

The War on Error
Holy War in Buddhism



by
Bhikkhu Pesala

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First Published: 11th September 2011

Last Updated: 11th September 2017

Association for Insight Meditation

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Foreword

When teaching at my own centre or in other Theravāda Buddhist centres I usually find that those who attend such classes and talks already have an interest in Theravāda teachings. However, when discussing Dhamma on Internet forums I come across the full spectrum of Buddhist thought from all schools of Buddhism. The teachings of the Buddha have spread to many different cultures over the centuries and have, in some cases, changed beyond all recognition.

Unlike many Buddhists of Southeast Asia, Western Buddhists have often come into contact with several of these divergent schools of thought, and many have also introduced their own ideas from western psychology or philosophy to further dilute or pollute the original teachings of the Buddha.

In the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, the Buddha advised us to compare any teachings with the Dhamma and Vinaya, and to reject them if they do not fit with, but contradict the original teachings. We should be wary of accepting any teachings at face value. Those teachings that we have accepted should be re-examined constantly in the light of whatever knowledge we gain later.

All of us start from a point of not understanding, and imperfect views. That is the nature of the human condition. If we were not deluded, we would not have taken rebirth in this world. The basic assumption for a Buddhist is that the Buddha knew something that we do not. To be a Buddhist, therefore, means that one must follow “The Way of Analysis” (*Vibhajjavāda*). The Buddha’s teaching is not a religion, or a belief system, but a way of life and a practical method to develop the mind so that we can remove our ignorance, clarify our understanding, and gain right view. The Pāli term for right view — *sammā diṭṭhi* — has a broader meaning than simply “right” as opposed to “wrong.” A Sammāsambuddha is a “Fully Awakened Buddha” so “*sammā diṭṭhi*” means a view that is perfectly correct, fully in accordance with reality. While we are in the process of studying and practising the Buddha’s teaching, our view is gradually straightened out and refined to remove any imperfections until, on attaining the Noble Path and realising nibbāna, it becomes the perfectly correct view that is fully in accordance with the way things are.

The most reliable source we have for the Buddha’s teachings are the Pāli texts. Translations are not the original teachings, but interpretations by those who have some knowledge of Pāli. Some translations

are more trustworthy than others, but if we really want to know what the Buddha taught then we have to go beyond intellectual knowledge, and practise his teachings to gain direct knowledge.

Nevertheless, before we can practise properly we do need to know what the Buddha taught, so there is much to be done by way of study, discussion, and systematic reflection. The Maṅgala Sutta lists thirty-eight auspicious signs of a prosperous future for one who fulfils them. Included in these thirty-eight are: 1) Not to associate with fools (*asevanā ca bālānaṃ*), 2) To associate with the wise (*paṇḍitanañca sevanā*), 7) Great learning (*bāhusaccañca*), and 8) Skill in work (*sippañca*), 26) Hearing the Dhamma at the right time (*kālena dhammasavanam*), and 30) Discussion of the Dhamma at the right time (*kālena dhammasākacchā*), all of which are about acquiring knowledge.

The empty-headed are just a bit too quick to quote the case of “Empty-headed” [Potthila](#), who was very learned in the scriptures, but still unenlightened. This elder quickly realised the Dhamma when he practised properly. I wonder how many of those who criticise academic learning have practised meditation seriously and gained insight? Study, practice, then realisation is the natural order of things. In exceptional cases, when an intelligent, virtuous, and wise person meets an enlightened teacher, they may gain realisation with little or no study.

References are to editions of the Pāli Texts in Roman Script published by the Pali Text Society. In the PTS translations, these page numbers are given in the page headers or in square brackets in the body of the text. This practice is also followed by Bhikkhu Bodhi’s modern translations, like that below:

128

Sallekha Sutta: Sutta 8

i.44

Thus, a reference to M.i.44 would be found on page 44 of volume one in the Pāli edition, but on page 128 of Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation. It would be on a different page in Miss I.B. Horner’s translation, but since the Pāli page reference is given, it can still be found. In the Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana edition of the Pāli texts on CD, the references to the pages of the PTS Roman Script edition are shown at the bottom of the screen, and can be located by searching.

I have attempted to standardise the translation of Pāli terms, but it is impossible to be totally consistent as the various translations and editions are from many different sources.

The War on Error

Introduction

There are two opposing ways that one can look at the world: the religious view-point, and the political view-point. The political view-point is concerned with the external world, the behaviour of human beings and how their behaviour affects others in society. Politicians try to persuade and coerce others to behave as they wish, for what they perceive as the benefit of society and therefore of themselves. The religious view-point is concerned with the personal world, the behaviour of oneself, and how one's own behaviour affects others in society. Religious people try to behave in a way that they perceive is of benefit to themselves and therefore to society.

In the following pages I will give a Buddhist's view-point — not, please note, *the* Buddhist view-point, but my own view-point on how to wage the war on error and fight the real enemies of Buddhism. I will support my views with references to the Pāli texts, and I hope that you will read the available translations for yourselves to improve your own understanding of what the Buddha taught. If we regard ourselves as followers of the Buddha, then we should try to follow what he taught, not what others say that he taught, or what we think he should have taught. In other words, we should not just follow our own views and opinions, or even the views and opinions of learned monks, but we should make a thorough inquiry into the teachings of the Buddha, and then try to apply those teachings in our daily lives.

If we don't make a thorough inquiry, then we are not waging war *on* error, but waging war *in* error. It won't be a holy war, but a wholly inappropriate war for Buddhists to wage, and it will be a tragic waste of this very rare and precious human rebirth during an era when the Buddha's teachings are still to be found in the world, and when there are still Noble Ones who know the right path leading to the end of all suffering.

Holy War in Buddhism

Like other religions, Buddhism also has a concept of holy war. Ignorant people use such ideas to justify physical violence, intimidation, denial of basic human rights, and the oppression of others. However, there is only one holy war that deserves the name, and that is the struggle to be waged by each individual to remove his or

her own craving and ignorance. No other war, crusade, or campaign is worthy of the appellation “holy.” Such battles with the external world do not lead to mental peace or to the cessation of defilements (*nibbāna*), but only to more suffering and greater ignorance. If you impose your views on others and deny them the right to hold different views, then you are not practising the Buddha’s teaching. Right views can be promoted by teaching Dhamma, by pointing out what is not Dhamma, and by allowing others the freedom to decide for themselves which is which. If they choose the wrong path, that is for their loss and harm, but it is not your responsibility. Even the Buddhas can only show the way, those who claim to be his disciples must follow his instructions to reach the goal.

When the Dhamma is not properly practised, then the ignorant need to wage war in the name of protecting the religion, but actually all they are doing is protecting their own self-interest. This is not the way to preserve the Dhamma, but the way to destroy it. During wars, even if the nation is victorious, many lives are lost, much wealth is dissipated, many enemies are made, and the young men who return from war do so with both physical and mental scars. The way of the ideal Buddhist ruler — the Cakkavatti, or Wheel-turning monarch — is to conquer by means of generosity, friendliness, and by speaking the truth, not by the force of arms and threats of violence. Such a campaign, of course, would not be a war, but a diplomatic mission.

In the *Milindapañha*, King Milinda asked Venerable Nāgasena, “Venerable sir, will you discuss with me again?”

“If your majesty will discuss as a scholar, yes; but if you will discuss as a king, no.”

“How is it then that scholars discuss?”

“When scholars discuss there is a summing up and an unravelling; one or other is shown to be in error. He admits his mistake, yet he does not become angry.”

“Then how is it that kings discuss?”

“When a king discusses a matter and advances a point of view, if anyone differs from him on that point he is apt to punish him.”

“Very well then, it is as a scholar that I will discuss. Let your reverence talk without fear.”

To preserve the Dhamma, we should discuss like scholars, not like kings. If we are unable to win over others to our point of view, then

the fault lies not with the Dhamma, but most probably with our exposition of it. Even the Buddha himself could not win over everyone to be his disciple, so what can his ordinary disciples do? Finally, after all kindness, generosity, and reasoning have failed, we must practise tolerance, and abide in equanimity. The Dhamma will not disappear because non-Buddhists attack it and try to convert Buddhists to their faith, the Dhamma will disappear only when Buddhists fail to practise it properly.

Self-Defence

What should Buddhists do when they are abused or attacked? How should they deal with aggression? A lady once asked me how she should deal with anger, so I advised her to contemplate the anger and the thoughts that gave rise to the anger, using the *Satipaṭṭhāna* method. However, I later learnt that what she meant to ask was, “How should I deal with aggression?” That is a different question entirely. It seems that her husband was in the habit of venting his anger on her. In this case, just being mindful with bare awareness of shouting or abusing is unlikely to be very effective. It might even make him more angry as he feels that he is being ignored and not getting the attention that he seeks. In this case, one should practise loving-kindness. Someone who regularly cultivates the practice of loving-kindness has very little fear or anger. They are no threat to anyone, so they rarely attract aggression. If one can develop deep insight into the human condition, then one can realise that there is nothing to defend. If there is no egoism, no self-interest, no craving, no expectations, no anxiety, how could anger arise?

However, most of us are not free from defilements yet, so how should we deal with abuse? Should we be a doormat or a punch-bag for others to use as they wish? I don't think that this is the Buddha's teaching. In *Dhammapada* [verse 223](#) it says:

*“Conquer anger by love. Conquer evil by good.
Conquer the stingy by giving. Conquer the liar by truth.”*

When others tell lies about us, steal from us, or abuse us, we should defend ourselves. However, if we become angry, then that is a weakness in us that we should learn from. We should be long-sighted, not short-sighted. All beings are the owners of their kamma, and will inherit its results. The suffering that we are inheriting while being

mistreated or abused is a result, but not all things are due to previous kamma. We can and should act in the present moment to deflect the fruition of past kamma as best we can. When we return anger with loving-kindness, stinginess with generosity, and speak the truth to expose lies, we are practising equanimity in the right way. If we do nothing, we are practising the equanimity of the water buffalo.

At one time, the Venerable Ajahn Chah asked a monk why he had not fixed the hole in the roof of his hut, from which water was coming inside. The monk replied that he was practising equanimity. Ajahn Chah said that that was the equanimity of the water buffalo.

If we practise that kind of equanimity, we may be strong, but we are behaving like a water buffalo. A human being should use wisdom to deal with problems that have arisen, using force if necessary, but not with anger. At one time, a shameless bhikkhu I lived with was constantly harassing me in various ways. After I returned from almsround one day, having walked six miles, he accosted me as soon as I returned, complaining that his telephone was not working. I immediately looked at his phone, and tested my own phone, to see if I could find an obvious fault. I could not, so I told him that I did not know why it was not working, and returned to my room to get ready for a shower, and to wash my almsbowl. The monk followed me into my room with his phone, still complaining that it was not working. So I made as if to follow him back to his room, and as he left my room I guided him out, and shut and locked the door to prevent him harassing me any further. For this I was accused by the Secretary of the Trust that supported the *vihāra* of “Committing an act of violence.” That is how corrupt people behave. They do not make a proper inquiry into the circumstances, but follow their own prejudices. If one can afford to, then one can also take legal action to defend one’s reputation — that option is not available to monks or most lay people due to the very high legal costs involved. One just has to put such injustices down to the fruition of past unwholesome kamma, let go, and move on.

When the circumstances demand it, Buddhists can and should use reasonable force to defend their own interests, but what is reasonable force is not written in any book. You have to decide that for yourself as circumstances unfold.

If we become angry — and there are plenty of things in this world that could make us angry if we are not mindful — then we will not be able to see clearly our own benefit, the benefit of others, nor the benefit of both. The Buddha gave the Simile of the Saw¹ to advise us how to respond to violence.

“Monks, even if bandits were to cruelly sever your limbs with a two-handed saw, he who got angry even at that would not be following my teaching. Thus you should train yourselves: ‘My mind will not be corrupted and I will utter no evil speech. I will remain with compassion for their welfare, with a noble mind full of boundless loving-kindness, and free from hatred. I will abide pervading these individuals with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, I will radiate boundless loving-kindness to the entire world.’ That is how you should train yourselves.”

Of course, we understand that very few people are entirely free from anger — only Non-returners and Arahants have eradicated anger completely — but the Buddha’s advice is clear, if we follow his teachings properly we should conquer anger and violence by practising loving-kindness and patience, without limit. There is no justification in the Buddha’s teachings for waging war with weapons and bombs to kill other living beings. If, due to lack of mindfulness, patience, and compassion, we do resort to violence or warfare, that is a fault in us, and we will make unwholesome kamma if we harm others for our own short-term benefit.

However, do not misunderstand this teaching. We do not need to run away from aggression, but we should face up to it with courage and quiet determination. We can find examples in the texts of how the Buddha dealt with aggression, abuse, and threats to his life.

On one occasion, King Viṭaṭūbha, the son of King Pasenadi of Kosala, wished to attack and destroy the Sākya race, and set off with his army. Knowing of the king’s intentions, the Buddha went to the road that he knew the army would follow and sat in the open near to a shady tree. When the king came there, the sun was getting high in the sky, and seeing the Buddha sitting in the hot sun, when there was a shady tree nearby, the king was surprised. He approached the Buddha, paid homage, and asked him why he wasn’t sitting in the shade. The Buddha replied, “While my relatives are alive, they

¹ *Kakacūpama Sutta*, *Majjhimanikāya*, Sutta 21.

provide me with protection and comfort, like that shady tree.” The king understood the Buddha’s meaning, and turned back his army.

What a noble example! How would we react if we knew that someone was planning to attack and kill our own relatives? Could we find some diplomatic approach like that to avoid bloodshed?

It is barely possible for ordinary people to respond in such a skilful way. We need to overcome our anger before we can see clearly enough to find the right way to deal with aggression — a way that is beneficial for both disputing parties. The first factor of the Noble Eightfold Path is right view. To see clearly what is for our own benefit, for the benefit of others, and for the benefit of both, we need to establish right view.

Remorse and Forgiveness

August 15th 2015 was the 70th Anniversary of Victory over Japan, commonly referred to as VJ-day. There was much discussion on a Buddhist forum that I visit whether the current US President should apologize to the Japanese for the dropping of the atomic bombs that led to the surrender of the Japanese seventy years ago. At the same time, there were several items in the media asking for the Japanese to apologize to the Korean “comfort women” who were abused by the Japanese soldiers during the war.

Some people think that such apologies are necessary to bring about reconciliation. My personal view is that such apologies are meaningless, and do nothing to address the divisions among generations far removed from the terrible events of that era. Even my generation, which is the one from shortly after the end of World War II, had no involvement in those events, and whatever we have learnt about them is coloured by the way that history was written about those events — mostly by the victors. We could not possibly understand how those personally involved feared for their lives at the time, and did manifold evil deeds misguided by propaganda and coerced by powerful leaders who had control over them.

Those younger than us, who are the descendants of that post-war generation, will feel even less responsible for the events of World War II. It is vital to study history to learn from former mistakes, but there is nothing that an apology can do to compensate the victims who suffered during that time. There might be a valid case for exchanging [Japanese Military Yen](#) for modern currency, or returning

stolen works of art to their rightful owners, but what does a public apology achieve?

Those old people who suffered directly can benefit from studying the Buddha's teaching on how to let go of the past, while living in the present, mindful that whatever we do in the present has consequences for the future. Dwelling with a mind overwhelmed by sorrow or ill-will has no benefit. If one receives no apology for the wrongs perpetrated by others, do not let it ruin your own happiness. Being a victim of a crime is a *result* of past kamma, which is called *vipāka* in Pāli, and there is nothing that anyone can do to prevent kamma from bearing fruit if its time is ripe. Even the Buddha had to suffer due to the fruition of past unwholesome kamma on several occasions during his lifetime, and the Buddha was unable to prevent the murder of his own Chief Disciple, *Mahā-moggallāna*, when his past evil kamma of murdering his parents in a previous life had to give its fatal results.

Remorse and Right View

It is very likely that imperfect human beings will sometimes do unwholesome deeds due to the force of circumstances. Even in times of peace, good people are sometimes overwhelmed by lust, anger, or jealousy. A story from the *Dhammapada Commentary* will serve to illustrate the importance of remorse regarding doing evil deeds.

A couple were shipwrecked on an island of birds and survived into their old age by eating eggs and chicks. However, they felt not the slightest tinge of remorse about killing the chicks and eating the eggs. In the time of the Buddha, the man was reborn as *Prince Bodhi*, and his wife of that time again became his wife in that existence. Although they had been married for several years, they had no children, and wishing for blessings, they invited the Buddha and the Saṅgha for a meal. Their belief was that if holy men stepped on white cloths in their house they would get a child, so Prince Bodhi had the floors of the palace covered with white cloths.

When the Buddha arrived at the door of the palace, he did not enter even when invited three times by the prince. Venerable Ānanda looked at the Buddha, and guessing the reason, he told Prince Bodhi to have the white cloths removed. After the meal the Buddha told the prince and his wife about the events of their previous life together, and explained that if they had felt remorse for their actions at any

period during their previous life, they would not have remained childless in the current existence. However, as they had never felt any remorse at all they were destined to remain childless.

There are several lessons to learn about kamma from this story. Firstly, the law of kamma is not fatalism. Once a deed has been done, it is going to give a result, but its effects can be mitigated. A cricket ball may be dodged or deflected with a bat, a bullet may be stopped by a bullet-proof vest, but a missile is difficult to intercept even with another missile. If a large meteorite is heading our way there is nothing that can be done to prevent its impact, but one can still get out of its way if one knows that it is coming. Secondly, if an evil deed is repeated again and again, without any inhibition or remorse, its power accumulates. Thirdly, if one's view is wrong, and one sees nothing wrong with doing evil deeds, the consequences are more serious. This may seem counter-intuitive, but it is true, and ignorance is no defence. The example given in the [Debate of King Milinda](#) is of getting burned more severely if one picks up a red-hot iron ball without knowing it is hot, as opposed to picking it up knowingly.

If we ever do evil deeds we should acknowledge them, at the very least to ourselves if not to the victim or to a spiritual preceptor. The Buddha said that it rains hard on what is covered, it does not rain hard on what is open. There is a ceremony that the monks perform at the end of the Rains Retreat, called the Invitation Ceremony (*Pavāraṇā*), where the monks invite others to admonish them if they have seen, heard, or suspected them of committing any offence against the Vinaya rules that has not been disclosed.

Asking for Forgiveness

There is no need to apologize for the evil deeds done by others, but if one has personally done harm to others it is very helpful to ask them for forgiveness. This benefits both parties. If the injured party is willing to forgive the offence or harm caused, the parties can be reconciled and become friends again. If not, at least it will lighten the burden of remorse and guilt for the one who did wrong.

