grip onto the craving and the body. For example, if you work a 9-5 job, you may not be eager to want to smile when you come home but you give yourself a smile anyway because you trust that *it's okay*, you trust your intentions, *it's okay*. That's another form of forgiveness, I like to think. So, whenever we relax, we usually have this thing called "a smile" that follows. And then *Re-smiling* opens the doorway for us to:

5) ***Returning*** here to the object of meditation, we take ourselves back to the *mettā* practice. Again, if you're completely lost, meaning, if you've lost that sensation of the fuzziness and warmth in your heart, that's okay. Just go back to the memory and quickly pick up that sensation. The more you do it, the faster the "R"s will roll and soon become a very quick cycle that won't take any energy, as they will happen by themselves.

Once you return to the object of meditation, you're anchored again in the body, which is another way of saying that you are aware. Please remember, the 6Rs are there to address the hindrances by seeing them for what they are, i.e. distractions, and to quickly guide you back to the practice so you can go deeper. The 6Rs are not there to be pulled out as a resource to fight or engage with any thought that arises and disappears on its own. The 6Rs are there to be used whenever you realize that you have drifted away from your meditation object, which is radiating *mettā* or loving-kindness to your Spiritual Friend.

In practicing the 6Rs every time these distractions or hindrances occur, you are in fact practicing Right Effort, which is a very important part of the Noble Eightfold Path. But you cannot practice Right Effort absent-mindedly; it requires one to be present and utilize the investigative qualities of the mind. This is where insight comes in, supported by awareness. Whenever you're practicing *mettā bhavana*, you are practicing awareness. If you were not aware, you would not catch yourself being distracted by the hindrances in the first place.

With practice, this quality of awareness becomes more and more stable. It gets glued or linked up from moment to moment, until you get to a point where there is hardly any moment during the day with any breaks in between. Through this awareness wisdom arises.

Lastly, with the sixth R we:

6) *Repeat* the whole cycle, by going through *Recognize, Release, Relax, Re-smile, Return* and *Repeat* the whole process. How often? Well, as many times as necessary. During a day of retreat or in a single sitting you might end up doing this so often and so fast that it becomes natural. Also, please remember not to compartmentalize the 6Rs when distractions are taking place; meaning, do not verbalize in the mind in a manner like this, *"Okay hold on, what's happening? Am I recognizing? Okay, Recognize: check; Am I doing Releasing? did I Release? yes? okay, that's it, go ahead,* etc. This is not advised to be done. Each of us are different and function slightly differently, especially when it comes to using the 6Rs. So, if you are following this system, see if you can make the Rs more of a flow while using a gentle touch.

Have the formula written or placed in front of you or in your pocket during the day, and especially on long retreats. The more you do it, the more you will be supported in the process and get a feel for it, until within a few days, just to give you a temporal idea, you will be so adept at it that as soon as a distraction arises, just like a wave, the 6Rs will happen naturally, before your attention is even caught or pulled into the distraction. And because the mind is getting so sensitive and subtle, it starts noticing the

hindrance before it even shows up. If an angry feeling arises, awareness notices it and then quickly links up to what's happening to the body. This, by the way, is insight. It says, *okay what's happening to the body? What's happening to the mind?* and it quickly notices the craving, the tightness in the brain, recognizes it, then relaxes the tension, smiles naturally, and finally returns to repeat the process, all on its own.

As mentioned, we practice the 6Rs because of the hindrances. But we also practice the 6Rs to gain insight. This is the reason why it was discussed earlier that the hindrances are not to be seen as enemies. In our careers as meditators, many of us have often been told that the hindrances are 'bad and that we need to get rid of them, cut them off or kill them.' However, when you recall the toughest lessons and the most difficult situations in your life, *those* were the ones that actually made the very fabric of the person you are today, and hopefully those tough situations allowed you to have a better understanding of your life. Hence, they were not necessarily your enemies. The same is true for the hindrances. If you learn thus how to negotiate your way around them and understand what they're trying to teach you, progress will be amazingly fast. Here, I am reminded of how scientists and astronomers use large objects in space for space flight.

For example, just like the massive gravity of a planet or moon, pulling everything down to its surface, if we know how to apply the force of gravity wisely, then much like a space ship or rocket that's been sent out to a far off planet or star, it uses this same gravity as it circles around it gathering intense momentum, turning it into an enormously powerful

booster for this rocket, that propels it faster to its destination and far more effectively than any jet or solid fuel that it contains for its long journey. This is the image I get when I think of the hindrances; they have this amazing potential to carry us to *Nibbāna!* In this way, using the 6R's truly helps in settling the mind down, as we consider that we cannot let go of the hindrances, but we can understand them. It is this understanding that is necessary for attaining the goal of this Path.

As you practice the 6Rs, you will notice suddenly that there is no longer a clash that used to be there in your mind, to the point where practice becomes smoother, and ongoing wisdom is developed thanks to the flowing stream of insights that will be hard for us to keep track of. Then, we start seeing the links of the 12 Links of Dependent Origination, or *paṭiccasamuppāda*. The other aspect of this practice is where it leads to, other than *Nibbāna*.

This practice allows a person to go through the *jhānas*, but not in the form of absorptions. Remember, the one-pointedness that I referred to in the beginning is about being completely engrossed in and by the object, be it the breath or some other object. As mentioned earlier, the commentaries created this schism between *Samatha* (Tranquility) practice and *Vipāssana* (Insight) practice. Unfortunately, they put *Samatha* in a different category claiming that it was for concentrative practices only and that it led only to *jhānas* and not wisdom, whereas *Vipāssana* practice is what leads to insight. Again, the Buddha never put a separation between these two. I have never come across anything in the *suttas* that expresses such a separation. This came much later, thanks to some commentators.

Over the centuries, people were discouraged from practicing one versus the other, with the premise that if your goal was to break the cycle of rebirth, then you certainly needed to practice *Vipāssana*. That was the teaching that the commentaries had come up with as their interpretation of the Dhamma. Meanwhile, when we look through the thousands of pages of the *suttas*, we see how the Buddha constantly reminds the meditator to practice the *jhānas* as a way to go into insight and thereby experience *Nibbāna*. This is beautifully described in the way the Buddha explains how Venerable Sāriputta himself attained to *Arahantship*, as depicted in the Middle Length Discourses' *(Majjhima Nikāya)*.[28]

Here, we see the Buddha listing all the stages that Venerable Sāriputta goes through in the *jhānas*, one by one, and how while being in the *jhāna*, he knows and sees that there's more to be done, hence goes beyond until he finally reaches that stage of cessation of feeling and perception, where his contaminants are destroyed, and he is fully liberated. Here is a perfect example by the Marshall of the Dhamma, Venerable Sāriputta, attaining full liberation using both the *jhānas* and insight, i.e. *vipāssana*.

The *jhānas*, in the words of my late teacher, Venerable Punnaji, are simply restful stations. They come and go, allowing the mind to rest while offering us tiny little gifts. Yet, they are not *Nibbāna*. The *jhānas* are also tempting for many of us because they can arouse conceit: *"Ah, I'm capable of attaining the fifth, arupa jhāna, versus you who are still working on the rupa jhānas!"* When that is our approach, we will certainly have a tough time experiencing insight. And that

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[28] *Anupāda Sutta*: One by One, MN 111

probably was one of the precautionary measures for some teachers to discourage meditators from *jhāna* practice in the past. But they 'threw the baby with the bathwater' when they did so, because *jhānas* are necessary for training the mind and are a very important way for a teacher to gauge the meditator as to where they are in their practice. This is exemplified countless times throughout the *Nikāyas*, if only we take the time and read the *suttas* (or listen to them) for ourselves and see this firsthand. A teacher always listens to the words used by the students as they describe their experiences. For each person, given their individuality, the teacher asks a series of questions and then finally connects the dots and sees how and what they're experiencing in relation to the Dhamma, by basing any and all conclusions on the *suttas*, and their own personal experience. From what they're saying, the teacher will know which *jhānic* level students are at, if at all. Thus, in addition to becoming road maps, the *jhānas* are also giving a wonderful return on your practice, as the mind becomes more and more settled.

Gradual practice is necessary for the mind to feel comfortable in what is to come next. You're truly changing the biochemistry of the brain and the body. However, this does not happen in the *jhānic* development or progression through the *jhānas* but will certainly occur when a person attains to the first level of awakening; namely, *Sotāpanna* or Stream-Enterer stage, where the personality will truly be transformed. People will notice things about you that they never did before. The way you relate to situations, and how you touch, feel, see, hear, understand, and process things will totally change. You will have literally passed the point of no-return. This *can* be attained in this life.

In fact, the Buddha encouraged us to get to this level, at the very least. For, we don't just practice meditation to practice meditation. I think that would be doing the Dhamma a great disservice. We need to have a destination in mind, not at the cost or sacrifice of our present moment or life, though. Wisdom can only be experienced here and not in the future.

For the longest time, commentaries have been written on the *suttas* (which, again, are the earliest teachings or words of the Buddha that have survived to this day), and often such commentaries were written by non-meditators, although many of them were highly scholarly figures. Somehow it was thought that practicing *mettā* did not lead to enlightenment but only to the first, second, or even third *jhānas*, not beyond. That is why for different generations or traditions of Buddhism in Theravāda countries there is respect for *mettā bhavana* but with the caveat that if you want to practice the Buddha's path and reach a point of awakening like he did, you need to practice *vipāssana* instead. This is a false idea. In reading the *suttas*, we see that there has never been such a separation between the meditative practice that the Buddha practiced and taught to thousands of people, thousands of whom became awakened. *Mettā* practice delivers all of these.

I myself have seen the wonders it brings forth in individuals who practice it. I have personally seen and taught those who have experienced some of these stages. *Nibbāna*, therefore, is not something left in old texts, *suttas*, or in another time, not belonging to this day and age. This certainty will come out of your own practice.

Lord Buddha himself said, '*Come, test, and **see** it for yourself!*

So long as humanity still has access to the Noble Eightfold Path, so long as it is being taught properly, and most certainly being practiced properly, then the world will never be short of Arahants!' This path is not just about making merits for gaining a higher rebirth. It is about liberation, plain and simple.

If the Dhamma is still available, then liberation is available! This is what the Buddha shared, as the most compassionate Teacher. What we do with the Dhamma he taught for forty-five years, and that has been carefully preserved to a great extent by the unbroken chain of Sangha members for 2600 years, is up to us. So, if there is any doubt towards the possibility of us experiencing *Nibbāna*, that has to do with us only and our limitation for not doing the work and has nothing to do with the efficacy of the Dhamma.

Thus, with the practice of *mettā* one gets to feel the taste of the Dhamma today, timelessly, in the now. This is another reason why the Buddha said that the Dhamma is for the wise: *"Paccattaṃ veditabbo viññūhī 'ti,"* which means that this path is not for just *anyone*. You cannot just wear a necklace of the Buddha, tattoo yourself with Buddha images, have statues of the Buddha all around you or even go to the sacred sites, and thus consider yourself to be truly practicing this Path. Not that there's anything wrong with these or that they're not helpful, because they can be. However, they are very supplemental in nature.

Here, we can mention how the Buddha discouraged people from worshipping him. When they asked him what to use for respect and adoration, the Buddha replied that they could use the Bodhi tree, because it gave him comfort when he was in need of a shelter, when he made his resolute decision to sit and not leave that spot until he was enlightened. This shows how the Buddha was always trying to bring the attention back to the practice. Once, there was a gentleman who left his home. He came and sat in front of the Buddha, mesmerized by his presence. Remember, the Buddha was the epitome of that warrior-like, powerful steadiness and solidity of the meditator's presence. And this man was just taken by that. Day after day, he was always there whenever the Buddha gave a talk. Finally, the Buddha saw his mind; he looked at him and said something to the effect of, *'What are you looking at? This is going to be a corpse, a worm-infested body, soon; this body will die. So, what are you adoring or admiring? What are you worshiping?'* The man was so disheartened and felt like he wanted to kill himself because the Buddha rejected his worship of him. Then the Buddha gave him another teaching which he finally understood.

Here, we see the Buddha's insistence that the best way to respect him and the path is to follow his example and be inquisitive, soft and gentle with ourselves, to constantly open up, gladden and calm the mind, and restfully see the defilements for what they are, as they are destroyed and unshakeable tranquility is established within oneself. When one comes to that point, it is called *akuppa ceto vimutti* or "the imperturbable liberation of mind." That is the state of *Nibbāna*, the state of unconditionality. And it is everyone's lot: every one of us has the potential to experience it.

This practice has worked for the Buddha, for his disciples, for many teachers, for my students and many others.

We have to be wise and smart in our choices in life. The Buddha was a very practical person as well. In the *Kālāma Sutta*,[29] he states clearly: 'if it works, do it.' How simple of an advice is that? I come from a generation of meditators who had been told for decades that, at the most, what one could expect from the diligent practice of the Dhamma would be a higher rebirth into some *Deva* or heavenly realm. Yet, this has never satisfied me because I would read in the *suttas* of the qualities of the Dhamma, such as being *timeless* and *immediately effective*, and wonder how it could be so and not manifest in me, now even 2600 years later. How could it not lead to insight or *paññā* if I was diligently practicing *sīla* and *samādhi?*

The great *Arahants*, the disciples of the Buddha, all had faith, mindfulness, energy, collectedness of mind, and wisdom. What is stopping us *from* having and using these same qualities today? What is stopping us from experiencing *Nibbāna?* Nothing! So, the idea that *Nibbāna* is a useful tool in the hands of Māra is none other than *micchā diṭṭhi* or wrong view, the opposite of the very first of the Eightfold Path: Right View, and we must remember that the Buddha always stressed how wrong view is the biggest hurdle to overcome.