The wicked monk [Devadatta](#) did many evil deeds during his life time, but during the final moments of his life he had sincere remorse and took refuge in the Buddha. The Buddha predicted that in the distant future, after suffering in hell for aeons, he will become a

Solitary Buddha. Prince *Ajātasattu*, who conspired with Devadatta, and killed his own father, was greatly remorseful regarding his own evil deeds. His evil kamma would inevitably bear fruit after his death, but after he acknowledged his fault to the Buddha, he was able to sleep peacefully again. According to the Commentaries he will also become a Solitary Buddha in the distant future.

Wrong Views

To understand right view, we need to know about wrong views. There are many kinds of wrong view. All are harmful, but some are more dangerous than others. Later I will discuss the heretical views that are especially dangerous, but I will begin with two wrong views that are almost universal in the world—eternalism and annihilationism.

Eternalism (*sassatadiṭṭhi*)

1. The first wrong view is that the self is indestructible, that it exists forever. This is eternalism. Its adherents hold that although the physical body is destroyed at death, the soul or self passes on to another body and continues to exist there. Those who are firmly attached to this belief cannot hope for spiritual progress. This wrong view is a major impediment to the realisation of nibbāna. Although it is not clung to firmly by well-informed Buddhists, one cannot remove it completely until one realises nibbāna and becomes a Stream-winner.

Annihilationism (*ucchedadiṭṭhi*)

2. Opposed to eternalism is annihilationism. According to this belief, the ego-entity only exists until the dissolution of the body, after which it is annihilated. These days this belief is very common because materialists reject the idea of a future life on the grounds that it cannot be proved scientifically. Annihilationism has become popular because of the rejection of traditional beliefs, distrust of religious leaders, and due to a strong desire to enjoy sensual pleasures in the present life. Buddhists are also atheists, *i.e.* they do not believe in an Almighty God or Creator. However, they are not annihilationists because they do believe in kamma and rebirth. According to the Buddha's teaching, mind is the forerunner, mind is the chief, and all things are mind-made.¹

¹ Dhp vv 1-2.

There is neither an immortal soul, nor annihilation after death. Buddhism denies the existence of any permanent ego-entity, but it recognises that the psychophysical process is conditioned by the law of cause and effect. There is continuity of a process, not of a person or being. Causes such as ignorance give rise to effects such as mental-formations (*saṅkhārā*). Mental formations in turn give rise to consciousness, and so forth. Death means the final dissolution of the psychophysical organism, which is subject to disintegration. However, death is not annihilation. Due to defilements, and conditioned by kamma, physical and mental events take place in unbroken succession as before, in a new rebirth into any of the six realms of existence.

Rebirth is neither the transmigration of a soul nor the transfer of mind and matter from one life to another. The physical and mental phenomena arise continually and always pass away. Death destroys all mind and matter completely, but new psychophysical phenomena of existence arise in a new life, and these are causally related to those in the previous life. The rebirth-consciousness and other psychophysical factors arise as a result of the attachment to any vision or sign (*nimitta*) relating to one's kamma or future life at the moment of one's death.

Since there is no self, it is a mistake to believe in an immortal soul that survives death, but it is equally wrong to speak of annihilation. The psychophysical process will continue as long as it is not free from defilements.

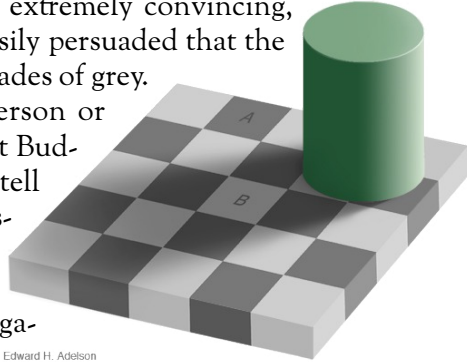
Self-view (*sakkāyadiṭṭhi*)

3. A third wrong view, which is almost universal even among Buddhists, is the belief in a self or soul. Buddhists have been taught that the so-called self is illusory, but unless they have practised insight meditation to a considerable extent, the belief will persist. It is not entirely removed until the meditator realises nibbāna and becomes a Stream-winner, but a diligent meditator can gain insight into the Buddha's teaching through direct personal experience. It is similar to the case of those who know how magic tricks are performed. If one does not know how illusionists perform their art, their tricks are extremely convincing. If one knows the secret, then one is not deceived, but the illusion is still very effective.

Look at this optical illusion. The two squares marked as A and B are the same shade of grey. Though I have told you this, you may not

believe me. The illusion is extremely convincing, and some people are not easily persuaded that the two squares are identical shades of grey.

However, an intelligent person or someone who had faith that Buddhist monks do not usually tell lies, will make a proper investigation of the image to see if what I say is true or not. If you have done that investigation, you will know without



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any doubt that what I say is true. However, the illusion remains just as convincing as before. The mind is completely deceived by the shadows and contrast.

It is similar with self-view. The illusion is deeply rooted at the level of perception, so no amount of reading of Buddhist literature or listening to Dhamma talks will make much difference. We may be fully convinced on the intellectual level that the Buddha was Fully Enlightened and that his teaching is flawless, but that does not eradicate self-view. There is only one way to remove this serious error, and that is through practising insight meditation — seriously and intensively, not casually or occasionally.

The mind is exceedingly rapid. Without practising meditation seriously it won't be possible for the average person to see through the illusion of self. Egoism is too deeply rooted and the belief in a self or person, "I" or "You," is too convincing. The average person identifies strongly with his or her nationality or racial group. National pride, racial prejudice, and narrow-mindedness have a fertile breeding ground as long as this very serious error of self-view is not dissolved through the practice of insight meditation. It is a dangerous error because it takes the impermanent to be permanent, the unsatisfactory to be satisfactory, and that which is devoid of self to be a self. Anyone still holding this view will expend most of their energy in the pursuit of sensual pleasures. A monk may not pursue coarse sensual pleasures such as sex, music, or food, but he will still be striving to satisfy the ego by seeking praise and status. If he is lacking in basic morality, then he will seek material gain such as money, property, and other things that are unsuitable for one who claims to be a renunciate.

Among Buddhists as well as non-Buddhists, there are many degrees of ignorance regarding this so-called self. Even among well-informed Buddhists who have studied the Buddha's teachings in depth, the illusion may persist and remain strong due to lack of insight into the workings of the mental and physical process. An uneducated person who has practised insight meditation effectively will have a better understanding than a learned person who has not practised meditation, because insight arises from direct experience of reality, not from conceptual thought.

Non-dhamma (*adhamma*)

It is now over 2,500 years since the Buddha passed away, and his teaching has spread to many parts of the world. Over the centuries, due to contact with other religions, and the natural process of decay that is inherent in all conditioned things, many heretical views have infiltrated into the Buddhist religion. In the West, if we use the word 'heresy' it tends to conjure up pictures of people being tortured on racks and burnt at the stake, so it is better to call it non-dhamma (*adhamma*). Buddhists don't torture heretics. They are compassionate, or at least they should be if they are sincere followers of the Buddha. The meaning of heresy is "any opinion or doctrine at variance with the official or orthodox position."

If one says that the Buddha taught what he did not teach, or that he practised what he did not practise, then that is a heresy. Similarly, if one says that he did not teach what he did teach, or did not practise what he did practise, then that is also heresy. However, for the benefit of those over-sensitive people who are afraid of being burnt at the stake if we disagree with them, we will refer to heresy as "non-dhamma."

If a person maintains, "The Shuraṅgama Sutra is definitely the word of the Buddha," he will be regarded as teaching non-dhamma by those who maintain, "The Shuraṅgama Sutra is definitely not the word of the Buddha." If someone says, "To be a compassionate Buddhist, you must be a vegetarian," they will be regarded as teaching non-dhamma by someone who understands according to what the Buddha Kassapa said in the Āmagandha Sutta that purity and impurity do not come from what we put into our mouths, but from what comes out of our mouths.

“Taking life, beating, wounding, binding, stealing, lying, deceiving, worthless knowledge, adultery; this is stench. Not the eating of meat.”¹

Dhamma and non-dhamma are farther apart than the sky and the earth. It is vital that one studies the Dhamma carefully and rightly understands, “This is the teaching of the Buddha,” or “This is not the teaching of the Buddha.” If one firmly accepts non-dhamma as Dhamma, one will accumulate a great deal of unwholesome kamma defending that wrong view, and criticising those who hold right views.

For example, the Dalai Lama says, “Those Arahants who have conquered the disturbing emotions are in a temporary state. They have not attained a final state. Due to the remaining obscurations they regard body and speech as ‘mine.’ Even though they are no longer motivated by disturbing emotions, the cognitive obscuration, which is a sense of a self, an ‘I’ and ‘mine’ manifests in their physical and verbal activities. Their conquests and achievements for their own sake are temporary. They are not capable of benefiting others ultimately.”

This teaching — which originates from the Mahāyāna Sutras — is non-dhamma. It is diametrically opposed to the teachings in the Tipiṭaka that the Arahants have reached the final goal, and done what should be done. It is also diametrically opposed to the teaching that says that all of the Noble Ones are worthy of offerings, worthy of gifts, worthy of reverential salutation, an incomparable field of merit for the world. That is, an offering to any Noble One, or paying homage, or doing service for them is of immense benefit for the pious Buddhist who has faith in the teaching of the Buddha. Even the Stream-winner is completely free from self-view. Stream-winners do not regard body and speech as ‘mine.’ Their conquests and achievements are irreversible and final. They will not fall back again to a lower stage of being an ordinary ignorant worldling, wandering in *saṃsāra* indefinitely. Within seven rebirths at the most, they will realise the final cessation of suffering with the attainment of Arahantship.

What the Dalai Lama says is non-dhamma. It is very harmful to the interests of those who would make offerings or pay homage to Noble Ones. It is harmful to those who would make offerings or pay homage to *stūpas* that are built over the remains of Noble Ones, because the

¹ Sn. v 245: “Pāṇātipāto vadhachedabandhanam, theyyam musāvādo nikaivañcanāni ca. Ajjhakuttam parādārasevanā, esāmagandho na hi maṃsabhojanam.”

Buddha said that they are worthy of homage (*arahaṃ*). Even if one pays homage or makes offerings to an ordinary monk or nun who is still a worldling, because they are wearing the robes of the Noble Ones, and maintaining the traditions of the Noble Ones, then one makes a great deal of merit by thinking about the noble attributes of the Noble Ones, such as having few wishes, being easily supportable, modest, honest, and so forth. Therefore, saying that the Arahants are not capable of benefiting others ultimately is a serious wrong view.

As the Buddha taught in the *Abhāsita Sutta* (What was not said):

“Monks, these two slander the Tathāgata. Which two? He who explains what was not said or spoken by the Tathāgata as said or spoken by the Tathāgata. And he who explains what was said or spoken by the Tathāgata as not said or spoken by the Tathāgata. These are two who slander the Tathāgata.”¹

Slandering ordinary, unenlightened beings by saying that they said what they did not say is unwholesome kamma. Slandering the Buddha is much more serious, and harmful to many people.

Pointing out non-dhamma as non-dhamma is not slander. It is not unwholesome kamma. Clarifying and distinguishing what is Dhamma and what is non-dhamma is the meritorious deed of teaching Dhamma. It is not a personal attack on the Dalai Lama. It is his teaching that is at fault, not the person. He is just repeating what he has been taught from a young age, without careful reflection as to whether it is really true or not. What you must decide for your own well-being and happiness is what is Dhamma and what is non-dhamma. Not who is right and who is wrong. Your decision must not be biased or prejudiced because you like one person or dislike another.

Are Arahants of any benefit to others or not? That is what you need to decide. If you could study the Dhamma with an Arahant, would that be beneficial to you or not? If you could pay homage or offer almsfood to a genuine living Arahant, would that be beneficial to you or not?

Those who are not Arahants teach Dhamma with a mind defiled by greed, hatred, and delusion. The Dhamma is still good, whoever teaches it, but won't the teaching of an Arahant be really lucid and clear, powerful and memorable, due to the Arahant's clear insight and perfect mental purity? Would listening to that pure Dhamma

¹ A.i.59.

teaching be beneficial or not? Would it lead to life-long happiness and spiritual progress, or to life-long misery and spiritual decline?

Is it really true, as the Dalai Lama says, that “Arahants are not capable of benefiting others ultimately?” If it is false, should we criticise that teaching of the Dalai Lama or not? If it is false, does that mean that all of the Dalai Lama’s teaching is false, or only some of it? Is the Dalai Lama telling lies, or merely speaking falsehoods?

We should be fearless when deciding what is Dhamma and what is not; when saying what is Dhamma and what is not. If we are doubtful about what is Dhamma and what is not Dhamma, we should remove our doubts, shouldn’t we? That can be done by careful, systematic study, and through the practice of meditation. Study, practice, and realisation.

Defeating the Enemy

To remove the illusion of self-view is not at all easy. We have to fight the holy war to defeat the enemy, who is called Māra. Māra is an illusionist who deceives people and holds them under his control. Because they are controlled by Māra, or under the spell of illusion, most people do not consider it necessary or desirable to renounce sensual pleasures, and to spend many days, weeks, months, or years in meditation centres and monasteries. They wallow in the temporary and hollow satisfaction afforded by sensual pleasures, praise, status, and fame. If a monk or experienced meditator does persuade them to take up the practice of insight meditation, when the time comes for them to go to the meditation centre, Māra intervenes and persuades them not to go. Something else more important suddenly crops up. They get sick, they have to help their friend, they have to take the dog to the vet. Whether the excuse is obviously lame or apparently genuine, you can be sure that Māra will prevent them from practising meditation.

Others are a bit more determined. They do actually get to the meditation centre, but after a few hours or a few days, Māra comes along and urges them to give up. “Why do we have to practise so long. I need to take a break. The Buddha’s way is the Middle Way; striving hard like this is self-torture.” Unless the teacher can convince them to persist with their meditation practice, these people soon give up and go back home. If the teacher is successful, and they continue to strive hard to the best of their ability, Māra will not go away, but will continue

to obstruct the meditator's progress at every opportunity. It is this battle with the internal enemy that is the true holy war. To fight this holy war we need great courage, determination, and intelligence. However, unlike other so-called holy wars, this one does no harm to anyone — not even to oneself. The harder one fights to overcome Māra, the stronger one's mind becomes. Even if one loses some battles, and Māra gains the upper-hand, the courageous meditator never gives up, and learns from his or her defeats to become a better holy warrior.

Five Kinds of Māra

1. Māra Devaputta

This is the powerful deity who tried to obstruct the Bodhisatta on the night of his Enlightenment. He resides in the highest realm of the sensual plane, Paranimmitavasavatti devaloka, or the realm of those who delight in the creations of others. Those who, due to many meritorious deeds done in the past, are able to indulge in whatever sensual pleasures they like, who enjoy robust health, and have many friends and supporters, will find it very difficult to see the truth of suffering. They will be disinclined to listen to teachings about impermanence, suffering, and the renunciation of pleasure. Not only will they not incline towards such teachings, they will be strongly opposed to them. Māra devaputta is like any individual who has great power and influence — he does not want to see that influence undermined. In the human realm, political leaders, military dictators, or industrial oligarchs who hold great influence, power, or wealth, are vehemently opposed to anything that might weaken their position.

2. Kilesa Māra

The mental defilements that arise to obstruct us whenever we try to do wholesome deeds such as giving charity, undertaking and observing morality, or cultivating meditation. If the eye is clouded by a cataract, if the air is filled with smoke, or if it is night and there is no light, we cannot see clearly. If the ear is full of wax, or distracted by extraneous noises, we cannot hear clearly what we wish to hear. Likewise, if the mind is clouded by mental defilements like lust, anger, conceit, bigotry, or dullness, we cannot understand clearly. To know things as they truly are requires mental purity and deep concentration.

3. Abhisāṅkhāra Māra

These are volitional activities or mental formations (kamma). Although wholesome kamma gives agreeable results such as long life, good health, prosperity, and so forth, it prolongs the cycle of existence. The pleasant results of wholesome kamma help to conceal the truth of suffering, and habitual busy activity keeps the mind constantly restless and confused, such that it cannot always clearly distinguish what is wholesome from what is not. However, the wholesome deed of insight meditation does not prolong the cycle of existence, as its aim is to reveal the truth of suffering.

4. Khandha Māra

As long as we are reborn with the aggregates of existence, then suffering will continue. The body demands food and water, clothing and shelter, care and attention, and the mind demands new sensory contacts to keep it stimulated. As long as we are attached to the aggregates, we will be making fresh kamma.

5. Maccu Māra

Life is short, and there are many things to be done by one born into this human realm. When we are first born we do not even know how to eat, clean our own bodies, or walk. Then we have to learn how to speak, read, and write. After that, we have to learn many kinds of secular knowledge and skills just to survive. If all goes well, we may reach a mature age without mishap, and get a precious opportunity to hear the Buddha's teaching. If we are wise enough to understand it, we may gain faith in it and want to practise to gain liberation from rebirth. However, finding time to practise meditation seriously is difficult, so many Buddhists get old and feeble without so much as setting one foot on the practical path of mindfulness. All too often, death intervenes, rebirth inevitably follows, and the process begins all over again. If, as a result of unwholesome kamma, one is reborn in the lower realms, the precious opportunity to practise the Buddha's teachings to gain liberation from suffering is lost. If, as a result of wholesome kamma, one is reborn in the human realm, one must again learn how to eat, walk, speak, read, and earn a living all over again. If reborn in celestial realms, one may still be heedless and negligent regarding the real practice leading to nibbāna.

Death is finally overcome only when one becomes an Arahant. The Arahants are no longer afraid of death, having eradicated all attachment to the aggregates. They have done what ought to be done by one born human.

The meditator must fight the mental defilements, notably the five hindrances that obstruct the development of concentration. Sensual desire, ill-will, sloth, restlessness, and doubt are the five hindrances that prevent the development of concentration. Without deep concentration and mental purity it will be impossible to gain insight. Whenever any one of these five hindrances appears, the meditator should note it with mindfulness to dispel it. The five powers of confidence, effort, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom are the weapons to use to defeat the defilements. The pure-hearted meditator who is always inclined towards nibbāna will conquer the other kinds of Māra too.

The Armies of Māra

Sensual Pleasure

To take up the practice of meditation in earnest, one must first renounce indulgence in sensual pleasures. Although it is not necessary to become a monk or a nun, if one wishes to develop concentration it is essential to observe chastity and to avoid entertainments during the period of practice. It is impossible that anyone, even a monk or nun, could gain deep concentration and insight while still indulging in, longing for, and thinking about sensual pleasures of various kinds.

Discontent

At first, meditation is difficult. When the mind that is accustomed to enjoying sensual pleasures is withdrawn from and no longer allowed to follow its usual habits, there will be a reaction. It is like taking a piece of red-hot iron from a fire, and plunging it into cold water. It won't be quiet, but will react violently. However, as one develops concentration and mindfulness, the mind will gradually become cool, then there is no longer such a strong reaction. After some time, the meditator will begin to enjoy continuous meditation, and won't want to indulge in sensual pleasures at all. It is like someone on a long journey, who is resting in the shade of a tree. He

or she is reluctant to go out again into the hot sunshine. Or, it is like someone who has had a bath and put on clean clothes. He or she does not wish to work and get dirty and sweaty again.

“Old habits die hard” as the saying goes. If one has indulged in sensual pleasures excessively and for a long time, one will have to work very hard to overcome discontent. If one has lived a modest and scrupulous moral life for many years, it will not be so difficult.

Hunger and Thirst

Everyone needs to eat and drink, even a diligent meditator. However, we don't need to eat three meals a day. A meditator should be content with two meals or just one. The Buddha recommended that one meal a day was the best for good health. Food should be taken with mindfulness, not indulging in the pleasure of tasting and eating, but reflecting wisely so that one eats just for the sake of nutrition.

Craving

Craving is the proximate cause of suffering, and it has many facets. Even when the meditator has overcome the stronger forms of craving for sensual pleasures, and craving for this or that kind of food, he or she may start longing for other things. He or she may hear about another meditation centre, or another teacher, or another style of meditation practice. The meditator may start getting attached to blissful states, or on hearing other meditators reporting their experiences in meditation to the teacher, he or she may start longing for similar experiences.

One should remember that the essence of meditation practice is to remain mindful of the reality in the present moment. Unusual experiences and insights will arise when the conditions are ripe, and not before. If you long to make good progress, then make good efforts. Longing for, thinking about, and wishing for special experiences does not lead to them; working hard to develop constant mindfulness and deep concentration does.

Sloth and Torpor

Everyone needs to sleep. Even diligent meditators need some sleep. Doctors recommend that one needs eight hours a day, but doctors don't meditate diligently. Meditation teachers recommend that one sleeps six hours a day at the most, and that four hours is sufficient for a really

diligent meditator. How much sleep a meditator needs will depend on how good their concentration is. Individuals have a wide range of abilities. A beginner may struggle to get by on only six hours sleep, while a meditator who has attained deep insights may need very little or no sleep at all for several days at certain stages on the Path. If you listen to Māra, he will always tell you that you need more sleep. A holy warrior should always be on the alert, and ready to get up and start fighting.

Fear

At the higher stages of insight, one needs to encounter unusual and unpleasant experiences. When entering unfamiliar territory, everyone feels apprehension and fear. The final goal of the practice is to overcome aging, disease, and death, and everyone is afraid of death. If one gets some disease, it may get worse or it may be cured by the body's natural immunity after some time. One can call a doctor and take medicine, but not all diseases are cured by medicine. There is no medical treatment that can prevent one from getting old. Even though one may be very careful about diet, personal hygiene, and exercise, one will still get old, and have to face death eventually. In spite of all the precautions that one may take, one's past kamma may bear fruit at any moment and cause death. A meditator should, therefore, confront fear whenever it arises and rely on their confidence in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha to protect them from danger.

Doubt

Buddhism is unique among religions in that it does not encourage belief. On the contrary, it encourages critical examination and analysis. A meditator should make a thorough investigation and test the theory to see if it works. During the time of the Buddha, a monk named Bhaddāli heard that the Buddha recommended eating only one meal a day. The other monks told him about it, but he liked to eat in the evening too. He reasoned, "I abide in comfort eating whenever I feel hungry, so why should I give up eating in the evening?" Although this was contrary to the training rule laid down for monks not to eat after midday or before dawn of the following day, Bhaddāli thought he knew better. He was overwhelmed by Māra. He doubted that the Buddha's advice would help him to develop concentration and insight. For the entire Rains Retreat, he continued to follow his wrong practice, and

the Buddha said nothing, but after the Rains, the Buddha admonished Bhaddāli and made him realise how attached and lazy he was.

Many meditators are like Bhaddāli. Although meditation teachers recommend that they practise continuously without a break for long periods, they are reluctant to do so. They think that an hour or just half an hour is long enough. Without doubt, meditating for one hour every day will be beneficial and will reduce stress in one's life. However, it won't be nearly enough to gain deep concentration and insight. I hold regular one-day meditation retreats from 7:00 am until 7:00 pm at my centre, but very few meditators come to practise. Yet, twelve hours is only half a day, not even a full day. Some want to practise for only six hours. Perhaps some lazy monks have taught them that prolonged, continuous, and strenuous practice is not following the Middle Way. Definitely they have been defeated by Māra. They are not holy warriors.

Conceit and Ingratitude

If a meditator overcomes the earlier armies of Māra, he or she may gain some results from their practice. He or she may be able to sit for long periods without moving, and may experience blissful mental states, lightness of the body, or other unusual experiences. In some cases, an inexperienced meditator with inadequate scriptural learning may think that enlightenment has already been reached, although it has not. Such meditators become forgetful of their dependence on their teacher. Although their teacher may have been meditating for thirty, forty, or fifty years and they have only practised for five or ten years, they may think that their experience is superior to anything that their teacher knows. Others, even non-meditators, can see that they are conceited, but they themselves cannot see it. They are completely blinded by the light of their own wisdom. Someone who has fallen into this serious error is very difficult to cure. It is one reason why an experienced meditation teacher should be relied upon for guidance. Even an unenlightened teacher with a sound knowledge of the texts is preferable to a teacher who is suffering from excessive conceit.

Gain, Praise, Honour, Undeserved Fame

Some monks seek academic qualifications, as without them it is hard to be appointed as the abbot of a monastery. Others travel abroad to gain degrees at universities under the tutelage of lay Buddhists,

rather than following the traditional monastic training in Dhamma and Vinaya. Such qualifications may be essential for lay people such as doctors and engineers, psychologists and lawyers, but this is the way of the world, not the way of Dhamma. When one follows the way of Dhamma, knowledge and wisdom are the essential qualifications — gain, praise, and fame are dangers to the spiritual life.

Learning the Dhamma in detail is obviously a good thing to do, but the motivation must also be right. The essential thing is to know what the Buddha taught, and then to apply that teaching in one's own life. In teaching meditation and giving Dhamma talks, the speaker should be thinking of the welfare of the audience, otherwise the teaching is corrupted by desire for gain, praise, honour, and fame. What does it matter if only one person is listening, or a thousand?

The number of people in the audience is no measure of the wisdom of the speaker. In this world, the foolish far outnumber the wise. Twenty-eight million viewers used to watch [Morecambe and Wise](#), but who among them was truly wise? Such comedians who entertain people may think that they are spreading joy and laughter, but that kind of happiness is worthless. In fact, it is worse than useless as it encourages stronger attachment and greater delusion.

When teaching the Dhamma, if one strives to be popular by telling stories and jokes, one may become famous, but at what cost? If desire for praise and fame is the motivation, then the purpose of Dhamma is lost and the teaching becomes corrupt. The suttas are not lacking in humour, but no comedy can be found there. Read some of the suttas such as the *Payāsi Sutta*,¹ and see if you can understand what I mean by the difference between humour and comedy. There, the Venerable Kumara Kassapa teases Prince Payāsi, making fun of his attachment to his wrong views. The purpose is to make him let go of those wrong views, which will be for his benefit. If we use humour in the right way, it is a skilful means — but we shouldn't misuse it. Māra's army of wishing for praise and fame is hard to overcome.

Venerable Sāriputta was praised by the Buddha as the wisest of his disciples, as the one who was the most capable to teach the Dhamma after himself. When the Venerable Sāriputta heard good reports about the Venerable Puṇṇa Mantāṇiputta, he went to see him to have some conversation with him, travelling on foot in stages the long distance from

¹ D.ii.320, Sutta 23.

Sāvattī to Rājagaha. Their conversation is found in the Rathavināta Sutta — The Discourse on the Relay of Chariots.¹ The two monks rejoiced in each others questions and answers. Later, the Buddha praised Puṇṇa Mantāniputta as the best expounder of the Dhamma among his disciples.

This is the nature of wise teachers. They recognise and praise the good in others, while being modest about their own knowledge and abilities. Inferior teachers think highly of their learning, jealously guard their disciples, and discourage them from practising with other teachers.

Self-praise and Disparaging Others

Someone who is not well-rooted in the practice will often resort to self-praise and the disparagement of others. It is due to lack of self-confidence. Actually, his or her practice may not be so bad, but due to his fault-finding nature it never seems to be good enough. It is only human to have faults and defects. If we openly admit them, then we can work to remove them. If we conceal our faults, and pay more attention to the faults of others, it will be difficult to make any further progress.

If we have acquired firm confidence in the teachings of the Buddha, and are sincerely striving to observe precepts, whether five, eight, ten, or 227 precepts, then we are heading in the right direction. The spiritual training is a gradual path, and a life-time job. Only those who strive with the utmost determination can reach the final goal in this very life. It is vital not to underestimate the task, but one also needs to rejoice in what has been accomplished already. If we have a realistic appraisal of our virtues as well as our vices, then we won't feel the need to praise ourselves or disparage others.

If we wish to criticise, we should only criticise attachment, aversion, or wrong views. Don't blame the person, lay the blame squarely on the shoulders of mental defilements. Any person who has taken rebirth in this world still has mental defilements, unless they have eradicated them by developing the Noble Eightfold Path, until reaching the final goal of Arahantship. Unless we are Arahants, we all deserve to be criticised.

“This, Atula, is an old saying; it is not one of today only:
They blame those who are silent, they blame those who
speak too much. Those speaking little they also blame.
No one avoids blame in this world. (Dhp v 277)”

¹ M.i.157ff, Sutta 24.

Right Views

Opposed to wrong view is right view (*sammā diṭṭhi*), which is the first factor of the Noble Eightfold Path as taught in the Buddha's First Discourse, the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*. As with wrong view, there are many grades of right view. In brief, it means to see things as they truly are — to understand things in accordance with reality. Prior to attaining the first stage of the path and becoming a Stream-winner, this right view is called mundane right view. At the moment of attaining the path and realising nibbāna, when right view becomes mature, it is known as supramundane right view.

To acquire the mundane right view one should study the Buddha's teaching, question learned Buddhist monks and scholars regarding the meaning, and reflect on that teaching using one's own native wisdom and intelligence to see if it accords with one's own personal experience. This process of cultivating right view is the wholesome deed of straightening one's view (*diṭṭhūjukamma*). It is vital not to accept any teachings at face value, but to examine them carefully, as one would if invited to purchase gold or gems.

A misconception among some today is that only meditation practice is important when it comes to understanding the Buddha's teaching, and that study is next to useless. The story of "Empty-headed Poṭṭhila" is often quoted in support of this view. This elder in the time of the Buddha was learned in the teachings and used to instruct five hundred bhikkhus. After receiving instruction from him, many of his students went to the forest, meditated, and gained Arahantship. The Elder Poṭṭhila, however, was too busy teaching to do much meditation himself, and so gained no special insight knowledge or attainments. When he met the Buddha, the Buddha referred to him as "Tuccho Poṭṭhila — Empty-headed Poṭṭhila." The elder took the hint, learnt meditation from a young novice who was an Arahant, and gained Arahantship himself.

It is true that developing mindfulness and wisdom is the only way to gain realisation of the Dhamma, and to put an end to suffering. However, if we don't have respect for learning we may practise wrongly, and instead of gaining nibbāna, we will go far astray from the right path. The pupils of Poṭṭhila who became Arahants first studied the Dhamma respectfully under him, and then practised meditation. Study should come first, then correct and systematic practice, which will lead to realisation only if done with sufficient diligence.

Satipaṭṭhāna — The Only Way

Correct and systematic practice refers to the development of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*) with the purpose of gaining insight (*vipassanā*). The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta is the Buddha's most important teaching on meditation. There are two versions of it: one in the Long Discourses¹ and one in the Middle Length Sayings.² We should study this discourse in some detail if we wish to cultivate mindfulness and gain insight.

It should not be misunderstood that there is only one way to practise meditation — there are many different ways to cultivate mindfulness, and there are many other discourses on meditation. By “the Only Way” it means that the goal cannot be reached without right mindfulness and the other seven factors of the Noble Eightfold Path.

The discourse was addressed to bhikkhus, but is suitable for all who aspire to gain insight and realise nibbāna. The Commentary says that the discourse was given among the Kurū people because even the servants and workers there were in the habit of practising mindfulness. Anyone who did not practise mindfulness was liable to be criticised for being negligent.

Introduction to the Discourse

In the introduction to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta the Buddha said:

“Ekāyano ayaṃ, bhikkhave, maggo sattānaṃ visuddhiyā, sokaparidevānaṃ samatikkamāya, dukkhadomanassānaṃ atthaṅgamāya, ñāyassa adhigamāya, nibbānassa sacchikiriyāya, yadidaṃ cattāro satipaṭṭhānā.”

“*Ekāyano maggo*” means that this is the only path, the most direct way, or the Noble Eightfold Path that culminates in the realisation of nibbāna (*nibbānassa sacchikiriyāya*), which is the cessation of suffering.

“*Sattānaṃ visuddhiyā*” means “for the purification of beings.” All human beings and other beings who are not yet Arahants have minds that are defiled by greed, hatred, delusion, conceit, jealousy, pride, avarice, contempt, wrong views, and many other kinds of mental impurities. It is these mental impurities that prevent us from seeing things as they truly are. Although we may be aware of these mental

¹ D.ii.289, Sutta 19. This longer version expands on the Four Noble Truths in a little more detail, otherwise it is the same as the version in the Majjhimanikāya.

² M.i.55, Sutta 10.

impurities within us, it is difficult to remove them. The impurities that we are not even aware of are even more difficult to remove.

“Soka” means grief, and “*paridevanaṃ*” means lamentation or weeping. When living beings have to face physical and mental pain caused by injury, disease, loss of loved ones, status, or precious possessions, blame and criticism, *etc.*, they grieve and lament because they are not yet free from attachment to pleasure and aversion to pain.

“*Dukkha*” means physical pain, “*domanassa*” means mental pain. “*Atthaṅgamāya*” means extinguishing. In Pāḷi, the setting of the sun is referred to as “*suriya atthaṅgama.*” In a hot country like Bihar in Northern India, where the Buddha mostly lived and taught, the sun is very hot and oppressive. When the sun sets, therefore, it is a great relief, unlike in cold climates where sunshine is delightful. All living beings recoil from pain, and no one wants to be sad. For beings who delight in pleasure and happiness, pain and sorrow are oppressive.

“*Nāyassa adhiḅamāya*” means “attaining the right method.” Learning to meditate is similar to learning to skate or ride a bicycle, but much more difficult. When you are learning some new skill like skating or cycling, you keep getting it wrong, and keep losing your balance. Keeping the mind fully aware of the realities arising and passing away in the present moment is a skill that takes a lot of training and self-discipline. All too often, the mind wanders and gets lost in conceptual thought. It roams to the past and future, delighting in memories, plans, or speculations.

Thinking is not the right method — thinking is a mental process that a meditator must be mindful of to understand its true nature. It is unnecessary and impossible (except in deep absorption) to stop thinking. If you have eyes you will see, if you have ears you will hear, and if you have a mind you will have thoughts. The right method is to be mindful at the moment of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, or thinking. This awareness of whatever mental or physical phenomenon is arising in the present moment is right mindfulness, which leads gradually to understanding things as they truly are.

“*Yadidaṃ cattāro satipaṭṭhānā*” means, “that is the four foundations of mindfulness. The introduction makes it clear that the only way to overcome suffering is to cultivate and establish mindfulness. The discourse continues by elaborating on these four foundations of mindfulness.

Contemplation of the Body

What are these four foundations of mindfulness? They are: the body, feelings, thoughts, and mental objects. The chapter on mindfulness of the body starts with the section on mindfulness of the respiration (*ānāpānasati*), and continues with sections on mindfulness of the four postures (walking, standing, sitting, and lying down), clear comprehension of daily activities, perception of repulsiveness of the body parts, analysis of the four elements (earth, water, fire, and air), and the cemetery contemplations on dead bodies.

A meditator does not need to practise all of these, but should choose a method suited to his or her temperament. The discourse was delivered for the benefit of a large number of monks from different groups who had already been meditating in the forest using different meditation objects for contemplation as instructed by their teachers. The Mahāsi Sayādaw taught the method called “Analysis of the four elements” (*dhātu-manasikāra*). When sitting, the meditator begins by observing the element of motion (*vāyo dhātu*) in the rising and falling movements of the abdomen while breathing in and out. The air element manifests as pressure or movement, the earth element manifests as hardness or softness, and the fire element manifests as heat or cold.

Where should one meditate? The discourse advises, “Having gone to a forest, to the root of a tree, or to an empty place.” An experienced meditator may be able to maintain mindfulness anywhere, even in a crowded or noisy place, but it is advisable to choose a quiet place where one will not be disturbed. To develop concentration and mindfulness takes a lot of time and effort, if there are too many distractions one will be easily discouraged, so one should go to a meditation centre or monastery where conditions are more conducive to the development of concentration.

How should one meditate? The discourse says, “Ardent (*ātāpī*), clearly comprehending (*sampajāno*), and mindful (*satimā*).” The meaning of “*ātāpī*” is with resolute, courageous, and strenuous effort to overcome all obstacles that arise. If one allows the mind to roam freely it will go wherever it likes, following sensual thoughts, dwelling on negative emotions, and so forth. If a meditator tries to restrain the mind and limit attention to only a few simple objects in the present moment, the untrained mind rebels and becomes stubborn. One must follow the teacher’s instructions to discipline this rebel-

lious mind and so overcome obstructions such as physical pain, drowsiness, restlessness, and doubt.

A meditator should behave very differently to an average person. He or she should move slowly and gently, speaking very little or not at all. Whatever is done, should be done only after reflection, and it should be done clearly comprehending that one is doing it and why — not flustered, busy, or confused like an unmindful person. The meditator's attention should be directed inwardly — that is he or she should be mindful of his or her own body and mind. One cannot be mindful of the past or future, it is only possible to be mindful of the present moment. Even if one remembers something done in the past, or plans to do something in the future, the present reality is just a mental process of remembering or planning. A meditator should be mindful of such mental processes as they occur, if there are no such thoughts, he or she should be mindful of the body in the immediate present.