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[29] *Kālāma Sutta*: To the Kālāmas, AN 3.65

More on The Seven Factors of Awakening

The Buddha was seen as the ultimate Medicine Man, the ultimate Protector and the Dhamma. This in itself is a beautiful way of experiencing and understanding the Buddha and the Dhamma. And this is going to be the link into my subject here, which are the *Bojjhaṅgās*, or the Seven Factors of Awakening.

Looking at the lives of great Disciples of the Buddha, one is surprised to read about the repetition of and power contained within the *bojjhaṅgās* or the Seven Factors of Awakening that were covered somewhat in earlier sections. Often, they are seen to be used as medicine, i.e. '*taking the medicine of the bojjhaṅgās.*' Here, we see instances from the lives of the Buddha and a few of his senior disciples, where they had become ill, whereby the Buddha would go to each of those students, when he visits Venerable Mahā Moggallāna and Venerable Mahā Kassapa, on two separate occasions and recites the *bojjhaṅgās* or the Seven Factors of Awakening.

One of the ways that the Buddha greeted his monks or nuns was by checking in on their health by asking if they were faring well. On these specific occasions, his disciples responded in the negative, as they were not feeling well and were in physical pain. Note that these were Awakened *bhikkhus*: *Arahants*. However, that did not negate the fact that they still had to live in this body, which meant they still felt pain. In reading the *suttas*, we again see the great

compassion of the Buddha reflected in how he asks his disciples about their wellbeing, as he sits down next to them with such care, and administers the remedy to the ailment of each *bhikkhu* by teaching them the Seven Factors of Awakening.

Now, both Venerable Mahā Moggallāna and Venerable Mahā Kassapa already knew the Seven Factors of Awakening, of course. In fact, they had been present when the Buddha recited and explained the *bojjhaṅgās* more than once. However, these incidents indicate that there is a great value in reciting the Seven Factors of Awakening given its incredibly protective quality.

While reciting it to the disciple, the student obviously would respond to Lord Buddha's questions with, "Yes master," and the Buddha then would do a question and answer about each of the factors with the ill-stricken *bhikkhu*, and in both cases, they were immediately healed just by the power of the recitation. Similarly, when the Buddha himself was sick once, it was one of his *bhikkhus*, Venerable Mahā Cunda, who was called in to recite the *bojjhaṅgās* to the Buddha, after which he rose up, having recovered completely from the physical symptoms he was suffering. Now, in our 21st century skeptical mind, we may not see how reciting something could be that transformative or healing. However, I myself tried it once, where a friend of mine recited them for me when I was really sick, unable to get out of bed. Immediately after the recitation, I was able to get up and make us both a meal. That's where one's faith comes in tremendously, given the understanding of what it is that these Seven Factors of Awakening really address.

Let us continue by looking at the *bojjhaṅgās* or the Seven Factors (*"Satta Bojjhaṅgā,"* in Pāli) in a slightly different way than before. To remind the reader, here are the *bojjhaṅgās*: mindfulness, investigation of states, energy or perseverance, joy, tranquility of mind, collectedness of mind, and equanimity.

Now, let us recall the five hindrances: first is *kāmacchanda* or sensual desire. The second one is ill will, *vyāpāda*; the third is *thīna-middha*, which is sloth and torpor, drowsiness, or sluggishness; the fourth is restlessness and worry, *uddhacca- kukkucca*; and finally we have *vicikicchā* or skeptical doubt. As a remedy to these hindrances, we have therefore been given the Seven Factors of Awakening by the Buddha. When a person is sick or ill, it usually means the Seven Factors are wobbly or unbalanced, which in the case of most people would also mean that the five hindrances have taken control and are "running the show."

So, what are the Seven Factors of Awakening? First, we have *sati*, which is mindfulness; the second one is *dhamma vicaya*, or the investigative quality of mind that brings about curiosity about what is happening now. Next comes *vīrya*, oftentimes translated as energy or perseverance or simply drive or effort. Then, we have *pīti* or joy, followed by tranquility of mind, which is *passaddhi*, in turn followed by collectedness or stability of the mind, *samādhi*; and finally, we get to *upekkhā*, which is equanimity.

Imagine how a mother's embrace feels, how it tastes, the flavor that it has. See if it conjures within you this undiluted, complete sense of peacefulness, of collectedness,

a state of balance, of security, and calm. That is exactly what the Seven Factors of Awakening render or bring about. When we talk about equanimity, for example, it is that sense of balance whereby we feel secure within.

And that's what I believe the Buddha was offering to His students who were ill, and later even to Himself, when He was physically ill. He asked His students to come and recite the Seven Factors of Awakening for Him, after which He became well, got up and started walking around when He was heavily sick prior to that. So, when the monastics put on the robe, when they go from home life to homelessness, they are in many ways relinquishing or letting go of their mother, of that maternal, nourishing presence in their lives, and of their families. But this relinquishment is done for something that they believe is greater, because that's the way they will be able to cut through rebirth. The Dhamma itself has the potential to substitute the love of our parents, based on our capacity to see this special quality that it has. This, because when you look at the Dhamma, and specifically the Seven Factors of Awakening, you see their nourishing properties, and how they ground the person by giving comfort and certitude owing to the development of the mind that is taking place, further indicated stage by stage through one's progression in the *Jhānas*, which the *bojjhaṅgās* come to clearly designate.

If you organize the Seven Factors of Awakening further, you will see them falling into roughly two groups: with one group having the quality of "energizing," which is more active, driven, and fueled, while the other group is more of a "calming" nature. This leaves us of course with one remaining factor, which balances them all, i.e. *Sati.*

Within the energizing group we find *vīrya*; that is, effort or perseverance. This is the quality that is often used to describe diligence or heedfulness *(appamāda)*. We also find in this group the factor of *dhamma vicaya* or the investigative quality of the mind, needed to be there to maintain a sense of knowing whether one's attention is on their object of meditation, and what's really happening in the mind. This, because sometimes you are going to go into different types of thoughts, daydreaming, and so on. When that happens, *dhamma vicaya* will bring you back to the present and to what's really going on. It will help you see, *"Oh, I have craving in my practice, because I want to repeat the fun experiences I had in my last sitting."* This will then be caught under the spotlight of *dhamma vicaya*, whereby we can ask ourselves: *"Is this really what I'm supposed to be doing at this moment, which is to relax instead, relinquishing all desire of all sorts, thus being present, available?"*

Following the investigation factor, we have joy.