To make this clearer, let's give a practical example. Suppose that, while sitting and observing the rising and falling movements of the abdomen, the meditator feels an itch on the forehead. An unmindful person would simply scratch it at once. A meditator should not just react. First, he or she should be mindful of the itching sensation and investigate it, observing it until it disappears. If it does not disappear, but only increases and becomes unbearable, then the meditator may scratch it, but in doing so should be mindful of and acknowledge the intention to lift the arm. While lifting the arm *very* slowly, the meditator should keep observing both the intention and the movement. On touching the forehead, know and observe the touching and the scratching movements. Then, on returning the arm to its former relaxed position, be mindful of each and every movement. This is the meaning of "clearly comprehending and mindful." Nothing whatsoever should be done without mindfulness. If a meditator becomes forgetful and fails to be mindful of any movement, he or she loses his or her life. That is, he or she is no longer a meditator, but just an ordinary unmindful and confused person.

Why should one meditate? To understand things as they truly are. Mindfulness is established to the extent necessary for knowledge and insight, so that one dwells detached and clings to nothing. If one is unmindful, then one does not know objects as they really are. Due to contact with any sense object at one of the six sense bases (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, or mind), feeling arises. If one is unmindful of the

feeling, then craving arises. If one is still unmindful of the craving, then attachment arises, then becoming or striving to obtain, keep, and enjoy that object, or — if it is unpleasant — to dispel and destroy it. That striving is kamma, which leads to birth and death. Thus the whole cycle of suffering and rebirth continues without any end in sight.

Contemplation of Feelings

The second chapter of the discourse deals with the contemplation of feelings (*vedanānupassanā*). As noted in the preceding paragraph, feeling is an important link in the cycle of dependent origination that drives the cycle of suffering. Living beings are easily led here and there by feelings, just as a bull is easily led by means of a rope attached to a string through its nose. We like pleasant feelings and recoil from unpleasant feelings. Neutral feelings do not interest us. A meditator should be mindful of all feelings that arise, whether they are physical in origin or mental, whether they are gross or subtle. Not all feelings are detrimental. If a meditator gains some concentration, he or she may enjoy very delightful feelings as a natural result of the absence of mental defilements. Such feelings may encourage a meditator to make more strenuous efforts to reach higher stages of insight. However, if the meditator is unmindful of these very pleasant feelings, and gets attached to them, then progress will stop. When the feelings disappear, the unmindful meditator may get discouraged and give up. At certain stages of insight, a meditator may experience considerable pain and discomfort, or unfamiliar feelings that are disconcerting. If the meditator is not mindful of these feelings, he or she is unable to progress. To progress without interruption, the meditator should just be mindful of all feelings as they occur, maintaining objectivity and equanimity.

Contemplation of Thoughts

The third chapter deals with mindfulness of thoughts (*cittānupassanā*). Some who are new to insight meditation have the misconception that to meditate one must stop thinking. It is not necessary, nor is it even possible for most meditators. Discursive thought will stop only in deep states of concentration. For the average meditator, thoughts will continue to come and go even after many weeks or months of uninterrupted meditation practice. The task of the meditator who is striving for insight is to know these thoughts as they really are in the present

moment, not to make them go away, but to understand their true nature. A lustful thought must be known as it is. An angry thought must be known as it is. A deluded thought must be known as it is, and so on. Whatever kind of thought arises — whether it is beautiful or ugly, selfish or altruistic, it should be known clearly as a mental process.

Contemplation of Mental Objects

The fourth chapter deals with mindfulness of mental objects (*dhammānupassanā*). This chapter is divided into five sections:

1. The Five Hindrances

When a meditator strives to develop mindfulness and concentration, these five mental obstacles will arise when mindfulness is weak. Sensual desires such as memories of sensual pleasures enjoyed in the past, or plans and fantasies about future enjoyments. When pain or noise, heat or cold, hunger and thirst, biting insects, or other irritating things interrupt a meditator's concentration, he or she may become angry or annoyed. This aversion or ill-will is the second hindrance to concentration. When effort is too weak, the meditator will become drowsy and want to take a break or sleep. When effort is too strong, but concentration is weak, a meditator becomes restless and cannot maintain the same posture for long. Lastly, the meditator may entertain doubts about the method, the teacher's ability, or his or her own ability to make progress.

These hindrances are perfectly natural. They are not an indication that something is wrong. On the contrary, they are a sign that the meditator has been making some effort to develop concentration. If a so-called meditator just does whatever he or she wants to do, changing posture or taking a break at the first sign of difficulty, the hindrances will not be obvious. Any fool can sit and day-dream all day long, but to meditate seriously with a sincere desire to gain insight requires both knowledge and wisdom. Acquiring a basic knowledge about meditation is not very hard, one can read a few good books, or listen to the teacher's instructions, but to gain wisdom and skill in meditation takes persistent effort to overcome the five hindrances, whenever they arise.

2. The Five Aggregates

These are physical phenomena, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. A meditator should know about the

arising and passing away of these mental and physical phenomena. For example, when the eye and a visible form make contact, seeing arises. Dependent on whether the perception of the object is beautiful or ugly, feeling arises — whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. A pleasant feeling tends to give rise to craving, whilst an unpleasant feeling tends to give rise to aversion. Following on from that craving or aversion, mental formations (volitional activities) such as planning to obtain or get rid of the object may follow. A meditator should endeavour to be mindful of this entire process, to understand the process and purify the mind from mental defilements.

3. The Six Sense Spheres

The eye and visible objects, the ear and sounds, the nose and odours, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and ideas. The meditator should know all of these as they occur in the present moment to understand how fetters such as attachment and aversion arise and obstruct progress in meditation.

4. The Seven Factors of Enlightenment

These are mindfulness, investigation, energy, joy, tranquillity, concentration, and equanimity. As the meditator continues to make strenuous efforts to overcome the five hindrances, and to clearly know all mental and physical phenomena in the present moment, the mind will gradually become purified. Whenever there are no mental hindrances then these seven factors of enlightenment will begin to manifest. The meditator will become very enthusiastic about the practice, finding joy and serenity from observing the realities in the present moment. Mindfulness and concentration will be keen. Instead of dwelling in aversion to pain and discomfort, or getting excited by pleasure, if any sensations arise, the meditator will investigate them with equanimity.

Making progress in meditation comes down to developing skill in the removal of the five hindrances and in cultivating the seven factors of enlightenment.

5. The Four Noble Truths

The purpose of practising mindfulness is to gain insight, and the culmination of insight is direct knowledge of the Four Noble Truths.

It means right understanding of suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path leading to the cessation of suffering. The final realisation of the path may take only a moment, but to develop the necessary maturity to realise the path takes countless hours of meditation and innumerable moments of insight into the Four Noble Truths. A meditator should strive to dispel the hindrances and to cultivate the factors of enlightenment without thinking too much about gaining insight or the path. When the conditions are right, insight will arise, and this usually happens when one is least expecting it. Just strive to understand the realities in the present moment.

The Promise Made in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta

The discourse concludes by saying that if one practises like this for seven years then one of two results can be expected — the final knowledge of Arahantship or the stage of a Non-returner. Let alone seven years, if one practises like this for one year ... for seven months ... for seven weeks ... for seven days ... even for one day, then one of two results can be expected.

This shows that there is a difference between individuals, that is not all who practise diligently will attain the goal within the same time span, it depends on their perfections (*pāramī*), which means it depends on how mature their spiritual faculties are due to meditation practice in previous lives or earlier in this life. Bāhiya Dāruciriya, who had practised meditation very strenuously during the dispensation of the Buddha Kassapa, was able to attain Arahantship within a finger-snap after listening to the Buddha's brief instructions. The Venerable Koṇḍañña gained the path on listening to the Buddha's first discourse, while his companions did not, but they gained the path on successive days after practising meditation diligently for a short period.

It also depends on whether or not one has obstructive kamma. For example, some people disparage the practice of meditation saying that it is a waste of time, or selfish, or that one can attain enlightenment by merely listening to the Dhamma, or that it is not the Middle Way to practise without a break, to maintain noble silence, or to observe additional precepts. All such speech that discourages others from practising the right path diligently is obstructive kamma. It creates a lot of doubts and negativity, and so inhibits one's own efforts

even after abandoning wrong views and realising that it is necessary to practise diligently. If someone stubbornly follows a wrong path for a long time, they will get very far away from their destination. The naked ascetic **Jambuka** had very heavy obstructive kamma. The Buddha knew this, so he waited until Jambuka had practised [severe self-mortification](#) for fifty-five years (since before the Buddha's own Enlightenment), before going to teach him. By that time, his obstructive kamma had given its fruit, and Jambuka became a bhikkhu and an Arahant after listening to the Buddha.

Another vital factor is effort. Even though some (like **Mahādhāna**) have the potential to achieve great things, if they make insufficient effort they will not realise their full potential. If we make the most strenuous and unremitting efforts throughout our entire lives, and still fail to attain the results that the Buddha promised, only then can we blame our lack of perfections or the presence of obstructive kamma as the reasons for our failure. In the Buddha's time there were many who had very good spiritual potential and so gained the higher paths of Arahantship or Non-returning. It is widely accepted that nowadays there are fewer beings with the necessary spiritual potential to attain the higher paths, while a few believe that even the first path cannot be attained. Perhaps holding this (wrong) view is a result of obstructive kamma. If someone thinks that they have no hope of attaining the path, then they have no hope of attaining the path. Only someone who is optimistic of success will have the confidence to strive with diligence, no matter how difficult it is, and no matter what pleasures they have to renounce.

To summarise the discourse in a single sentence, "A meditator should be mindful of every mental and physical phenomena as it occurs, throughout the entire day, without missing anything." To do this requires an extraordinary effort, a do-or-die effort, not just an average level of effort. The Middle Way cannot be seen by the average person. All of the Noble Ones of the past and present who gained the right path are extraordinary individuals who had keen wisdom and made extraordinary efforts. All of those who would become Noble Ones in the future must have keen wisdom and make extraordinary efforts. As it says in the Discourse on the Great Thoughts of Anuruddha.¹

¹ A.iv.228.

1. This Dhamma is for one who wants little, not for one who wants much.
2. This Dhamma is for the contented, not for the discontented.
3. This Dhamma is for the secluded, not for one fond of society.
4. This Dhamma is for the energetic, not for the lazy.
5. This Dhamma is for the mindful, not for the unmindful.
6. This Dhamma is for the composed, not for the uncomposed.
7. This Dhamma is for the wise, not for the unwise.
8. This Dhamma is for one who is free from impediments, not for one who delights in impediments.

Evil Deeds

The greatest sin in Buddhism is the sin of ignorance (*avijjā*). Due to not understanding how the law of kamma works, people tend to do evil deeds that lead to future suffering, and they are reluctant to do wholesome deeds that lead to their own happiness. An evil deed is called “evil” just because it leads to suffering. That killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, and so forth lead to suffering for the victims is obvious enough, but when we say that evil deeds lead to suffering, we mean that they lead to suffering for the perpetrators. The result for the victim is immediate and obvious, but the result for the perpetrators is hidden from them, as it may not bear fruit for a very long time.

People who are deeply immersed in ignorance enjoy doing evil deeds, and they regard them as good. The thief thinks that it is good to steal from others. Though hazardous, it is a quick way to make money if it succeeds. By using bribery, deceit, and corruption some cunning people can become very wealthy without providing any benefit at all for others — on the contrary, their actions cause much anxiety, grief, and despair for honest, hard-working people.

Some say that evil-doers experience suffering in the present due to their guilty conscience, remorse, and the fear of prosecution or censure by others. However, evil-doers don’t have a sensitive conscience as kind and thoughtful people do, that is why they can do evil deeds. Due to lack of shame and fear of retribution in hell, such people do not suffer much in the present life. If they had such wholesome tendencies as shame (not wishing to be blamed) and fear of retribution in the next existence, then they would not do evil deeds. Good people have these wholesome qualities, that is why they

avoid evil and try to do good. They may not be devout Buddhists, but at least they have the basic understanding of kamma — what goes around, comes around.

Evil deeds are rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion. They can be done by body, by speech, or by mind. Even good people do them sometimes, due to the same three unwholesome roots, but good people have a sense of shame, and fear retribution because of their right view that they will one day inherit the results of their own actions. Good people feel keen remorse after doing evil deeds, and try not to repeat the same mistakes. Those who have no such scruples, take delight in evil deeds, and do them repeatedly and shamelessly. They may be afraid of punishment in this life, but they do not fear retribution in the next existence as they have no faith in the law of kamma, or similar teachings that are found in all religions. Right view is therefore an effective inhibitor while wrong view is a powerful catalyst for evil deeds.

Evil Bodily Kamma

Killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct are the three evil bodily actions that lead to future suffering. Killing and injuring other living beings who fear death and recoil from pain is the first evil kamma that leads to hell and rebirth in lower realms. If, due to some other good kamma, the evil-doer is eventually reborn in the human realm, he or she will have a short life, or suffer from physical disabilities and/or painful diseases. This is the consequence of killing and injuring living beings with cruel intent or callous indifference.

Stealing includes taking the property of others by force, by threats of violence, in secret, or by deceit. In brief, it means obtaining what one is not entitled to by using illegitimate means. The result of stealing is rebirth in hell or the lower realms. If, due to some other good kamma, the evil-doer is eventually reborn in the human realm, he or she will be poor or will have his or her own property stolen.

Sexual misconduct means enjoying sexual relations with unsuitable persons by force, by threats of violence, or by deceit. In brief, whatever sexual activity causes grief or inflicts pain on others is sexual misconduct. The result is rebirth in hell or the lower realms. If born in the human realm due to some other good kamma one will have defective sexual organs, perverse sexual desires, and will be

married to incompatible partners. That is, whatever sexual pleasures one enjoys in future lives will be accompanied by mental and/or physical suffering.

All of these evil deeds are accompanied by evil thoughts too. Mind is the forerunner, and unless the mind is associated with unwholesome mental states then the action cannot rightly be called “evil.”

Evil Verbal Kamma

Lying, slander, abuse, and idle chatter are the four evil verbal actions that lead to future suffering. Lying may bring some short-term benefit, but its future results are terrible. For anyone who is earnestly seeking to realise the Dhamma to eradicate delusion, any falsehood, even spoken in jest or unknowingly, is something to avoid, let alone intentional lying. If we promise to do something, while having no intention of keeping that promise, it is also deliberate lying. Therefore, when Buddhists undertake the five or eight precepts it should be done sincerely, otherwise, while apparently doing the good deed of observing morality, they will, in fact, be making the evil kamma of telling deliberate lies. If they say, “I undertake the precept to abstain from taking intoxicants that cause heedlessness,” while having no such intention, then not only do they break the fifth precept, but they break the fourth precept too. Pretending to be pious Buddhists, they wish to be respected members of the Buddhist community, but it would be more honest to take the three refuges and the four precepts.

It is the same for monks when they observe the Uposatha ceremony, during which they confess their offences and undertake not to commit the same offences again in the future. If they are concealing an offence, then they are guilty of deliberate lying. This is clearly stated in the introduction to the Uposatha ceremony. If they have no intention of observing the training rules in the future, it is also telling deliberate lies.

Buddhists are imperfect, just like everyone else, but they should be perfectly frank and open about their own short-comings, otherwise it will be obstructive kamma for them, which will prevent them from gaining any realisation of the Dhamma or liberation from suffering in this very life. If one speaks a falsehood, believing it to be true, then later realises that it was untrue, a Buddhist should make

amends by making an open admission of their error, and asking for forgiveness.

Slander is often false speech too, but it does not have to be false. Even the truth, if it is spoken with the intention to discredit someone in the eyes of others, is still the unwholesome deed of slander. If the intention is aiming at benefit, for example, to warn others by saying, “That person is corrupt and shameless. Do not associate with him or her. If you do, be mindful or you may suffer loss of your property or good reputation.” When speaking ill of others, therefore, we have to be especially mindful of our intentions. Are we just jealous of the material gains and praise enjoyed by the corrupt, or do we have sincere good-will towards those innocent people who might be deceived?

Abusive speech is harsh speech that aims to hurt another’s feelings and make them feel inferior. It may be true to call a thief a thief, or to call a fool a fool, but if the intention is to cause them grief, it is not right speech. However, if the intention is aimed at their benefit, or the benefit of others, then it is not abusive speech. Again, one must be especially mindful when using speech that we know is likely to be hurtful to others. The Buddha knew beforehand whether or not such speech would be beneficial. If it would be beneficial, he chose the right time to say it; if not, he remained silent. A teacher may admonish a pupil, or a parent may admonish their child, or a manager may admonish the company’s employees using harsh speech without it being abusive speech. It depends on the intention — is it aimed at benefit?

Idle chatter means any speech that is frivolous and worthless. It has no benefit for anyone. Never mind the polite and friendly greetings and small talk that is aimed to put others at ease and make them feel welcome. What this refers to primarily is telling jokes, shaggy dog stories, and all manner of gossip and tittle-tattle just to pass the time. If we are sincerely following the Buddha’s advice to seek an escape from this endless cycle of birth and death, we don’t have a moment to waste. At least our conversation should have some mundane benefit, such as how to earn an honest living, how to avoid danger, keep healthy, and make friends. It doesn’t have to be only about spiritual things, but at least it should cause no harm and give some benefit.

Evil Mental Kamma

“Mind is the forerunner, mind is chief, and all things are mind-made. If one speaks or acts with an impure mind, then suffering follows, as the cart’s wheel follows the hoof of the ox that pulls it.” ([Dhp v 1](#))

Before we can act or speak with an unwholesome intention, an unwholesome mental state has to arise to motivate us to speak or act. Though it seems to be less important than speech or action, in fact mental action is the most important kamma of all. That is why Buddhism emphasises the practice of meditation to purify the mind from all defilements. If the mind is kept pure through regular meditation practice, unwholesome speech and actions will be deprived of their life-blood. There are three mental unwholesome kammās: covetousness, ill-will, and wrong view.

Covetousness (*abhijjhā*) is the desire to possess the property, relatives, or reputation of others by unlawful means. Before one can steal, commit sexual misconduct, or tell lies there has to be some evil thoughts motivated by greed. It is hard for human beings to remove all desire and lust, but at least we should strive to remove evil desires that would lead to transgression of the precepts if we fulfilled our phantasies.

Ill-will (*vyāpāda*) is the wish to harm other living beings. Before one can kill or injure other beings, one must harbour anger and malice towards them. To remove all anger and aversion is difficult, but the impulse to kill and injure others should be removed. If we enjoy watching war movies, boxing, bull-fighting, cock-fighting or other such violent entertainments, then we are dominated by ill-will.

Wrong view (*micchā ditṭhi*) is any view that is not in accordance with reality. It is a delusion, a misperception, or misunderstanding of the way things are. If one holds a wrong view such as, “There is no harm in taking intoxicants,” then one will do it repeatedly, whenever one wishes to, without any shame or remorse. If one knows that is blameworthy, if one does it at all, one will do it less frequently and try to avoid it and give it up.