Joy has an exuberant quality to it. It's overflowing, just like the surging of a cool spring, playfully gushing and fluttering from the ground as it sweetly refreshes. It just bursts with energy. Now, in meditation practice, we have all experienced sluggishness, which is the third of the hindrances, *thīna-middha*, a state of drowsiness or sleepiness, where it can be really hard to resist the urge to fall asleep. Right there and then, however, if a meditator simply recalls or brings up the wish for experiencing joy at that moment, suddenly, they find the energy to sit longer. This again is key for both strengthening and benefitting from our heedfulness or *appamāda*.

Thus, within the energizing group we have the energy or perseverance factor, alongside investigation and joy or rapture. These are the first three factors.

The second group is the calming group, which has to do with the mind finding itself more and more settled. The first of these factors is *passaddhi*; that is, tranquility or calmness of mind, which we need to experience first *before* the mind finds itself collecting and coming to rest in *samādhi*, and before equanimity even arises. Tranquility of mind is basically a state of mind that is not perturbed. In other words, this is a state of mind where sensual desires are absent. Tranquility is a natural state of mind that does not have any of the hindrances. That's one of the reasons why it has a calming effect, which prepares the ground for *samādhi* to come in, the next item on the list of calming factors. *Samādhi* is the collectedness or stillness of mind as mentioned before. Then, finally we get to equanimity as the last of the calming factors, *upekkhā*.

Having three factors in the energizing group, and three in the calming group, we are left with one, which happens to be *sati* or mindfulness.

Sati is the common denominator in all the Factors of Awakening. Without *sati*, one cannot get into any of the *jhānas*, for example. Without *sati*, one cannot have wisdom. We cannot experience awakening. In fact, it's so important that *sati* is found in so many different categorizations for our success on this Holy Path, all laid out by the Buddha in his teaching. For example, *sati* is also found in the Five Spiritual Faculties, The Five Spiritual Powers, the Noble Eightfold Path, and here, in the Seven Factors of Awakening, among others.

Therefore, it must have been very important for the Buddha to include it in almost every formula or formulaic structure of his teachings.

The Seven Factors of Awakening are incredibly vast to be addressed briefly, and that is because they hit upon so many elements of our lives, and especially of our meditation practice. The way I was introduced to them was when my teachers encouragingly said that if I could only balance out the Seven Factors where they were all perfectly lined up with each other, then, that would be the moment when *Nibbāna* occurs. So, there need not be a predominance of any factor, for example of joy, because even though it's a beautiful state to be in, and is one of the Seven Factors of Awakening, there are times when we need to take a step back from it, and go towards the collectedness of mind, or towards the tranquility of the mind factor perhaps, as the case may be. This, because too much joy is too fluttering, unsteady, which takes away from the tranquility of the mind, especially when we are going into the deeper *jhānas*, where the slightest agitation of the mind will throw us off balance. Similarly, with too much of tranquility the mind will slide into torpor or a sluggish state. Thus, there needs to be just enough of each of these factors so that they become balanced. "It's like a seesaw," a meditation friend once said on a retreat. When you have too much of a predominance in one, that means the other ones are lacking. Then, you will be lopsided in your practice.

In my own journey through the *brahmavihāras*, something I realized quickly was when my teacher helped me see that I no longer needed to push my way through but become softer in my attitude towards the practice. Thus, by putting too much of *vīrya*, too much of one of the factors in the energization group when I needed to just put in the right amount, at the right time, while balancing with the others, made all the difference. When looked at in this way, suddenly we get to see how meditation can genuinely become fun!

It's in our attitude, therefore, to have the Right View because when we approach the practice in such a stern, serious way instead of having a playful yet kind approach, we miss the whole point of balancing the Seven Factors of Awakening. So, we need to look at our practice in this generous fashion, viewing ourselves with the care and love of a mother, which is often lacking in meditators, and people in general.

Often, I sit down with meditators or my patients in therapy sessions as I find myself having to convince them that they deserve love. Somehow in our lives, we have convinced ourselves that everybody else might be deserving love but not us. Here, we need to recall the unconditionality of a mother's love, or at least that it is needs to be such. I read not too long ago a woman saying that if one feels they need to try hard to prove themselves worthy of receiving love from their mother, then something is wrong; that is not motherly love. As Dhamma teachers, we look at the Dhamma for our motherly nourishment so we can actually share it. And there is so much of it that's necessary.

Sometimes I see such begrudging ways of communication, even within Dhamma circles, or publications, where we are promoting this sense of selfishness. I find that to be at odds with the spirit of motherly love.

When I look at the Buddha, I see my Mother. I see a Mother's Love.

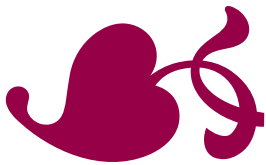
In fact, once while on retreat, as I listened carefully to the Suttas being read, with joyous tears I realized…quietly:
"The Dhamma is sweeter than my own Mother's milk!"

The Buddha would always advise *bhikkhus* to take care of each other. After all, the Sangha leaves behind mother and father and comes to the Dhamma, our true mother and father in helping us get rid of our clinging and come off the *saṃsāric* wheel of suffering. This is something that no matter how hard a parent may want or try to help us with, no parent can do this *for* us, other than giving us the body, whereby we can walk the Holy Path on our own and with it, break free.

When reading and studying the Dhamma, especially when sitting down to practice, we realize that we are not going to have our mothers forever. We aren't going to have our fathers forever. We aren't going to have our loved ones forever. We are here because of the multitude of mothers and fathers that we have passed through the arms of, who have spent sleepless nights taking care of us. But how much of that nourishing, parental love are we bringing forth first towards ourselves, and secondly, towards the world around us?

Yet, when we look at the world today with so much violence, it clearly indicates one thing: there is no love available for oneself, to begin with.

In studying and practicing the *bojjhaṅgās* or the Seven Factors of Awakening, and as we experience their nourishing effect on our lives, we are reminded of what the Buddha said, that 'a person who loves oneself cannot possibly have the desire to harm anyone.' The question then is how much of the motherly love can we bring into our own lives, towards ourselves, and to our practice, because that is going to emanate, manifest, and radiate out towards everyone that we come across.



Paṭiccasamuppāda: The Twelve Links of Causal Relations [30]

We would't have the Buddha's teachings if it hadn't been for some persuasion. The *suttas* tell us of how Brahmā Sahāmpati, one of the Divine Beings in the highest Brahmā Pure Abodes, was able to see what the Buddha was thinking right after his experience of *Nibbāna*. The Buddha was pondering how this Dhamma he had just discovered was so very profound, even for himself. And he realized at that moment that no one would understand it, and no one would have the capacity of discernment to penetrate through the deep layers of the Dhamma. Thus, he decided not to teach.

At that very moment, Brahmā Sahāmpati saw what the Buddha was thinking and immediately came to earth, bowed down at his feet, paid homage to the Buddha, and said: 'Please Lord, it has been way too long since humanity has been in the dark. This is the *only* opportunity they have. In fact, not only humanity, but the whole existence itself, with its beings, *devas*, gods, human and non- human beings

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30 This section is not intended to be an exhaustive and thorough elaboration of *paṭiccasamuppāda* by any measure. Instead, it is included in this manual to show the reader that whatever has been discussed can be placed contextually in a more coherent manner, vis a vis the major principles of the Dhamma, the crown of which may be easily considered *paṭiccasamuppāda* or the 12-Links of Causal Relations (Dependent Origination).

all *need* to hear the Dhamma; they are not liberated yet." He continued by saying, 'There are those beings with little dust in their eyes,' who are right at the edge and all they need is the right instruction at the right moment, and they will be liberated. 'Please, for the sake of those, I beseech you, do teach.' Then, the Buddha, out of compassion, scanned the entire existence with his mind and saw that, indeed, there were so many people who were ready, and had just a thin layer of 'dust in their eyes.'[31] The Buddha also saw many others with very thick layers of dust in their eyes, but this was an opportunity for him to speak and teach the Dhamma to those who would understand. And, he did, for forty-five years.

There are lovely stanzas of poetic words in the *suttas* of the exchange between Brahmā Sahāmpati and the Buddha, where the former is convincing the Buddha, and the Buddha agrees to teach for the sake of those with little dust in their eyes.

In considering the complexity and depth of the Dhamma, from the vast library of principles and foundational elements to allow a person penetrate the Teaching given to us by the Buddha, none stands out as much as his teaching on *paticcasamuppāda* or Dependent Origination or the 12-Links of Causal Relations. Many teachers abstain from teaching the Links of Dependent Origination because of its vastness. However, it is at the core of the Dhamma. In fact, it is so important that the Buddha said, "One who sees the Dhamma, sees the *paṭiccasamuppāda*, and one who sees *paṭiccasamuppāda*, sees the Dhamma." That

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[31] The "eyes" here represent wisdom and the dust stands for the layer of ignorance

is how deep it is. And that distinguishes Buddhism from any kind of religion or philosophical school, because of its emphasis on an individual's wisdom. Now, a caveat here: given that in the West we tend to view wisdom as a purely rational or intellectual effort, gathering of more data and information, a distinction needs to be made. In Buddhism, there is a difference between knowledge and wisdom, and wisdom is always regarded at a much higher level, so much so that without it, *Nibbāna* can never take place.

Of course, the Buddha never discouraged the use of rationality, given its necessity for an intellectual understanding of the world; however, it has its severe limitations, especially when we are discussing the domains of meditation and its fruits, via genuine practice. The Buddha's pragmatism is best demonstrated in his insistence for individuals to validate the teachings learned in and through the Dhamma in the very laboratory of one's life, as experienced through the practice of meditation, done for and by oneself. That is why the Buddha never was and never wanted to become a philosopher. The Buddha has been clear in his message, in that he was teaching only two things: suffering and the cessation of suffering. That's it!

After the Buddha became awakened, he sat in front of the Bodhi Tree for seven days, facing it, just expressing his gratitude to this tree that supported him as he became awakened under it. After the seventh day, in the first watch of the night (roughly from 6-10pm), he pondered the parts of the *paṭiccasamuppāda*, this time with more detail. Many people have the misconception that the Buddha came to realize Dependent Origination for the first time ever right

after he became awakened. That is not true, because in the *suttas* we see how the Buddha had thought and pondered the causal relationships between pain, suffering, lamentation, grief, and despair much earlier. Thus, before becoming the Buddha, having already looked at each of these links, but lacking the wisdom of a Buddha, he had not been able to see clearly as to the different chain of reactions, or causation taking place within them. This, he later termed "conditionality" or *paccayā* in Pāli, which says, "because of this, this arises; and because of the cessation of this, that ceases."

During the first watch of the night, seven days after his experience of *Nibbāna*, the Buddha pondered Dependent Origination in a direct path, that is, by going forward with the links. In Pāli, there is a beautiful term for this: *anuloma*. If you have ever petted a dog, a cat, or a fury animal, by moving your hand in the direction where the fur is growing, you find that to be very smooth and without obstruction, flowing in one motion. That is *anuloma*, which is how the Buddha looked at the links starting with ignorance, or *avijjā*.

He said, *"avijjā paccayā saṅkhārā,"* meaning, ignorance is the condition for *saṅkhāras* or generative causes to arise. Now, *"saṅkhāra"* has been translated differently by different translators. In *bhikkhu* Bodhi's rendition over the course of the last twenty years, we come across "formations," "volitional formations," and "volitional actions." Venerable Katukurunde Ñāṇananda – one of the greatest minds in the Dhamma, who recently passed away and who wrote *"Concept and Reality,"* a massive, incredibly powerful, and concise book with such depth of meaning – termed *saṅkhāras* as "preparations." Ajahn Thanissaro calls them "fabrications." Based on my understanding of the *saṅkhāras*

and the *suttas*, I have seen it to match more the terms "generative causes" or "habitual tendencies." So, ignorance produces generative causes, or *saṅkhāras*, and because of *saṅkhāras*, *viññāṇa* or consciousness arises.

There are six kinds of consciousnesses according to the Dhamma, which correspond with the six sense organs. Thus, in addition to the five sensory perceptions in the West, in Buddhism the sixth happens to be the mind itself, which perceives and conceives mind objects. Right now, you are able to process what you are reading based on the ability of *mano viññāṇa* or mind consciousness, which is taking in mind-concepts or mind-objects, such as thoughts, ideas, memories, words, etc. Once we have *viññāṇa*, we get to this very interesting, often mis-understood, mis-interpreted, and mis-translated word: *nāmarūpa*. Some people have called this first aggregate or *kkhandha* out of the five, that makes up an individual person, as simply: "name and form." Another, more palatable term for it could be "mentality and materiality." *Nāmarūpa* goes hand in hand with consciousness: if we remove consciousness, there is no *nāmarūpa*, no name and form; and if we remove name and form, there is no consciousness. This was a dilemma for many students who asked the Buddha how consciousness could be on both sides, where the two are caused by each other. The Buddha then gave them the beautiful example of heat and the luminosity of a lamp, a light source, and how they were dependent on each other. Similarly, *nāmarūpa* and *viññāṇa* go hand in hand, which takes us to the six sense bases, or *saḷāyatana*, whereby we get to experience and taste the world around us.

With the six sense bases, we are getting 'closer to earth,' so to speak, to something more tangible, experiential, and relatable for us. Because of *saḷāyatana* or the six sense bases, we get to experience life in the form of contact or *phassa*. Because of contact, there is feeling, *vedanā*. Thus, the feeling takes place because of contact, and contact itself took place because of the six-sense bases that have been picked up as the mind translates all these bits of data coming in. For example: say you hear the clapping of hands. The contact that takes place in your ears requires all that was mentioned so far, including consciousness or *viññāṇa*, and obviously the six-sense bases. To elaborate on it a bit more, the Buddha gives the example of eyesight, what he calls eye-consciousness.