It has been said that there is only one sin in Buddhism, the sin of ignorance. Renounce ignorance and all evil deeds will be given up. Hence the importance given to study and meditation. Buddhism is not a religion for worship, it is a way of life that requires

a commitment to follow and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path. This way of practice includes not only basic moral conduct, which is common to all religions, but also mental development through meditation. Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration entail withdrawing the mind from sensual pleasures, and focusing it inwardly on the physical and mental processes as they occur in the present moment. Right Thought entails the willingness to expel unwholesome thoughts such as covetousness and ill-will mentioned above, and Right View requires a fundamental change of perception to remove the misperception that we have regarding reality. This cannot be achieved merely by undertaking and observing moral precepts, nor even by pious prayer and worship of saints or deities. Right View on the intellectual level requires careful study of the Buddha's teachings through reading, or listening to the teachings of learned teachers, and Right View on the experiential level requires deep insight that can only be gained through deep concentration. Therefore, there is no other way — if one wishes to follow the Buddha's teachings fully, one must meditate seriously.

Peer Pressure

The views that we hold are a product of our upbringing and current situation. Someone may be born in a Buddhist country, into a devout Buddhist family, but may later move abroad to study or work, and may marry a non-Buddhist. Someone else may be born in a non-Buddhist country, into a family that follows another religion or none, then may become a Buddhist after studying the teachings or travelling in Buddhist countries. Later in life, they may associate mostly with others following the Buddhist path.

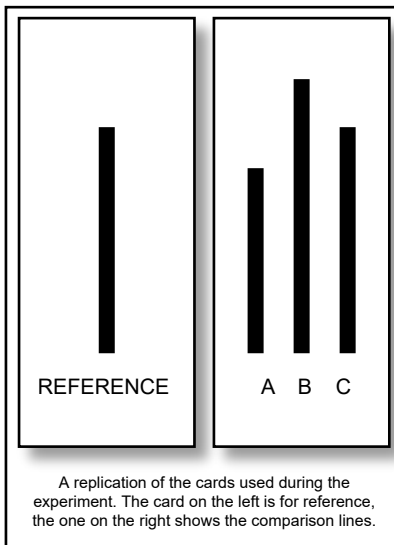
Almost all human beings socialise and relate to others, and since they read books, newspapers, and magazines, or watch television, *etc.*, they are inevitably influenced very significantly by these various interactions. It is rare to find someone who is capable of thinking in a way that is truly independent.

In the [Asch Experiment](#), the test subjects were shown a series of cards with lines drawn on them, and asked to state whether the lines were shorter, equal to, or longer than a reference line. Unknown to the students being studied, others in the group were told to speak

the truth at first, but later to lie when shown the cards. The study found that the subjects being tested would be strongly inclined to agree with their fellow testers, even if they were obviously wrong.

“At least 75% of the subjects gave the wrong answer to at least one question, although experimental error may have had some influence on this figure. There was no doubt, however, that peer pressure can cause conformity.”

Peer pressure clearly exerts an enormous influence, especially on young people, but also on mature adults. As fashions change over generations, most people adapt their habits to fit in with the crowd. The clothes they wear, the language they use, the social-life they enjoy, the holiday destina-



tions they visit, the music they listen to, the food they eat, and the values that they hold as the most important are all strongly influenced by the nation of which they are a citizen, the ethnic or religious group with which they identify, and the environment in which they live and work. Nobody wants to be a nobody — *i.e.* a person who is disregarded or shunned by society.

Since I was born and bred in England with two English parents, and grew up in England during the 1960's, most of my cultural influences are British, though after becoming a Buddhist I also spent many years living among Buddhists, or living in Buddhist countries, mostly in Burma or Thailand, but also briefly in Sri Lanka. In the UK, I have been supported by the Burmese and Sri Lankan communities, but also spend a period supported by the Indian Buddhist community. Those are my cultural influences and biases. It would be unfair to criticise the cultural biases of Asian Buddhists as I was neither raised in Asia, nor as a Buddhist. I will therefore talk mostly about the cultural influences on the British. Please apply these ideas with due alteration of details to your own culture.

Sporting Excellence

At the time of writing it is September 2012, just after the London Olympics. Since I live in East London, I could hardly fail to notice it, not even living as a monk. Not everyone, but many people in the UK are talking about, and getting emotional about the Olympics.

Let's consider what motivates people to dedicate a large portion of their life to becoming excellent at sports. What drives someone to train for years, undergoing great physical hardship, foregoing other social activities, spending their own money, or relying on family or sponsorship, so that they can dedicate themselves to improving their performance. It's not just for health and fitness, or skill in shooting, or acrobatics, is it? Neither is it a biological drive that is essential for the survival of the human species. Does a modern man or woman need to run 25 miles to escape from pursuing wolves or to catch lunch? What purpose is served by being able to hit a target at 50 metres with an arrow? What benefit could there be from kicking a ball into a net if not for the fact that footballers are paid far too much?

The primary motivation is unlikely to be financial gain, except perhaps in the case of a few sports like football or tennis. I take it as self-evident that what motivates most participants in competitive sport is the desire for praise, or in other words, peer pressure. If society did not praise excellence in sports, no one would pursue their chosen sport to such an extent. They might run, swim, play football, hockey, volleyball, or whatever, for enjoyment, or to keep fit and healthy. They might learn boxing or martial arts for self-defence, but would they train so hard if no medals were awarded, if no one watched them, or if no one applauded? If your mates didn't cheer when you scored a goal, would you even bother to run after the ball?

The British, along with many other nationalities, place a high value on sporting excellence. Anyone who reaches the top in their sport is respected, praised, and valued as a special member of society. They get invited to participate in charity events, TV game shows, and attract sponsorship from manufacturers who want to enhance their brand by association with a famous sports star. If they are very successful, they get awarded an MBE, OBE, or whatever in the Honours List.

All of this adulation of physical prowess and skill is peer pressure. Praise inflates the ego and stimulates pride. It encourages rivalry and

diverts the participants away from their true welfare. While spending their time and hard-earned money to enjoy such sporting events, the spectators are also getting further away from realising the true nature of existence. The emotional roller-coaster ride of watching sports events is a kind of intoxication. It may be less unwholesome than that obtained from taking drink or drugs, but it is still unwholesome, deluding, and of no lasting benefit. It makes people feel good, of course, or no one would enjoy participating in or watching sports. However, from feeling arises craving, from craving arises attachment, from attachment arises becoming (fresh kamma or striving to excel at sports or to attend sporting events), from becoming arises birth, and from birth arises aging, death, grief, lamentation, pain, sorrow, and despair.

As any pole-vaulter will tell you, whatever goes up, must come down. It is not unusual for [sports personalities to suffer from depression](#). Why is this? Is it not obvious that the root cause of that suffering is craving for praise and fame?

During the Buddha's time, a young man named Uggasena became skilled in performing somersaults on the top of a bamboo pole. While he was performing his act, the Buddha entered the city for alms, and the crowd paid no attention to Uggasena's performance. He was utterly deflated. The Buddha admonished him to let go of the past, let go of the future, and let go of the present. He was wise enough to do so there and then, even while standing on top of the pole, and he became an Arahant devoid of all passions. The Buddha invited him to come to him, and he became a monk. ([Dhp v 348](#))

Singing, Dancing, and Comedy

The British love entertainments of all kinds. Some of the most popular shows on TV are the X-Factor, "Strictly Come Dancing," "Britain's Got Talent," and "The Voice." Aspiring singers, dancers, and comics from all over the country compete in the hope of winning these talent shows. They hope to make a career in show business, entertaining the masses with their particular talent.

If they succeed, the financial rewards are potentially enormous, but many are spurred on to master their craft as much by the desire for applause and recognition, as by the desire for financial gain.

Millions of people, especially, but not exclusively among the younger generation, enjoy these entertainments greatly, and aspire to be like their pop idols. They dress like them, style their hair like them, practise their dance moves, and listen to their music constantly. It's a huge industry, financed by millions of adoring fans, with many spin-offs in fashion and multi-media products — iPods, MP3 players, multi-media systems, etc.

All of this is due to peer pressure. Although singing, dancing, and comedy do not lead to real happiness, the vast majority of ordinary people value these entertainments enormously, and some may think that life without them would not be worth living.

As in the case of sports personalities, there is a long trail of broken lives, divorce, depression, suicide, and drug overdose among successful musicians. The psychological stress and emotional problems suffered by many at the top of their profession shows that commercial success does not guarantee happiness.

The Buddha said:

“In the Noble One’s discipline this is lamentation, namely, singing; this is madness, namely, dancing; this is childishness, namely, laughter.”

At first sight, this may seem like an odd thing to say, but if you develop insight into the true nature of existence, or reflect wisely, you may understand why those who are apparently so successful in this industry are often among the most unhappy. It is the craving for praise, fame, wealth, or influence that motivates their strenuous efforts. Disappointment and despair are the flip-side of success.

Comedians are not immune from depression and alcoholism either. Though they make others laugh, they are apparently very insecure and unhappy. There are many well known comedians who suffered from depression, suicidal thoughts, and alcohol or drug addiction. [Robin Williams](#) was undoubtedly a very talented and popular comedian and actor, but he recently committed suicide by hanging. He had a long history of addiction and depression. For a Buddhist to see such intelligent and talented people wasting their precious human lives in this way is very sad. If only they had had a good friend who could open their eyes to the Dhamma, things could have turned out quite differently.

In the [Tālapuṭa Sutta](#) (S.iv.306), an actor or comedian approaches the Buddha and asks if it is true that comedians go to the heaven of laughter after their death. The Buddha declines to answer until pressed for the third time, then replies that they go to the hell of laughter after death. On hearing this, Tālapuṭa bursts into tears, sad that he has been deceived for so long by this wrong view that making others laugh leads to happiness hereafter.

Check it out for yourself, don't just take the Buddha's word for it. Without bias or prejudice, observe your friends and associates, or examine your own mind carefully. Are those who are constantly laughing, joking, and playing the fool really happy and fulfilled, or are they very insecure and just seeking attention?

When you're immersed in this Western culture, surrounded by various forms of entertainment, and bombarded daily by media through the Internet, mobile phones, media players, radio, and television, there is scarcely a moment left in the day when you can contemplate and find spiritual peace. At one time, Sundays used to be a day when shops and pubs were closed, when the religious people went to church, and others had a quiet day in the garden or relaxed in parks or on the seafront. Nowadays, Sunday is much like any other day, with no respite from sensory stimulation unless you make some effort to avoid it. In Buddhist countries, the Uposatha days of the full-moon or new-moon are days when people visit monasteries or meditation centres. They undertake to observe the eight precepts, which includes abstaining from entertainments. It is a vital first step towards calming the mind to develop concentration and insight.

Sexual Relationships

Sexual relationships give rise to many conflicts, and are the basis of serious errors by religious zealots and liberals alike. Sexual desire is a very strong and deeply rooted desire in human beings, and since desire is the cause of suffering, it should come as no surprise to Buddhists that sexual relationships lead to a lot of suffering.

We need to distinguish between sexual misconduct (*kāmesu-micchācāra*), which breaks the third of the five precepts, and sexual activity that breaks no precepts. The former is liable to lead to the lower realms of existence, while the latter, though still unwholesome,

will not, unless it is the cause of other misdeeds such as stealing, killing, lying, slander, covetousness, ill-will, or wrong-views.

The Buddha did not go into much detail when describing sexual misconduct. The texts only refer to sexual misconduct for men, and the Commentary enumerates twenty kinds of women¹ with whom it is improper to have sexual relations. These cover adultery, sex with minors or the mentally retarded, sexual relations with the betrothed of another, and those under the protection of their parents or other guardians. Women will have to infer what constitutes sexual misconduct for them, e.g. relationships with married men, boys under the age of consent, or young men still living with their parents.

Pre-marital sexual relations is not specifically mentioned in the texts, so it deserves special attention. One famous story is that of *Paṭācārā*. She was the daughter of a millionaire who eloped with a servant. When she was pregnant, she wished to return to her parents' home to give birth, but her husband would not return, fearing that he would be killed. Although *Paṭācārā* had consented to the relationship, her parents had not, and the servant boy was guilty of a serious breach of trust too. It doesn't say how old they were, but if he was much older than sixteen perhaps his parents would not have trusted him to be alone with their daughter. Assuming that both were over sixteen years of age, this would not be regarded as illegal in the modern world, and some might say that it is not sexual misconduct, but according to Buddhism it is sexual misconduct for the servant to have sexual relations with a girl without parental consent, and although the texts do not say this, I think that one should infer that the girl was also guilty of sexual misconduct.

Parental Consent

This then raises the question of what young lovers should do when their parents will not consent to a marriage due to race, religion, or some other reason? If they elope or marry without parental consent is that sexual misconduct? At what age are they free to choose for themselves? Here, we should look at the Commentary, which says "Protected by their parents," (or by other relatives). Is a young person the property of his or her parents with no right to choose their life-long partner? I don't see any evidence for that point of view.

¹ MA.i.199, the Commentary to the *Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta*, M.i.47 where the Buddha describes what is wholesome and what is unwholesome.

The way I see it is that as long as they remain living at home, or are still financially dependent on their parents, then children should respect their parents' wishes. If they are old enough to get a job, leave home, and buy or rent their own home, then they should be free to choose their own partner. It won't be sexual misconduct if they are mature, independent adults, making their own decisions, and accepting full responsibility for those decisions. If they are adults, and consent to cohabitation, and are faithful to their partner, then they are not committing sexual misconduct. For various reasons, couples often live together without getting married. Traditional religions may condemn such relationships, but what really matters is fidelity, *i.e.* being truthful and faithful to each other, and no document or ceremony can make any difference to that. What a marriage ceremony does is change the legal status of the relationship, and what happens if the relationship should break up. It is a legal issue, not an ethical or moral one. Any young couple buying property together or having children should inform themselves about their legal rights and duties should the relationship fail.

First, young couples should try by all skilful means at their disposal to obtain the consent and moral support of their parents. Marriage is already difficult enough even with parental support and consent, let alone without it. If that does not succeed, even after several years of persuasion (not after just a few months), then they should leave home and become financially independent. They are then free to do as they wish, with or without parental consent. In time, the in-laws may realise that the marriage was the right decision for the couple to make, and they will then support it.

Interfaith and Interracial Marriages

Forced marriage is an immoral practice at any age. It is basically condoning rape, slavery, and imprisonment. Good parents may have little choice other than consenting to a marriage with which they disagree. Having reluctantly agreed to it, they should give their blessing, and make every effort to make the marriage succeed. In the Buddha's time too, there were marriages between young people of different faiths. *Visākhā* was married to the son of Migāra, a follower of the naked ascetics (*Nigaṇṭha*). She had previously become a Stream-winner at seven years of age on first meeting the Buddha.

Due to her great intelligence and spiritual courage, she was able to arouse faith in her father-in-law, Migāra, who become a Stream-winner too, and hence a devout follower of the Buddha. He was eternally grateful to Visākhā for leading him onto the right path. She was the chief female supporter of the Saṅgha.

If people live by the Dhamma and practise it fully, not merely calling themselves Buddhists while clinging to narrow-minded prejudice about the followers of other religions, they will be able to spread the Buddha's teaching to their new relatives for the benefit of all. In this way, the harmony of the entire community is ensured, with those of all religious persuasions, and those with none, living among each other with tolerance and mutual respect. Being united, they will be able to promote wholesome activities, and protect the next generation from immorality.

Divorce and Separation

Even with the full support of both families, and the best intentions of the married couple, sometimes things do not work out, and divorce is the only pragmatic choice. In other cases, one partner may die prematurely due to disease, accident, or war, leaving their spouse to bring up the children alone.

A divorcee is often looked down upon by proud people who think that it cannot happen to them. They like to blame someone for the failure of the marriage. It is often the case that the parents of the wife will blame the husband, and the parents of the husband will blame the wife, citing this or that fault as the cause of marriage break-down. In most cases, no one is any more to blame than the other. People change over time, and marriages break-up when the partners are no longer compatible. If they are no longer happy living together, it makes no sense to continue living in misery for the sake of keeping up appearances. The honest thing to do is to divorce and go their separate ways without acrimony, having made suitable arrangements for their children's welfare, should there be any.

Buddhists should understand that all conditions are inherently unstable, subject to change and dissolution. If a marriage succeeds and prospers for the entire life, that is commendable, but it is not helpful to engage in blame and recrimination if a marriage fails. What each divorcee needs is the continued support of family members, who should think first about the welfare of the grand-children who

had no say in the matter. They are often the victims of the break-up, and deserve the love of both parents, and all four grand-parents. The divorcees too, will no doubt be suffering from the trauma caused by separation, they do not need any additional strife from in-laws who behave more like out-laws. The relatives should do what they can to make the separation as painless as possible, just as they would if the separation was caused by premature death.

A divorcee may wish to remarry later. If they are wise, they won't rush into a new relationship, but learning from their previous experience they will consider long and hard before getting involved again. It is not sexual misconduct for divorcees to have sexual relations with single people, or with other divorcees.

However, do be very careful about this. When a marriage is failing, one party may have an extra-marital affair, citing the excuse that his/her spouse is no longer affectionate, *etc.* In this case, since the marriage has not yet failed, sexual relations with or by such a person is sexual misconduct, and will probably lead to the final break-down of the marriage.

Last, but not least, any sexual relationship with a monk or nun is sexual misconduct. Women should be wary of any monk or meditation teacher who pays them special attention, and monks should be wary of women who are too affectionate.

Swimming Against the Current

After he gained Enlightenment at the foot of the Bodhi tree, the Buddha was at first reluctant to teach. He spent seven weeks enjoying the bliss of liberation, and when he considered teaching the truth that he had realised to others, he hesitated thinking, "This truth that I have realised is very profound. Though it is sublime and conducive to inner peace, it is hard to understand. Since it is subtle and not accessible to mere intellect and logic, it can be realised only by the wise." This account is given in the Vinaya Mahāvagga, where the Buddha refers to the Dhamma as "Going against the current (*paṭisotaḡāmim*).” The meaning is that living beings are swept along by the currents of greed, hatred, and delusion. To realise the truth they will need to "swim against the current," that is they will need to realise the grave danger that they are in, and make strenuous efforts to abandon their desire for pleasure, fame, praise, wealth, influence, and so forth.

Firstly, it is difficult to see that being swept along by desire and immersed in pleasure is a very dangerous predicament to be in. There doesn't seem to be anything wrong with enjoying pleasure as long as one can do so. Its dangers and disadvantages can be perceived only by the wise.

Secondly, even if one clearly perceives the dangers, it is hard to take that leap of faith and start swimming in the right direction. The alcoholic or nicotine addict can probably see the dangers quite clearly, yet to renounce his or her addiction and just stop drinking or smoking is hard. It takes great will-power even though the danger signs are everywhere to be seen in hospitals and public health advertising. In the case of ordinary sensual pleasures, the danger signs are not so obvious. Usually, people only see the disadvantages after suffering some great disappointment, such as the break-up of a relationship, the death of a loved one, or the destruction of their own property or health, limbs, *etc.* A wise person, who has empathy, can see these signs easily since they are reported every day in the news. They can reflect that what has happened to others can and will certainly happen to himself or herself one day. Even though the Bodhisatta was enjoying great prosperity, perfect health and vigour, and all kinds of sensual pleasures, he was able to perceive the danger of existence when he saw an old man, a sick man, a dead man, and a monk — someone who had already renounced the pleasures of household life to seek liberation from suffering.

Thirdly, having seen the dangers, and having made the fateful decision to turn one's life around, and to dedicate most of one's efforts to seeking liberation from suffering, whether as a monk or nun, or as a devout lay Buddhist, it is still not easy to escape from the currents of desire. The river is in full-flood, and the mind is swept away by stimuli through the six senses whenever one is awake. For lay people, who associate by necessity with many others who are not pious and see no danger at all in the enjoyment of sensual pleasures, it is hard to escape even for a day from social commitments. These days, it is socially unacceptable to abstain from alcohol in some cases, but even where abstinence from drugs and alcohol is commended, it is rare to find anyone who commends solitude, meditation, and religious study. Even those life-long Buddhists who observe the five precepts traditionally, disregard the practice of meditation. In their

view, you only need to meditate if you are a monk, a nun, or suffering from mental health issues. Such people are still completely swept away by and immersed in the currents of desire.

This aversion, fear, and suspicious regarding the practice of meditation is the most harmful manifestation of peer pressure. For many generations, shameless and ignorant monks have exaggerated the benefits of giving charity, and perversely neglected to explain the superiority of renunciation and meditation. It is easy to see why — it is because those monks are themselves swept away by the current of desire. The Buddha warned them about it, but they don't pay attention to those discourses.

If monks give inspiring Dhamma talks, and work hard for the spiritual welfare of their supporters, of course it is wholesome kamma, and they deserve praise for their good efforts. I am not talking about that kind of well-deserved gain, fame, and praise. What I refer to is ill-gotten gain and undeserved fame. The [Lokavipatti Sutta](#)¹ makes the distinction clear. We all need to cultivate insight to remain free from peer pressure, and to distinguish the right path.

The Preservation of the Religion

One of the primary duties of a monk is to preserve and propagate the Buddhist religion, maintaining its perfect purity. It is called the burden of learning (*gāṇḍhādura*). This requires intellectual integrity and moral purity. A monk or nun, or anyone who teaches the Dhamma must have a sincere respect for the teachings, and should not pretend to know what he or she does not know. The other primary duty is to practise the teachings to gain insight and personal realisation of the Dhamma. It is called the burden of insight (*vipassanādura*). If a Dhamma teacher has both learning and insight, he or she will be tolerant and open-minded.

The householder Upāli was a follower of the naked ascetics led by Nigaṇṭha Nāṭaputta. He was persuaded to go to the Buddha to dissuade him from his “wrong views.” Of course, Upāli was won over by the Buddha and became a Stream-winner.² The Buddha urged Upāli to continue supporting his former teachers. Upāli did so, telling his servants to give almsfood to them, but not to invite them into his house. Nigaṇṭha Nāṭaputta at first refused to believe

¹ A.iv.157.

² M.i.371ff.

that Upāli had become a follower of the Buddha, but when convinced that it was so, he was so angry that he vomited hot-blood, and died soon afterwards. Intolerant teachers cannot bear it when their disciples go to study with others — they guard their followers jealously and disparage other teachers. A wise teacher understands that no ordinary person can know everything, and so will encourage his followers to listen to any teacher who observes morality, and has a good knowledge of the Dhamma. When a sick person goes to a General Practitioner, an honest doctor will send the patient to see a specialist, or another GP for a second opinion, if he or she is unsure how to treat the patient. A proud or greedy doctor will pretend that he or she knows what is best for the patient, even if it might lead to the patient losing his or her life, or failing to get cured.

If one teaches the Dhamma, one should be sure that one is teaching the Buddha's Dhamma, and not some other ideas picked up during life's long journey. The Buddha taught different meditation methods to suit the many different character types and individuals who came to him for guidance. Human beings suffer from many kinds of diseases, and the medicine that cures one disease may aggravate another. The Buddha encouraged Upāli to make a thorough inquiry before accepting him as his teacher, and he gave similar advice to the villagers of Kesamutti, in Kālāma, who were doubtful about who was teaching the truth because previous teachers who had come to them had praised their own teachings while disparaging those of others. If any teaching doesn't enable the students to investigate and examine the doctrine to discover the truth for themselves, then it's not teaching at all, but indoctrination.

Recently, in both Burma and Sri Lanka, there has been ethnic violence spurred on by ignorant monks inciting hatred against Moslems, Christians, and other minority groups. It is a serious error. Although they claim to be protecting the Buddhist religion, these fanatics are damaging it. Nowhere in the Buddha's teaching can one find justification for killing others and destroying their property to protect one's own selfish interests. In many ways the Blessed One taught his followers to practise patience and tolerance. One only has to look at the [Discourse on Effacement](#) (Sallekha Sutta), to know the right attitude for Buddhists to adopt. What others believe and practise is not our concern, we should only pay attention to our own

beliefs and practices, and make sure that our views and behaviour are in harmony with the Buddha's teachings.

“Disregard the faults of others, things done and left undone by others, but examine the deeds done and not done by oneself.” ([Dhp v 50](#))

Buddhists should all hold the right view that our actions are our own property (*kammassakatā sammādiṭṭhi*). Killing, beating, or threatening others is evil, stealing is evil, destroying others' property is evil, slander is evil, and those who do such evil deeds will be reborn in the lower realms. If, due to some other wholesome kamma, they are reborn in the human realm, they will suffer the misfortune of being killed, having their property stolen or destroyed, being slandered, etc., just as they are currently doing to others in this life. Everyone should know that hatred cannot cease by hatred, but only through loving-kindness and compassion. If others hold wrong-views and do evil deeds in this life, they deserve compassion, not anger, because they will inevitably inherit the results of their evil deeds, evil speech, and evil thoughts in future existences, unless we can set a good example, and lead them back onto the right path.

A fine example of this skilful attitude was shown by Sakka, the king of the gods of Tāvatiṃsa, in his previous life when he was the youth Māgha. Early one morning, on going to the market square to set up his stall, he found the place full of rubbish. He cleaned up that place, set up his stall, and at the end of the day, packed up his stall and returned home. The following day, he found another trader occupying the area that he had cleaned up the day before. Instead of arguing with him, he cleaned up another area, set up his stall and did his trading as before. The next day, too, the second cleaned area was already occupied by another trader. Cleaning up a third area, he set up his stall again. In this way, each day Māgha had to clean a new area before he could set up his stall to begin business. After a few weeks the entire market square was clean.

If present-day Buddhists are industrious, humble, and intelligent like Māgha, Buddhist communities will prosper. They will have no fear of being dominated by the followers of other religions. Buddhist business people would be able to compete on fair terms with others without resorting to evil deeds.

*“Dhammo have rakkhati dhammacārī,
Dhammo suciṅṅo sukhamāvahati,
Esānisaṃso dhamme suciṅṅe,
Na duggati gacchati dhammacārī.”*

“The Dhamma protects one who practises it. Properly practised, the Dhamma brings happiness to the person who practises it. One who practises the Dhamma properly does not go to bad destinations.”

Fear, racial prejudice, bigotry, and all other unwholesome mental attitudes are surely the result of not practising the Dhamma properly. Not even during the Buddha’s time was it the case that everyone was a follower of the Buddha. Many did not follow his teaching, some opposed him, and tried to cause harm to the Buddhist religion. Nowadays, the genuine teaching of the Buddha is less well known, and there are fewer who can practise the Noble Eightfold Path to its conclusion. It is not particularly difficult to learn the basic teachings, or to distinguish the true path from false practices with the help of a learned teacher, but actually practising the teachings requires firm faith, resolute effort, constant mindfulness, deep concentration, and mature wisdom. One must be willing to renounce sensual pleasures at least for a few weeks, and to meditate for the whole day without a break.

If we sincerely wish to preserve the Buddha’s genuine teachings we must practise it, not just talk about it, or write books explaining it. Insight can arise only from deep concentration, and gaining concentration takes time. It cannot be done in half an hour, nor even half a day, nor half a week. An exceptional individual might gain deep insight after half a month of continuous and diligent practice, but an average person — one who already observes basic morality and has a solid foundation in the Buddha’s teachings — might need half a year of continuous and diligent practice to progress much beyond the lower stages of insight. There are some who teach that merely listening to their discourses is enough to realise the Path and its Fruition, which is nibbāna. Such claims should be viewed with scepticism. Though there are many accounts in the Buddhist texts of disciples doing just that, they were listening to the Buddha or his Arahant disciples, and they had good perfections (*pāramī*). Those auspicious times have long since passed — we must expect to do

some hard graft to get worthwhile results. Even to become a qualified psychologist takes many years of study and training, so how could anyone possibly become an expert who understands and knows how to purify their own mind by listening to a few Dhamma talks, or attending a weekend seminar?

There are retreat centres, and weekly meditation classes where one can learn the basic skills. Start today, and make a sincere commitment to developing the Noble Eightfold Path that leads to nibbāna. Do be content regarding material things, but don't be content with the superficial practice of the Dhamma. The Bodhisatta strove tirelessly for 91 aeons to fulfil the perfections required for Buddhahood. If it would take us 91 years to realise the Dhamma, it would not be very long at all compared to the infinite cycle of existences. Surely 91 weeks or 91 days would be a small sacrifice to make if it were to lead us to attain nibbāna in this very life?

The Vitality of the Teachings

The primary responsibility for preserving the Buddhist religion (*sāsana*) lies with the monks. They are the leaders of their communities who must guide their supporters in the right direction. There is a saying by [Mahāgandhayon Sayādaw](#):

“The leading bull must go straight, or the following cattle will fall victim to the tiger. If the abbot goes up to the loft, the novice will climb on the roof of the monastery.”

In Buddhism, as in other religions, nowadays there are plenty of scandals involving leading members of the clergy. Some monks are overwhelmed by greed, get involved in politics, or are content with performing religious rites and rituals for their congregation because it is much easier than teaching the Dhamma properly or instructing meditators how to establish mindfulness.

The Vinaya rules were laid down by the Buddha:

1. For the excellence of the Saṅgha (*Saṅghasutthutāya*).
2. For the well-being of the Saṅgha (*Saṅghaphāsutāya*).
3. To control wicked individuals (*dummaṅkūnaṃ puggalānaṃ niggahāya*).
4. For the comfort of well-behaved bhikkhus (*pesalānaṃ bhikkhūnaṃ phāsuihārāya*).

5. To restrain present taints (*diṭṭhadhammikānaṃ āsavānaṃ saṃvarāya*).
6. To prevent the arising of future taints (*samparāyikānaṃ āsavānaṃ paṭighātāya*).
7. To arouse faith in those who lack faith (*appasannānaṃ pasādāya*).
8. To strengthen faith in those who have faith (*pasannānaṃ bhiiyobhāvāya*).
9. To establish the true Dhamma (*Saddhammaṭṭhitiyā*).
10. To support the Vinaya (*Vinayānuggahāya*).¹

Wherever the Vinaya rules are respected and observed, there the Buddhist religion will prosper. Wherever they are flouted and neglected the true teaching will decay and perish.

It is the duty of the monks to follow the rules that they accepted at the time of their ordination. However, lay Buddhists can play their part by supporting those monks who respect the training. If the laity know that monks are not permitted to use money, cook food, to eat food that has not been offered to them at the right time, or to practise astrology, palmistry, prescribe medicine, sell amulets, *etc.*, then corrupt monks will have a hard time, while those monks who teach the Dhamma or earnestly practise meditation will be encouraged to strive even harder to preserve the true teaching of the Buddha.

It is a joint effort. The Vinaya rules were designed to make the monks dependent on the laity for their support. The laity, in return, by inviting the monks regularly for alms get an opportunity to learn the Dhamma. They should use that opportunity to gain knowledge and wisdom, and not offer alms only for the sake of “making merit,” in the pious hope of future prosperity. If offering alms is done merely for the sake of enjoying celestial pleasures or human sensual pleasures after death, or to maintain one’s good reputation, that would be a missed opportunity and a great loss comparable to that of Āḷāra the Kālāma or Udaka Rāmaputta, who both taught the Bodhisatta, but did not get to hear the teachings of the Buddha.

The Kula Sutta² lists nine qualities of a family that makes them worth approaching, and having approached to be worth sitting with:—

1. They are pleased to greet a monk.
2. They are pleased to pay homage.

¹ A.v.70.

² A.iv.387.

3. They are pleased to offer a seat.
4. They do not hide what they have to give.
5. When they have plenty they give plenty.
6. When they have excellent things they give them.
7. They give respectfully.
8. They sit close to listen to the Dhamma.
9. They listen attentively.

Lay supporters like this are a pleasure to visit, teaching them is delightful, and their offering of alms is of great benefit. If they ask a question that I am unable to answer adequately, I am inspired to study more to clarify my understanding so that I can explain better. Intelligent lay supporters gain knowledge, encourage the monks to be more diligent, and thereby help to preserve the true Dhamma.

If you read the discourses you will see that most of them were instigated by a householder, a wanderer, a deity, or a monk asking a question to the Buddha or to one of his disciples. Sometimes, the Buddha would give a discourse without first being asked a question, but most of those teachings were given to the monks who, by their undertaking to follow the training and by dwelling in the presence of the Buddha, were open to instruction and teachings.

Look at the very well-known [Maṅgala Sutta](#), for example. A certain unnamed deity approached the Blessed One at night and questioned him about the auspicious signs that lead to future prosperity. The Buddha replied in detail, enumerating thirty-eight wholesome practices such as charity, morality, Dhamma discussion, and meditation that, if practised, guaranteed future blessings.

A number of discourses, classed as *Vedalla* or analytical discussions, are a whole series of questions and answers. The [Cūḷavedalla Sutta](#), for example, is a Dhamma discussion between the householder Visākha and his former wife, the nun Dhammadinnā, who had swiftly become an Arahant after her ordination.

Teaching anything to a student who is not eager to learn is onerous even if it is one's duty to teach them. If you have read this far, then one can assume that you are eager to learn the Dhamma. Listening to or reading the Dhamma is a great blessing, and discussing the Dhamma is also a great blessing. Don't be afraid to ask questions. However, do some reading and reflection first so that the discussion will be beneficial.

Focus on the Fundamentals

Fundamentalism is a word that conjures up a vision of extremism, but the Buddha's Middle Way avoids the two extremes of sensual indulgence and self-mortification. Many mistakenly believe that this means to practise moderation in all things. However, the Noble Eightfold Path leading to nibbāna requires a lot more than a moderate amount of effort and intelligence. The lazy, and those who lack wisdom, cannot even set one foot on the preliminary path to nibbāna, let alone reach the Noble Path. The Middle Way is a steep and direct path for the energetic who are scrupulous regarding moral precepts, and totally committed to living by Buddhist principles of truthfulness, harmlessness, and intelligent inquiry.

As it says in the Anuruddha Mahāvitakka Sutta:¹

1. This Dhamma is for one who wants little, not for one who wants much (*appicchassāyaṃ dhammo, nāyaṃ dhammo mahicchassa*).
2. This Dhamma is for the contented, not for the discontented (*santuṭṭhassāyaṃ dhammo, nāyaṃ dhammo asantuṭṭhassa*).
3. This Dhamma is for the reclusive, not for one fond of society (*pavivittassāyaṃ dhammo, nāyaṃ dhammo saṅgaṇīkārāmassa*).
4. This Dhamma is for the energetic, not for the lazy (*āraddhavīriyassāyaṃ dhammo, nāyaṃ dhammo kusitassa*).
5. This Dhamma is for one with well-established mindfulness, not for one of confused mindfulness (*upaṭṭhitassatissāyaṃ dhammo, nāyaṃ dhammo muṭṭhassatissa*).
6. This Dhamma is for the composed, not for the uncomposed (*samāhitassāyaṃ dhammo, nāyaṃ dhammo asamāhitassa*).
7. This Dhamma is for the wise, not for the unwise (*paññavato ayaṃ dhammo, nāyaṃ dhammo duppaññassa*).
8. This Dhamma is for one who is free from impediments, not for one who delights in impediments (*nippapañcārāmassāyaṃ dhammo nippapañcaratino, nāyaṃ dhammo papañcārāmassa papañcaratino*).

The final goal of Buddhism is to realise nibbāna, which means the cessation of craving. It is unusual for human beings to be free from desire and attachment to material things. If we were not fond of sensual pleasures, we would not have taken rebirth in the sensual

¹ A.iv.227.

realms, but would be dwelling in the Brahma worlds. When we get what we desire, it rarely ends there. The enjoyment of pleasure usually only increases desires. If someone gives you a box of chocolates can you eat only one, or do you eat the whole box?

At the very beginning of the Buddhist path, therefore, one has to renounce greed and desire, being content with the bare necessities of life. Monks should be content to eat only once a day, being satisfied with any kind of almsfood. Lay Buddhists, who don't have the luxury of meditating or studying all day, but have to be physically active, will need to eat more often, but they should also try to be content with eating only for the sake of nutrition, to stay healthy, not eating for the sake of pleasure.

When desire has been restrained to some extent, the next step is to develop mindfulness and concentration. This cannot be done while busily engaged in social activities, watching cricket, listening to music, or enjoying other entertainments. To pursue the Middle Way one must avoid the extreme of sensual indulgence. To develop concentration deep enough to penetrate the Four Noble Truths is not something that can be done in a few hours, nor even in a few days. At the very least, to gain a moderate degree of concentration, one needs to practise meditation for the entire day without a break. Striving hard in this way may be physically uncomfortable, sometimes even painful, but it is not the extreme of self-mortification.

Pious lay Buddhists may go to a Buddhist temple to observe the Uposatha. On such days, they generally wear white clothes, and observe the eight precepts, which include not eating after midday, not listening to entertainments, and not using perfumes or cosmetics. This tradition dates from the time of the Buddha. From the story of [Mahākāla](#) it seems that he spent the entire night in the monastery, listening to the Dhamma and practising meditation. This is what is meant by, "This Dhamma is for the energetic, not for the lazy."