Often, we look at eye-consciousness as if it arises independently from everything else. But eye-consciousness is the result of a couple of things coming together. The Buddha explains this beautifully. He says, when you put together a perfectly functioning eye and forms – things that could be seen – then you have eye-consciousness. This trio itself – an eye, forms, and consciousness – brings about contact. So, with the clap, we have sound and a perfectly functioning ear (which the Buddha calls the internal sense base), and when ear and sound are put together, we have ear-consciousness. That is what facilitated you picking up a clap. That is the contact. What was generated because of the contact is the next link, which is feeling, or *vedanā*.

Now, as mentioned previously, in the West we have a misconception that feelings and emotions are the same, but they are not. In Buddhism, this difference is very clearly

stated. The usual number of feelings that we come across in the Dhamma is just three: pleasant, painful, and neither pleasant nor painful. These are the three primary categories in which feeling could go into.

Once we have feeling, things get a little bit more interesting, as far as the cycle of rebirth or *saṃsāra*. is concerned; that is, the cycle of misery and suffering. Because of our liking, disliking, or indifference to the feeling, we develop craving, which is the next link. The Buddha used the term *taṇhā* for craving, meaning "thirst." That lingering desire or thirst to have more of something is what, many teachers say, has to be cut, right there, because up to the point of "feeling," we were good, but the moment there is "craving," we develop "clinging," *upādāna*, which entails grasping, holding onto, much like that lovely feeling that we experienced in the past and now want to repeat it.

Craving and clinging are the reasons why a person ends up staying in *saṃsāra while* being reborn again and again, experiencing all kinds of suffering. And we have been doing this for eons. Thus, because of clinging, there is *bhava* or becoming. At this point, we have the habitual tendency of being too dedicated, too committed and the energy is now so powerful that it pulls the person to the next moment.

Here, a correction needs to be made about the way Dependent Origination has often been described or broken up into separate categories. Commentators, not only in the 20^{th} or 21^{st} centuries, but even prior to that, have misconstrued the teachings of the Buddha when it comes to Dependent Origination, as well. Namely, they took the

twelve links of Dependent Origination and divided them into three supposed *lifetimes*, whereby the first two links, in which ignorance *(avijjā)* gives rise to generative causes *(saṅkhāras)*, are said to be the product of past lives. Furthermore, the link of becoming *(bhava)*, which leads to rebirth *(jāti)* or the desire to go into the next moment, is supposed to be connected to one's future life.

The major error lies in the fact that what this tells us is that one has no control over those sections of the twelve links in this life, since they have to do with one's past and/or future lives, and therefore beyond the reach of the present life. However, this goes against every grain of wisdom that is found in the Dhamma; for if we recall any of the statements made in previous chapters about the Buddha's insistence on the person to do one's work, put the effort, develop the understanding and break free, then we see how such a separatist way of looking at *paṭiccasamuppāda* has nothing to do with the Dhamma, because the view that it is broken into three separate lifetimes relinquishes one from having full responsibility for one's life.

If you have ever studied any of the teachings of the Buddha, you notice that his focus is always on how to get one out of suffering of s*aṃsāra* right now, and not tomorrow. He was a very pragmatic, conscientious, compassionate, and straightforward kind of a wise teacher, unlike any other. Not a single moment of the Buddha teaching the Dhamma had been idled away. The Buddha constantly brings up the urgency of one's liberation, here and now. It is also very important to remember that there is no room for exercising probability in the Dhamma: we are *not* gamblers when it comes to undertaking the work to be done on this Holy Path.

Everything is factual, in front of your eyes, right here, to be tested. The Buddha says, *ehi passiko*; meaning, 'come, test it out, and see it yourself!'

Let us continue examining the links of Dependent Origination.

Right after craving, there comes grasping or clinging, *upādāna*. Oftentimes, we use the word clinging and think it only covers that which the Buddha was talking about; however, it is crucial to understand what clinging entails. One of my teachers, Bhante Punnaji used the term personality development, not necessarily in a good way, to delineate that which takes place with clinging. It is through clinging, or *upādāna*, that the idea of a personality is generated, via identification: *this is mine; this is who I am; this is myself,* which is often described as the modus operandi of delusion, i.e. the third *kileśa* or defilement. *"That was my body that was abused,"* or just like that elderly person in a senior home, who is looking at their body and saying, *"I used to be such an attractive and healthy person, what happened to me?"*

Then, right after clinging, we have becoming or *bhava*. Because of *bhava*, there is *jāti* or birth, whereby the person's tendency of becoming goes into the next moment of action, or at death drops into the womb in the form of yet another birth to take place. And once you are born, there is death; you are basically stuck. One time, a man came to the Buddha, asking why it was that we suffered and died. The Buddha in turn responded with a question; He asked, *"Were you born?"* The man said, *"yes."* Then, the Buddha explained, 'if you are born, then you are going to die, since everything that has a beginning, has an end.'

Now, the Buddha didn't stop at death; he went further. Because of death, we see how sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair arise. The Buddha wasn't just a formulator of these links; he also gave distinct explanations for each so that we could find our place within them in the here and now and navigate our lives accordingly. This is what his *Nibbānic* experience allowed him to do and see. Even though he had known these links before when he was still struggling as a *bodhisatta* during those six and a half years, what he didn't have was a realization of the Four Noble Truths, which he gained at the night of his Awakening. That completely changed everything, because now he was able to see the link *and* its origin, i.e. through their connection, just like in the Four Noble Truths, where we have the Truth of Suffering, as well as its cause, i.e. the Truth of Craving.

Thus, if we take clinging, for instance, what would its origin be?

It is craving that brings about clinging. Then, the Third Noble Truth comes in: there is a cessation to clinging, to *upādāna*. The realization the Buddha had in seeing this changed everything, because the Buddha was no longer just seeing the link, but also the cessation of it, a way *beyond* it. Again, let's be reminded that the Buddha taught two fundamental things: suffering and its end. Thus, the cessation of clinging is the second part of the Buddha's teaching, where the first was suffering itself. He saw that *upādāna* or clinging has an end. And what is the end of clinging? Here, the Fourth Noble Truth comes in, which is the Path that leads us out of suffering: The Noble Eightfold Path. Again, this was the crucial turning point, because now

the Buddha saw how each of these links comes to be, and how each of them ceases.

While in the first watch of the night he went over Dependent Origination in the forward motion, in the second watch of that same night (10 pm. to 2 am.), he did the reverse motion of *paṭiccasamuppāda* or Dependent Origination, this time going backwards. If we use the same analogy of petting a cat, for example, now in the opposite way, you will find that it doesn't go so smoothly. In Pāli, this is called *paṭiloma*, whereas the forward motion was called *anuloma*. The reverse motion through the links entailed the following understanding: With the ceasing of clinging, what ceases? With the ending of craving, clinging ceases. Then, with the ending of what does craving cease? With the ceasing of feeling, craving ceases. With the ceasing of what does feeling cease? With the ceasing of contact, craving ceases. And so on.

The crucial task for us is to cut the link between feeling and craving, right there, before feeling turns into craving. For, when contact takes place, the experience of feeling in its purest form arises; meaning, it is still devoid or empty of the three defilements. It is the presence of the defilements that brings craving into the scene, and thereby everything else that follows. Thus, the *paṭiccasamuppāda* is an in-depth explanation of how the defilements take shape, how feelings come about once the six sense doors bring in information via contact. That is what the Buddha was advising his students to get to experience life as, i.e. feeling in its purest state, devoid of the defilements, as seen earlier in the teaching given to the lay disciple, Bahiya:

'*In seeing just see; in hearing just hear; in smelling just smell; in tasting just taste; in feeling just feel; in cognizing just cognize*.'

Now, each of these links themselves have ignorance in them. When we study the Dhamma and practice the teachings in our own lives in the form of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, for example, we see how every aspect of life has within it some tiny little tinge of ignorance. In other words, the first link of Dependent Origination is everywhere.

Once, the Buddha was explaining this to Prince Bodhi in the *Bodhirājakumāra Sutta*,[32] where the prince asks the Buddha how long it would take a person to experience Nibbāna. The Buddha starts by saying that it takes seven years; then he says it doesn't have to be seven, and drops it to six; then to five, then four, three, two, one, half a year, five months, four months, three months, two months, and all the way down to one day and one night. This is one instance where we see the inadequacy, to say the least, of the misunderstanding brought forth by some commentators whereby Dependent Origination is seen as something that requires three different lifetimes, while not considering how the links, *all of them*, are very much related to a person's full understanding of the Dhamma, in this one life. This is my understanding. The Dhamma is about striving, without leaving anything to probability in a future, and instead tasting *Nibbāna, now*.

At every moment we are choosing, and there is birth of action, whether in the form of a thought, speech, or bodily action. That is why ignorance is found in every single link of the *paṭiccasamuppāda*. And how do we identify ignorance? Remember the Eightfold Path, where Right View comes first,

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[32] *Bodhirājakumāra Sutta*: Discourse to Prince Bodhi. MN 85

followed by Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Lifestyle, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Collectedness of Mind. Negotiating this Eightfold path into our lives is equivalent to putting a big, fat spotlight on your present moment, and how it is that you are relating to situations. Meaning, are you reacting automatically, blindly? Or, are you giving Right View a chance? Are you giving Right Speech a chance, instead of blurting out a curse word or using harsh speech? Or indulging in sexual misconduct when no one is looking? Or, are you participating in useless chatter, or gossiping, or doing something even worse, lying, because if you can lie, the Buddha said, you can do anything.

Thus, no matter what our experience, we can always go back to the Noble Eightfold Path. This makes everything relatable. It brings the very complex principle of Dependent Origination into our lives and places it in our laps, reminding us of our own freedom to choose between the wholesome and the unwholesome. The Buddha explained this beautifully when he related back his own experience with choosing between wholesome and unwholesome thoughts in the *Dvedhāvitakka Sutta*.[33] The name of the *sutta* is "Two Kinds of Thoughts," which relates how, before becoming a Buddha, *Sidhattha Gautama* as a *bodhisatta*, saw that he was having two kinds of thoughts, and decided to make a pile for each: one pile would be made up of the unwholesome thoughts, which he determined not to touch, and the other would be the pile of wholesome thoughts, the one he would instead choose from, starting from that point on. This is a technique I have used with many of my patients in the past, and I try to live by this myself and always

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33 *Dvedhavitakka Sutta*: Two Kinds of Thoughts. MN 19

encourage those around me to do the same, because it's so simple. But, here's the question: *Can we do it?*

Choosing between the wholesome and the unwholesome already means you are abiding by the Noble Eightfold Path. If you are using the Noble Eightfold Path, that means you are bringing in the detergent drop of wisdom into the dirty bucket called ignorance, which is at the backbone of every one of the links of Dependent Origination. With that wisdom, what you are essentially doing is disrupting this blind chain of events from occurring. What better way to take control of our lives!

If we remove this very crucial element of wisdom, i.e., the understanding of Dependent Origination, then there is no point to becoming or calling ourselves Buddhists. If there is no element of discernment in our lives, and no detectable difference in the quality of our lives, no higher sense of calm and tranquility, where we are not being pulled left and right, up and down with our old tendencies, then we are able to see these tendencies for what they are and choose our actions. Then, every time you let go of an attachment, relinquishing your tight grasp on some thought or desire, you may wonder: "Hmmm, what is it that's happening in the background?" That's called tranquility, a mini *Nibbāna*. The more of these that occur, the closer you get to that point where *Arahants* live, where they experience the purity of the moment, undefiled by greed, aversion, or delusion, the unshakeable liberation of mind *(akuppa ceto vimutti)*. That blissful state of mind is also sometimes called *kiriya citta*, where one can no longer make any new *kamma*.

All of us look for happiness, and we want to see that happiness, first be experienced within *this* life. Often however, we forget to appreciate the time that we have and what we can do with it. Thus, we need to first start from a space of appreciation. Here, appreciating our goodness, our virtue, is key in bringing about and retaining a sense of happiness. We need to disengage ourselves from a sense of identification, which was the main point of Lord Buddha's emphasis on *anattā*, or taking things personally, as he formulated the conditional stages of *paṭiccasamuppāda* or Dependent Origination, described so eloquently and in detail.

Remember, identification due to ignorance is, after all, a major defilement, and it could have as its object (of identification) a feeling, an emotion, a thought, an image, etc., anything that may arise at the six sense doors. In thoroughly appreciating the damage caused by our identification or taking of things personally, we need to see that it requires four things: 1) to approach that object out of a multitude of other objects; 2) to grasp the object: *"I like this:"* craving, or *"I don't like this:"* aversion; 3) to enter into the object, the image, the feeling; and finally, 4) to be entangled with the object; to be one with it: "*I am* my anger, *how dare you? This is my passport, my nationality; this is my skin color, my gender; these are my views, etc.*"

Identification with (wrong) views especially is a powerful one that the Buddha had a name for: *diṭṭhi māna* or the conceit of views, which doesn't allow us to see the Dhamma, to live the Dhamma, let alone *practice* the Dhamma. You must be careful not to fall into this trap, and if you find yourself in one, read the *suttas*, listen to Dhamma Talks from various teachers, and keep your heart open and

soon, you'll be free from all wrong views, as you find yourself safely anchored in the utterly fresh experience of the Dhamma supreme, with unshakeable faith in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha.