When one practises correctly like this, abstaining from talking, and striving continuously for the whole day (or the whole day and night) without a break, the average meditator will find it very difficult. The mind will become obstructed by one or other of the five hindrances. Very often, meditators will fall asleep, or experience painful sensations from sitting for long periods. Their mind may become very restless, so they may seek for distractions from

practising meditation. Only if they persist as instructed by the meditation teacher will they overcome these mental hindrances, and be able to maintain awareness of whatever occurs in the present moment. This is what is meant by “This Dhamma is for one with well-established mindfulness, not for one of confused mindfulness.”

When the meditator is able to sustain mindfulness for a respectable period, being able to sit in one position or walk back and forth for one hour or longer, the five hindrances will no longer overwhelm the mind. Instead, mindfulness successfully overcomes the five hindrances. If drowsiness or restlessness do sometimes appear, the mindful meditator is able to notice them quickly and thus they are dispelled. This is what is meant by, “This Dhamma is for one who composed, not for one who is uncomposed.”

The mind that is thus made alert, pliant, and well concentrated is able to see mental and physical phenomena as they truly are. In due course, when mindfulness and concentration are mature, insight will arise into the true nature of phenomena as being impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self. This is what is meant by, “This Dhamma is for the wise, not for the unwise.”

Meditating properly is not at all easy. It takes a lot of training and persistent practice. Even for pious Buddhists who have a good foundation in morality and a satisfactory grasp of the Buddha’s deeper teachings, it is easy to lose focus on the fundamentals and get distracted by other activities. One only has to visit any Buddhist country to see how many luxurious temples and magnificent pagodas there are. The meditation centres especially are well supported with the best almsfood being offered daily. Naturally, if one has practised meditation seriously for a few weeks or months, which is long enough to appreciate the benefits, then one will want to support others who also wish to practise meditation. However, if one wants to make more merit, one should practise meditation oneself, and not just urge and support others. Losing focus on the fundamentals, which means engaging in the practice of meditation to establish mindfulness and deep concentration is what is meant by, “This Dhamma is for one who is free from impediments, not for one who delights in impediments.”

Virtues Needed by Leaders

In 2016, it is now fifteen years since the infamous terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre. This has been a good year for women, with Theresa May becoming the Prime Minister of the UK and Hilary Clinton receiving the Democrats' nomination as their candidate in the US Presidential Election. This has never happened before, but there's a good chance that we may soon see the first female president of the United States. In many countries, women still face obstacles, but well-educated women can succeed and reach the very top.

Gender-based discrimination is still common in many parts of the world, but it makes no sense to waste the talents of half of the population. The best person to appoint to any job is the most capable, experienced, and intelligent individual available. Angela Merkel has been doing the top job in Germany for over ten years, and Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister of the UK for eleven years. Whatever your opinion of these leaders, their success shows that gender has little to do with ability. [Other countries with incumbent female leaders](#) are Austria, Chile, Croatia, Liberia, Lithuania, Malta, Mauritius, the Martial Islands, Nepal, South Korea, Switzerland, and Taiwan.

Women are able to gain the highest spiritual attainments. The exponent of the [Cūḷavedalla Sutta](#) mentioned above was a Bhikkhūnī who attained Arahantship in a matter of weeks, while her former husband, Visākha, was of less mature perfections, so he had attained only the stage of Non-returning. She was praised by the Buddha as the nun most skilled in teaching the Dhamma. The monk praised for the same virtue was none other than the Venerable Sāriputta.

What makes the difference between a highly capable person and one who is unsuited for a leading role is not physical size or strength, but intelligence, knowledge, and wisdom. A leader must have emotional and spiritual maturity, and a powerful intellect. They need to have six special virtues, as listed by the Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw in his [exhortation](#) to his disciples.

1. The first virtue is tolerance (*khamā*).
2. The second is energy (*uṭṭhāna*).
3. Thirdly, comes vigilance or wakefulness (*jāgariya*).
4. Fourth is distribution or sharing (*saṃwibhāga*).
5. Fifthly, there is compassion or sympathy (*dayā*).
6. The last virtue is foresight (*ikkhanā*).

Tolerance

If there is one thing that I cannot stand, it's intolerance. Many countries are populated by people from a wide range of ethnic origins, speaking different languages, and holding divergent views on religion and ethics. Diversity is not a new phenomenon, and intolerance is not a new human trait. The caste system existed during the time of the Buddha, and it still exists now. Barbaric practices and punishments existed then, and they still exist today in many places.

To practice tolerance does not mean that we condone something. We may strongly disagree with the views and practices of others, but if we understand the basic Buddhist teaching that all beings are the owners of their actions and will inherit the results of their actions we need not feel compelled to change their views or behaviour. We can criticise, we can advise, we can encourage, and we should inform, but we should not threaten or harass anyone.

Buddhists, like Hindus, regard the cow as sacred.¹ We owe cattle a special debt of gratitude for providing dairy products, and (in some countries) for providing agricultural labour. Buddhists do not generally eat beef, although most have few qualms about eating other forms of meat, poultry, and fish. However, even if one is a vegetarian, it is not one's own kamma if others kill living beings or if they choose to eat various forms of meat and fish. The skilful attitude was taught by the Buddha in the [Sallekha Sutta](#):—

“Other people may harm living beings. However, we will not harm any living thing. Thus, you should practise effacement that will lessen the defilements.”

Tradition dictates what kind of food is acceptable to eat according to one's culture or religion, and ethics is rarely the reason that a particular food is taboo. Religious books prohibit certain foods, but those who follow a different religion or none do not need to obey those injunctions. The purity of the speech that leaves one's mouth is more important than the purity of the food that enters it. Censuring others for evil deeds is justified, but everyone needs to eat to sustain life and killing is involved in most food production. There is little difference between eating beef, pork, chicken, or fish. Buying or cooking meat or fish is blameless unless one urges others to kill.

¹ See [Cow Dhamma](#) by the Venerable Ledi Sayādaw.

Shortly after the assassination of Martin Luther King, an American primary school teacher, [Jane Elliot](#), performed a now famous psychological experiment on her pupils. She divided the class into two groups: brown-eyed and blue-eyed children. She then proceeded to tell the class that the blue-eyed children were superior to the brown-eyed children, and treated the blue-eyed children differently to the brown-eyed children. The blue-eyed children soon began to treat the brown-eyed children with intolerance and cruelty. The brown-eyed children became timid, and their test results suffered.

Although the results of her experiment may not be conclusive, I think it highlights a very real tendency for human beings to be intolerant towards others who are not members of their own group. These tribal traits are a result of evolution and are not easy to identify, let alone to remove. They are the basis for casteism, racism, sexism, homophobia, hooliganism, and other antisocial behaviours.

The latest outbreak of intolerance in France over Moslem women wearing the [burkini](#) is typical of the problem. Although there is a solid case for requiring women to uncover their faces in public places for ease of identification, there is not a single logical reason to insist that women uncover their hair while bathing. Western women cover their hair with swimming caps, some women wear one-piece swim-suits for the sake of modesty, and others wear wet-suits. The sole reason for this ban is Islamophobia. If Moslems can tolerate Western women wearing bikinis or even going topless, surely Westerners should be able to tolerate Moslem women wearing a burkini!



Energy

The term used for energy (*uṭṭhāna*) in this context is not the usual word (*virīya*). Literally, it means “Standing up.” Perhaps readiness would be a better translation. Ordinary people will make an effort when they need to, but they prefer to follow rather than to lead. Lazy people only make an effort when they must, but leaders are the first to take action as they are alert to danger, courageous, and decisive.

To be successful, leaders need to continue striving even in the face of opposition. Ordinary people, who lack courage, will soon give up if they meet with opposition and criticism. They are too susceptible to **peer pressure** as they are lacking in moral courage.

Wakefulness

Akin to readiness is vigilance or wakefulness (*jāgariya*). Average people sleep about eight hours out of twenty-four, but leaders make do with much less. When the Brighton Bomb detonated at 2:54 am on 12th October 1984, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was still awake, preparing notes for her Tory party conference speech the following day. Meditators should be content with six hours sleep at the most, while diligent meditators often sleep four hours or less.

The Buddha was exceptional — he slept only one hour at night, from approximately 2:00 am until 3:00 am. He also rested briefly during the day to rest his body. Buddha means “The Awakened One.” Compared to the Arahants, everyone else is dull and deluded. Even while awake they fail to notice what would be obvious if they were paying full attention. Good leaders are always alert to changes.

Sharing

Leaders know that strength lies in unity. They are part of a team and know that they cannot succeed without the help of others. They share the fruits of their success and the credit with those who support them. Leaders who are domineering and intolerant rule by threats and violence, or by bribery and nepotism, but that is not the route to prolonged prosperity. If only a few cronies benefit from the leader remaining in power, leadership challenges, coups, or assassinations are a constant danger. Good leaders get re-elected repeatedly due to their popularity, and can retire when they wish to leave office.

Compassion

One who rightly understands the Buddha’s teaching on ownership of one’s kamma has compassion for those who do evil and hold wrong views. The death sentence, torture, and cruel punishments have no place in any civilised society that respects the truth. Evil doers must be restrained to protect others, and retrained to rehabilitate them into society if that is at all possible.

“Hatred never ceases through hatred in this world;
through love alone does it cease. This is an eternal law.”¹

Parents who resort to beating their children, CEOs who scold their staff, and teachers who shout at their pupils are very unskillful. Their anger and rage convey entirely the wrong message and are counter-productive, obstructing the learning process. In the *Kesi Sutta* of the Gradual Sayings,² the Buddha has a conversation with a horse-trainer, asking him how he trains horses. The horse-trainer says that he trains his horses with kindness and with strictness, but if neither works, then he kills them.

When asked how he trains his disciples, the Buddha replies that he trains them with kindness and with strictness, but if neither works, then he kills them.

Kesi is shocked at this, and asks, “Surely the Blessed One does not kill his disciples?”

The Buddha replies that if his disciples do not respond to either kindness nor to strictness, then he no longer considers them to be worth speaking to, and their fellow monks also think the same. For those who have undertaken the spiritual training to seek enlightenment, this is end of any progress on the path.

The Bodhisatta’s charioteer, *Channa*, was very difficult to instruct by other monks due to his pride in his former close association with the Bodhisatta. Just before his demise, the Buddha instructed the Venerable Ānanda to have the *Brahmaṇḍa* imposed on Channa by the Saṅgha. This most severe “punishment” by the monks of a stubborn monk consisted of not admonishing him any further.

After this punishment was imposed on Channa, he mended his ways and became humble again, asking the monks to remove the penalty, which they did.

You may see or hear about cases of monks punishing novices or temple-boys with beatings and so forth, but it not allowable according to the monastic discipline. However naughty a novice is, he should not be punished in cruel ways. He can be assigned onerous tasks like cleaning latrines, or given physical labour such as carrying bricks or firewood, but he should not be beaten, imprisoned, or deprived of food. If he remains stubborn and impossible to instruct, he must be sent away from the monastery.

¹ Dhṛp v 5.

² A.ii.111.

Most criminal justice systems are based on ideas of punishment and retribution, which is why they don't work very well, if at all. The robber *Āṅgulimāla* had killed 999 people when he met the Buddha, but the Buddha was able to rehabilitate him to such an extent that he became an Arahant, a perfect saint free from all lust, anger, and delusion. It takes both great compassion and great wisdom to show the right path to those of a criminal bent.

The *Āṅgulimāla Organisation* in the UK sends Buddhist chaplains into prisons to support Buddhists who end up in prison. In India, Sri Goenka and *Kiran Bedi* have done exemplary work by conducting vipassanā meditation courses in prisons to rehabilitate hardened criminals. If anyone is able to change their behaviour, that change has to start from self-realisation and acceptance of personal responsibility for one's own actions. Right understanding cannot be imposed, it has to come from within.

One can, and sometimes must, use force to prevent the wicked from harming others, but it's a short-term policy. To bring about long-term changes to human character requires a far-sighted and compassionate view-point.

Foresight

This brings us to the sixth of the qualities needed by a leader — foresight (*ikkhanā*). This important virtue inculcates patience and wisdom. Rather than acting hastily, a person with foresight reflects carefully on the likely outcome of any action before taking it.

The Buddha said that three kinds of individuals can be found in the world: the blind, the one-eyed, and the two-eyed.¹ The meaning is this:—

1. A person is called “blind” if he or she lacks the foresight to see his or her own benefit in this very life. Lacking any moral restraint, diligence, or wisdom, he or she does many evil deeds such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, telling lies, or indulging in intoxicants. Being sensually indulgent and lazy, such a person ends up in debt, in prison, or addicted to drugs, alcohol, or gambling.
2. A person is called “one-eyed” if he or she has to the foresight to see his or her benefit in this very life. Not being averse to

¹ A.i.128, *Andha Sutta*.

hard work, such an individual makes an effort to acquire wealth to enjoy sensual pleasures and support his or her family. Sometimes he or she is honest, but lacking the eye of wisdom, he or she is sometimes dishonest, acquiring wealth in unskillful ways, which though not illegal, bring harm to others.

3. A person is only called “two-eyed” if he or she also has the knowledge to distinguish between wholesome and unwholesome actions, and thus observes the five precepts, avoids wrong livelihood, and fulfils his or her duties to society.

Many Buddhists are only one-eyed, not two-eyed. They are not pious, they do not observe the five precepts, they do not have the right view regarding ownership of one’s actions. If they practice charity it is at best donation of the medium kind motivated by desire for sensual pleasures in the celestial or human realms of existence, or it is of the inferior kind, wishing for gain and favour in this very life. Lacking foresight, they do not reflect on the brevity of life and the inevitability of death. If they meditate at all it is only the superficial practice of tranquillity to calm their restless mind and guilty conscience for a short while. They lack any aspiration to gain insight and higher stages of the path.

It is my experience whenever I urge most Buddhists to take up meditation practice in earnest, to attend a one-day retreat, or to go away on a ten-day course. Only a tiny minority, even among those who express an interest, actually attend meditation classes or a retreat. It takes many years of urging and encouraging to get the average Buddhist to put one foot on the path. Many who make a start soon give up and revert to their short-sighted ways.

The problem is that they are still “one-eyed.” They may be very diligent and hard-working in worldly matters, not lazy at all by most people’s standards. However, due to their lack of foresight they do not see the true value of the Buddha’s teaching, and they are blind to the next existence. The Story of the Weaver’s Daughter told in my book, “[Where Have You Come From?](#)” also shows how rare it is for people to have foresight.

The young girl in this story was about thirteen years of age when her mother died. Seeing this in his divine-eye, the Buddha travelled the long distance to Ālavī to teach her. The essence of his teaching was this: “Life is uncertain, death is certain. Contemplate death

constantly to protect yourself from danger.” All of the villagers heard that same discourse, but within days or weeks they had forgotten it, and became as heedless as ever. Only that girl took it to heart, and meditated constantly on death for three years. Seeing that she was ready to gain Stream-winning, the Buddha returned to the village and the following dialogue ensued:–

“Young girl, where have you come from?” the Buddha asked.

“I do not know, venerable sir,” the girl replied.

“To where are you going?”

“I do not know, venerable sir.”

“Do you not know?”

“I know, venerable sir.”

“Do you know?”

“I do not know, venerable sir.”

Although the Buddha’s questions were extremely brief and cryptic, without any reference to past or future lives, the young girl understood what he meant, whereas the others in the audience took the questions literally and were puzzled by the girl’s answers, saying that she was saying whatever she wished, without answering the Buddha’s questions. The Buddha silenced them, asking the girl to explain her replies. She explained that when he asked, “Where have you come from?” he meant to ask if she knew from which existence she was reborn into this one. When he asked, “Where are you going?” he meant to ask if she knew to which existence she would be going after death. When he asked, “Do you not know?” he meant to ask if she knew that she would die. When he asked, “Do you know?” he meant to ask if she knew when she would die. He concluded with this verse:–

“Blind is this world. Few are there who see clearly.

Like birds that escape from a net, few go to a blissful state.”¹

The young girl gained Stream-winning on the conclusion of the verse, and on returning home, she was accidentally killed by a heavy beam on the loom at which her father had been working the whole night. Distraught at the sudden death of his only daughter, the weaver came to the Buddha, listened to his teaching, ordained as a monk, and gained Arahantship.

On another occasion, during the infamous Kosambī incident when the monks were quarrelling over a trivial matter of monastic

¹ Dhṛ v 174.

discipline, the Buddha related the story of *Dīghāvu* (Dīghāyu), the *Dīghīti Kosala Jātaka* (No.371), to admonish the monks and urge them to practice forbearance, to be farsighted, not short-sighted. However, they would not listen even to the Buddha, so he left to spend a period of solitude in the Pārileyyaka Forest.

The full story of *Dīghāvu* related in the Vinaya Piṭaka¹ tells how an exiled king admonishes his son to be farsighted, not short-sighted, while he is being led off to execution. The son, who is in disguise, heeds his father's advice, thus not revealing his identity. After his parents are executed, he gradually wins the trust of the usurper, and enters his service. When he gains a perfect opportunity to kill the king, *Dīghāvu* spares his life, and instead asks the king to spare his. The grateful king shares his kingdom with *Dīghāvu* and they become firm friends.

If we take the long-term view, this cycle of birth and death (*saṃsāra*) is infinite. If we are now suffering some cruel injustice in this life, we must at some time in the past have meted out similar injustice to others. According to the Buddha's teaching, nothing happens without a reason. Not everything is due to actions in the past existences, but there is nothing that happens due to blind chance, nor is it a punishment imposed by an Almighty God. Evil deeds bear fruit with unpleasant results, and good deeds bear fruit with pleasant results. That is only natural. *Kamma* is neither malicious nor unjust. According to the deed, the fruit manifests whenever the conditions are ripe. **Birth depends on actions, and nobody can escape from the results of their actions.**

In his previous life as *Dīghāvu*, the Bodhisatta showed great forbearance and compassion, but also great foresight and insight. Having faith that his own parents were to be executed not only due to the wickedness of King Brahmadatta, but also as an inevitable consequence of their own previous *kamma*, showed deep insight into the workings of *kamma*.

Heeding his father's words to "Be farsighted, not short-sighted," showed his great forbearance in very distressing circumstances. He was powerless to intervene to prevent the execution of his parents. Had he tried, he would simply have revealed his identity as their son, and would undoubtedly have been executed along with them, which would not have liberated the country from the wicked king who had usurped the throne.

¹ Vin.i.343 ff, cf. Dhpa.i.46f on Dhpa v 6.