Meditation is inseparable from living a decent, virtuous, a holy life, in a sense. Again, the Buddhist training is threefold: *sīla, samādhi, paññā;* meaning, virtue, mental cultivation, and wisdom.

These are not necessarily reserved for a practitioner in a deep retreat somewhere in a cave or a hut, or for a *bhikkhu* or *bhikkhuni*, or for any specific type of a uniquely segregated person. It is our own choice and decision to live with the Dhamma and take care of the Dhamma, as we take care of our mindfulness, our *sīla*.

Therefore, here in this book, I have attempted to encourage you through an invitation to experience the reality of such a community wherein Awakening is not only a possibility, but the inevitable result of effort, ardency, virtuous living, and intentional action based on Right View, as captured within the Noble Eightfold Path. Thus, the key to changing the world, the environment, your community, your family, and loved ones, starts with yourself as you hold the key in your hand, starting by reading this book, along with the encouragement that these words have attempted to bring to you.

I am reminded of how many times people approached the Buddha over the forty-five years of his teaching career asking him the following question: "Are there people in our lives who we can never repay for the work they have done for us?"

The Buddha said, '*there are two people you can never repay; they are your parents, your mother and father.'*

Now, there is one more person that is hard to repay, but we can indeed try. This happens to be Lord Buddha, the Tathāgata.

We *can* repay the Buddha for the Dhamma that he gave so generously to us by becoming awakened ourselves. To this end, the Buddha added a caveat in reference to repaying one's debts to parents by saying, that there was one instance in which you could actually come close to repaying your parents, and that is by making the Dhamma available to them, if you show them the Noble Eightfold Path, i.e. the Four Noble Truths, that which has lit up your own life by you becoming a living embodiment of the Dhamma, and attaining its sublime Fruits.

Bhante Candana can be reached at bhantecandana@gmail.com

If you wish to contribute by supporting Bhante in his daily requisites and living expenses, as he continues teaching the Dhamma along with his ongoing project of retranslating and freely making available the recordings of the Pāli Suttas online, then perhaps you may consider making a donation via Go Fund Me:

https://gofund.me/5b573711

Dedication of Merits

Ākāsaṭṭhā ca bhummaṭṭhā devā nāgā mahiddhikā
Puññantaṁ anumoditvā ciraṁ rakkhantu sāsanaṁ

May mighty deities and nāgas dwelling in space and on earth rejoice in these merits of ours and long protect the Buddha's Dispensation

Ākāsaṭṭhā ca bhummaṭṭhā devā nāgā mahiddhikā
Puññantaṁ anumoditvā ciraṁ rakkhantu desanaṁ

May mighty deities and nāgas dwelling in space and on earth rejoice in these merits of ours and long protect the Teachings of the Buddha

Ākāsaṭṭhā ca bhummaṭṭhā devā nāgā mahiddhikā
Puññantaṁ anumoditvā ciraṁ rakkhantu mamparaṁ

May mighty deities and nāgas dwelling in space and on earth rejoice in these merits of ours and long protect myself and others

Idaṁ no ñātinaṁ hotu, sukhitā hontu ñātayo
Idaṁ no ñātinaṁ hotu, sukhitā hontu ñātayo
Idaṁ no ñātinaṁ hotu, sukhitā hontu ñātayo

Let these merits go to our loved ones, and may our loved ones & relatives be happy
Let these merits go to our loved ones, and may our loved ones & relatives be happy
Let these merits go to our loved ones, and may our loved ones & relatives be happy

Etttāvatā ca amhehi sambhataṁ puñña sampadaṁ
Sabbe devā anumodantu sabba sampatti siddhiyā

May all deities rejoice in these merits, which we have just acquired for the achievement of all kinds of success

Ettāvatā ca amhehi sambhataṁ puñña sampadaṁ Sabbe bhutā anumodantu sabba sampatti siddhiya

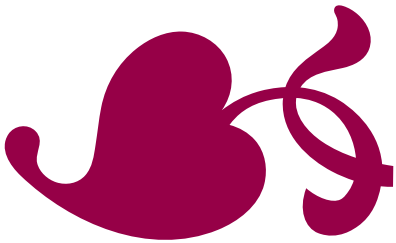
May all non-humans rejoice in these merits, which we have just acquired for the achievement of all kinds of success

Ettāvatā ca amhehi sambhataṁ puñña sampadaṁ
Sabbe sattā anumodantu sabba sampatti siddhiya

May all humans rejoice in these merits, which we have just acquired for the achievement of all kinds of success

Sādhu... Sādhu... Sādhu...

Excellent...Excellent...Excellent...



This is a manual intended for readers who are on various levels of practice on the spectrum, from absolute novices to those seasoned in the practice of meditation with years of experience. This work is especially intended to relate with the living circumstances of modern readers dealing with the various stressors of life, in all their phases, whether one is a layperson or a monastic. By providing a simpler formula of what comes to us through the Buddha's words, this book attempts to bring to the reader the most essential and pertinent information regarding mental cultivation and developing of the mind while basing it on the earliest known teachings of the Buddha, as taught in the suttas of the Pāli Nikāyas, and not their commentaries.

In addition, the modern interest in mindfulness is brought into focus by taking the reader back to its source, i.e. the Dhamma, wherein mindfulness is presented in its proper light. That is, in relation to the Threefold Training *(virtue or ethics, meditation, & discernment)*, which is essential for it to work. After all, mindfulness, much like a famous recipe to a delicious dish, is simply one ingredient among many others. Furthermore, this manual intends to also guide the reader through the systematic progression of the Dhamma *without* adding or subtracting from it anything. The goal of this work is to guide you to a *Happier State of Being;* allowing you to gain a clearer understanding of the vicious cycle of suffering, taking you all the way to tasting the Fruits of the Dhamma.

Bhikkhu Candana (pronounced "*Chandana*") is a Theravāda Buddhist monk, who has been a student of the Dhamma for over thirty years, having sat at the feet of many learned *Mahātheras*, and has been teaching meditation for over two decades. Academically, in addition to his MA in Psychology, Bhante Candana has a Doctorate in Buddhist Ministry, and has received the title of "Teacher of Dhamma" (*Ācariya*) in 1998, given to him by the late Ven. Dr. Havanpola Ratanasāra Nāyaka Mahāthero, who first encouraged the (then) layperson Candana, to begin teaching the Dhamma in the 1990's. Currently, Bhante lives and teaches in Europe, teaching and retranslating the Pāli Suttas which he narrates for YouTube so to safeguard the Teachings for posterity, as well as giving Dhamma Talks, while conducting meditation retreats online & around the world. Bhikkhu Candana is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (CA), serving as a psychotherapist for low-income individuals and their families.