Instead, Dīghāvu suppressed his anger, remained silent, and plotted to win the favour of the king. After years of working as the king's servant he gained his trust, and became his personal attendant. In due course, a perfect opportunity arose for him to slaughter the sleeping king to wreak vengeance for the murder of his parents. However, being someone who had firm faith in the law of kamma, he realised that to do so would not resolve anything, but would only make fresh evil kamma for himself, resulting in his own execution at the hands of another in many future existences. He would very likely be captured by the king's men. Even if he could escape abroad, the country would continue to be ruled by the king's descendants, who, like their father, would not have faith in the Dhamma.

The only long-term solution was to prove to the king that to spare someone's life was far more noble than to take it. He therefore woke the king and asked him to spare his own life. As long as he was living, Dīghāvu was under the threat of discovery of his true identity, so he needed to persuade the king that in spite of the king's misdeeds, he posed no threat to him at all as he was committed to observing the five precepts. King Brahmadata was won over to the right view, and thereafter ruled together with Dīghāvu righteously in accordance with the Dhamma. The two became firm friends, and the entire country benefited immeasurably from gaining two kings who cared for and protected each other. It was the great foresight of the Bodhisatta that led to this best of all possible outcomes.

Ownership of One's Actions

The right view regarding ownership of one's actions is crucial. Anyone who does not believe in the inheritance of their own actions is capable of committing the most heinous crimes. If the leaders of a country hold wrong views it is a disaster for the entire nation.

Most industrialised nations have repealed the death sentence even for the most heinous crimes like mass murder, drug trafficking, and treason. However, [according to Amnesty International](#), 25 countries performed a combined total of more than 1,630 executions in 2015 — the highest number of executions since 1989.

In some states, where the leaders lack compassion and tolerance, extra-judicial killings are common. It shows a serious break-down in law and order. It also often happens during wartime or when a

ruthless leader is clinging onto power without the support of the majority of the population. Ruthless leaders are unwilling to cooperate with others and share responsibilities. They will even execute their own family members to retain their vice-like grip on power.

The design, manufacture, and sale of weapons spreads war and poverty to many parts of the world. According to the Buddha's teaching, the arms-trade is a wrong livelihood.¹ So too are trading in living-beings, meat, intoxicants, and poisons.

The trade in alcohol is a huge business that causes immeasurable harm to society. Trading in Class A drugs is a serious crime that can lead to a sentence of life in prison, while trading in Class B drugs can lead to a sentence of up to fourteen years in prison.² However, trading in alcohol is condoned because it brings in more tax revenue than it costs to deal with alcohol-related social issues and health-care.

However, not all costs of alcohol abuse are paid for by the tax-payer. Many hidden costs are paid by those related to alcoholics and binge drinkers. It would be much better to curtail the trade in alcohol and have a healthier, happier population.

Although drug use is illegal, that does not prevent it from being a big social problem. The same would be true, but on a much bigger scale, if alcohol production and sale was regulated in a similar way to drugs. Criminals would be the first to profit from making the trade in alcohol illegal, as has been proved before in the US prohibition era. What good leadership can do is support health education, and legislate in a way to reduce alcohol consumption, and support those affected by its abuse, for example, by providing more safe-houses by those who suffer domestic abuse at the hands of their partners. Addicts can be rehabilitated, but programs need government funding.

Sports funding has had a very obvious affect on the medal winning performance of the UK's Olympic athletes, but the spin-off for those engaged in sport at all levels of ability is hard to measure. If young people take up competitive sports before they even start drinking, it will surely benefit society. Sports facilities like swimming pools keep people healthy and reduces the costs of health-care.

Good leadership directs efforts where they are most needed, heals divisions that cause disharmony, and rewards excellence whenever it is merited. That's how Leicester City won the Premiership!

¹ A.iii.208.

² www.gov.uk

The Dhamma is Very Profound

The Buddha's teaching is profound and goes against the current of desire. If one has faith in Buddhism, one should try to arouse faith in others for their long-term benefit. Teaching is one of the duties of a monk — to study and preserve the Buddha's teachings for future generations. Their other duty is to practise meditation and gain insight knowledge leading to the realisation of nibbāna. Lay people should urge their friends and associates to take up meditation practice. They should learn the teachings too, so that they can at least answer questions on the basic teachings without misrepresenting what the Buddha actually taught.

When the Buddha gained Enlightenment he reflected thus: "This truth that I have realised is very profound. Though it is sublime and conducive to inner peace, it is hard to understand. Since it is subtle and not accessible to mere intellect and logic, it can be realised only by the wise." Fortunately, however, he also realised that there were some with only a thin veil of ignorance, who would be able to understand the truth if he taught them, so he began his dispensation by teaching the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta to the group of five disciples (*pañcavaggiyā*). For over forty-five years he continued teaching the Four Noble Truths, presenting it in different ways to all those who would at least gain some benefit, even if they did not gain final liberation from suffering.

It is noteworthy that he would first use his mind-reading abilities to discern if an individual had the potential to gain realisation, and would only teach them what they were ready to understand.

Is there a Self or Not?

A wanderer named Vacchagotta approached the Buddha and asked him directly: "Is there a self?" The Buddha was silent. Then Vacchagotta asked: "Is there then no self?" Again the Buddha was silent. Vacchagotta got up and walked away.

After he had left, the Venerable Ānanda asked the Buddha why he had not answered. The Buddha explained that if he had replied that there is a self, that would have been siding with the Eternalists, who believe that a permanent soul transmigrates after death. If he had replied that there is no self, that would have been siding with the Annihilationists, who believe that existence ends with death.

Furthermore, had he replied that there is a self, that would be contrary to the teaching that all phenomena are not-self, and if he had replied that there is no self Vacchagotta would have been even more confused than he was already, thinking that the self, which he formerly believed that he had, did not exist.

In other words, Vacchagotta was not yet ready to understand the profound doctrine of not-self as he firmly held a wrong-view. The so-called self that we refer to in normal conversation as: “I did this,” or “He said that,” is a conventional truth, not an absolute reality. The mental and physical phenomena comprising a living-being are continuously changing — arising and then immediately passing away. By following the Buddha’s path, we can see through this illusion and understand the three universal characteristics of mental and physical phenomena: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self.

Unfit to Discuss With

In the [Kathāvatthu Sutta](#) it says:–

“It is by how he engages in a discussion, monks, that an individual should be known as fit to discuss with or unfit to discuss with. If, monks, on being asked a question that deserves a direct answer, an individual does not give a direct answer; on being asked a question that deserves a qualified answer, an individual does not give a qualified answer; on being asked a question that deserves a counter-question, an individual does not ask a counter-question; on being asked a question that deserves to be set aside, an individual does not set the question aside; then he is not fit to discuss with.”

If someone asks a question like, “Did the Buddha teach the doctrine of rebirth?” one can answer it with: “Yes, there is no doubt that he did.” One can give references to substantiate the statement. However, if someone asks directly, “Is there any rebirth after death?” one should be honest and say, “The Buddha taught that there is,” or “I believe that there is,” rather than saying, “There is,” when one does not know it from one’s own direct experience.

If someone asks a question like, “Do murderers go to hell after death?” then one should give a qualified answer: “The Buddha taught that some do, and that some do not. If they killed their own mother

or father, or an Arahant, then they do. If they killed an ordinary human being or several human beings, they might well be reborn in hell after death, but it depends on what they do during the rest of their life, and what they think of at the moment of death.” See the [Mahākammavibhaṅga Sutta](#) for the relevant teaching.

Many discussions on religion, politics, ethics, or science, do not lead anywhere because people are attached to views. Take a topic like “Is Buddhism a religion?” for example — one person will say that it is a religion, while another will say that it is a philosophy, or a way of life. If someone asks a question like this one should reply with a counter-question: “What do you mean by religion.” Once the terms are clearly defined, then one can give a direct answer. If by “religion” you mean a doctrine that believes in an Almighty God who created the world and all living beings, then the answer should be “No, Buddhism is not a religion.” However, if by “religion” you mean “A body of doctrine that teaches its followers to lead an ethical life to find true happiness,” then we can say that Buddhism is a religion.

If one asks: “Is the universe eternal?” or “How was the universe created?” such questions should be set aside, as they have no satisfactory answer, and are not connected with the goal of putting an end to suffering.

If anyone is in the habit of taking a discussion off-topic, or making *ad hominem* attacks, quibbling about the meaning of words, or nit-picking about spelling, then one can soon realise that he or she is not fit to discuss a serious topic. Remaining silent is the best policy.

Skilful Speech

Ideally, speech should be not only true and pleasing to others, but also beneficial. Even if speech is displeasing to others, if it is beneficial, then it should be said. Sometimes, the Buddha used speech that was beneficial to some, but harmful to others. For example, when the brahmin [Māgaṇḍiya](#) offered his daughter [Māgaṇḍiyā](#) to the Buddha as a bride the Buddha declined, saying that he did not wish to touch her foul body even with his foot (Sn.163). [Māgaṇḍiya](#) and his wife became Non-returners after this, but [Māgaṇḍiyā](#) took it very badly, and conceived a hatred for the Buddha. Out of spite she conspired against [Sāmāvati](#), who was a devout disciple of the Buddha, and was cruelly executed by the king for her wickedness.

The fault does not lie with the Buddha's truthful speech. It is true that a woman's body (and a man's) is nothing but a sack of skin full of all kinds of foul parts — it lies solely with Māgaṇḍiyā being too conceited about her physical beauty.

Fake News

As far as possible, one should avoid speech that is displeasing to others, but sometimes it is necessary to refute untruths. Nowadays, there is a lot of fake news available as it is easy for rumours to spread without anyone checking the facts. Even before the invention of the Internet, this was a problem. Sir Winston Churchill said: "A lie gets half way around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on." ([Brainy Quotes](#))

Politicians with an agenda use lies and half-truths to stir up hatred between different groups. Religious and political leaders should be promoting tolerance and harmony, but many seek their own advantage by spreading intolerance and racism. In the [Dabbhapuppha Jātaka](#), a wily jackal saw two otters disputing over the ownership of a fish. He offered his services to make a judgement on their dispute. They agreed, so he gave the head to one, the tail to the other, and took the middle for himself.

In any community where there are people of different religions, or from different ethnic backgrounds, the entire community can be prosperous if they co-operate and remain in harmony. Even within a family or a workplace there can be disputes. Wherever harmony is destroyed, everyone suffers. People may be lynched or beaten to death on the basis of a rumour. Careers, friendships, and marriages can be destroyed by false allegations. Anyone who claims to be fighting the war on error should make a proper inquiry before accepting as true the statement of another, words written in any book or on the Internet. Whenever accusations of serious wrong-doing are made, such as murder, theft, or sexual assault, a proper investigation should be made by the police and a judgement made in the courts. If the decision is just, everyone should accept it and abide by the ruling. If it is not, then one can appeal to a higher court, or just accept it as the result of past evil kamma and get on with one's life. The world is full of injustice, and it is seldom worthwhile dedicating one's entire life to reversing an unjust decision.

The Goat That Became a Dog

This fable is from the *Hitopadesa*, a Sanskrit work of moral tales by a little known pandit named Narayana from the 12 century C.E.

At one time, a Brahmin bought a small goat and carried it with him for the purpose of performing a ritual, an act to propitiate a deity. A group of scoundrels seeing him carrying a goat, wanted to get it for nothing. They made a plot, and agreed to make claims that the goat was a dog. They waited at assigned places along the route that they knew the Brahmin would take. The person waiting at the first point said to the Brahmin on the latter's arrival, "Hello, Great Teacher! Why are you carrying a dog on your shoulders?" The Brahmin ejaculated with anger, "Who the devil are you? The animal on my shoulders is not a dog, but a goat. I have bought it for a ritual sacrifice. Can't you see that it is a goat? How could it be a dog?" So saying, he proceeded on his journey.

After walking for some distance, the Brahmin reached a place at the fringes of a jungle. There, a group appeared and one of them said "What a wonderful teacher! Since you belong to the high caste of Brahmins, it's really surprising that you are carrying a dog on your shoulders." The rest of the group joined in and agreed: "Yes. We are at a loss to know why he is carrying a dog on his shoulders." Then, the Brahmin's mind began to waver. He thought: "Just then a person had told me that the animal I carried is a dog. Could it be a dog? I had better take a close look at it." Thinking thus, he put down the goat and looked at it. He felt the goat's ears and said to himself, "Hmm! This is not a dog, but a goat after all." So saying he continued on his journey.

Then again when he reached the other side of the forested area, another group appeared and made fun of the Brahmin, clapping their hands, saying: "Hey, Look! Look! This is amazing. In spite of being a high caste Brahmin, he is carrying a base creature — a mean dog. How extraordinary!" Then the Brahmin thought to himself; "It seems to be true. The first person said that the animal on my shoulders is a dog. The second group also stated that it is a dog. This group also remarked that it is a dog. The beast I am carrying does not seem to be a goat after all. It appears to be a dog." He then set the animal free, uttering: "Off you go, you big dog."

After he had abandoned the goat and left, the animal was killed by the villains who cooked the flesh and made a feast of it.

Making a Thorough Investigation

Like other religions, Buddhism has its orthodox doctrines, which most of its followers regard as true and as the genuine teaching of the Buddha. However, it is now thought to be about 2,561 years since the Buddha's final passing away (there are also different opinions about the precise date of the Buddha's demise), and there are now many different schools of Buddhism to be found in the world. They agree on some matters, but diverge greatly on others, so how can anyone know which is correct?

The Four Great References

In the [Mahāparinibbāna Sutta](#), the Buddha gave four methods by which one should decide whether any statement was the Buddha's genuine teaching or not. They all amount to the same method — whatever the reputation of the source, one should compare the statement with the Dhamma and Vinaya. The first source is a monk who claims to have heard the teachings directly from the Blessed One. No such monk can be found now. The last such monk was present at the Second Buddhist Council, a hundred years after the Buddha's demise. The other three sources are a community of venerable monks lead by a great elder, a community of learned monks, or a single learned monk.

“Monks, the words spoken by that monk should neither be received with praise nor treated with scorn. Without praise and without scorn, every word and syllable should be carefully understood, and compared with the discourses and the rules of discipline. If when so compared they do not harmonise with the discourses, and do not fit in with the rules of discipline, then you may conclude, ‘Verily, this is not the word of the Blessed One, and has been wrongly grasped by that monk.’ Therefore, monks, you should reject it. However, if they harmonise with the discourses and fit in with the rules of discipline, then you may conclude, ‘Verily, this is the word of the Blessed One, and has been well grasped by that monk.’”

There are some who place great faith in their teacher, saying that he is an Arahant, and since Arahants never lie, whatever he says must be true. This is not a reliable reference. One should only use the four great references by examining the statement in the light of the Dhamma and Vinaya.

Another yardstick can be found in the Buddha's discourse to his step-mother, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, in the *Samkitta Sutta* (A.iv.200).

“Those things, Gotamī, regarding which you know, ‘These things lead to passion, not to dispassion; to bondage, not to liberation; to accumulation, not to relinquishment; to having many wishes, not to having few wishes; to discontent, not to contentment; to association, not to seclusion; to laziness, not to arousing energy; to being hard to support, not to being easy to support,’ definitely, Gotamī, you can decide, ‘This is not the Dhamma, this is not the Vinaya, this is not the Teacher’s instruction.’”

“Those things, Gotamī, regarding which you know, ‘These things lead to dispassion, not to passion; to liberation, not to bondage; to relinquishment, not to accumulation; to having few wishes, not to having many wishes; to contentment, not to discontent; to seclusion, not to association; to arousing energy, not to laziness; to being easy to support, not to being hard to support,’ definitely, Gotamī, you can decide, ‘This is the Dhamma, this is the Vinaya, this is the Teacher’s instruction.’”

If one compares this statement to other discourses and to the Vinaya rules, it fits perfectly. The Buddha frequently taught in this way, and the Vinaya rules are all designed to curtail passion, bondage, and to stir up energy.

Having made a thorough inquiry into the Buddha's teachings it should be obvious that one needs to practice meditation to gain personal realisation of those teachings. The era when people could realise nibbāna merely by listening to a short or long discourse has long since passed. Some bogus noble ones may try to convince you that there is no need to practice meditation, and that one only needs to listen to their Dhamma discourses, but they are selling snake oil.

It should be clear from the Buddha's brief teaching to Gotamī above that one must stir up strenuous effort, abandon the pursuit of sensual pleasures, and practice seclusion, which means to develop concentration. There are two kinds of seclusion: bodily seclusion (*kāyaviveka*) and mental seclusion (*cittaviveka*). The former means to live alone, without much social interaction, the latter means developing concentration by overcoming the five hindrances of sensual desire, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and sceptical doubt. Only the concentrated mind can see things as they

truly are. Theoretical knowledge through reading or listening to discourses, or by careful reflection on what one has learnt, is helpful, but it is not the same as direct knowledge. Knowing a lot about sailing and navigation would be very helpful or even essential for someone wishing to sail across the ocean, but it would not get anyone safely to their destination. The Dhamma taught by the Buddha is realisable by oneself (*paccataṃ veditabbo viññūhi*).

If one has made that thorough investigation through study, practice, and realisation, one will no longer need to rely on another or take things on trust. Anyone who has gained the first path of Stream-winning is assured of final liberation from the cycle of rebirth and is incapable of converting to another religion. As it says in the *Book of Ones*:—

“It is impossible, monks, it cannot happen that one endowed with right-view could point out another as his or her teacher. That is not possible. However, it is possible, monks, that an ordinary person could point out another as his or her teacher. That is possible.”

In this current era, only two kinds of individuals are thought to remain — those who can realise the Dhamma through training (*neyya*), and those who cannot realise the Dhamma however hard they strive (*padaparama*). The latter category include those who are mentally retarded or seriously mentally ill, those who have committed one of the six heinous crimes, those with a fixed wrong-view,¹ and those with obstructive kamma.² Fixed wrong views can be relinquished after making a careful study of the Buddha’s teachings and obstructive kamma can be removed by confession or asking for forgiveness.

A trainable individual (*neyya*) may be easy to train or difficult to train. If they are intelligent and diligent they may attain realisation in a matter of months or even weeks with the right teaching. If they are dull and lazy they may not attain realisation even after many years. There are many variables to consider. Don’t think about how long it will take, just practice as hard as you can, and don’t be gullible.

¹ **In brief:** fatalism, creationism, or nihilism. Please refer to the *Titthiyātanādi Sutta*.

² Concealing a serious offence, or insulting the Buddha, the Dhamma, or a noble disciple. These obstructions can be removed by confessing one’s offence or asking for forgiveness. The Buddhist custom is to ask for forgiveness in general terms if one has inadvertently offended any noble one by body, speech, or mind.