

A Cup of Tea

Light on the Teaching of the Buddha



[The Dharmasar Solution](#)

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A Cup of Tea

Empty the Cup, then Wake Up



I have heard:

Once the great Japanese Master Nan-in gave audience to a Western professor of philosophy. Serving tea, Nan-in filled his visitor's cup and kept on pouring. The overflowing tea filled up the saucer, spilled over into the tray, and still Nan-in kept pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he could restrain himself no longer: "Stop! The cup is full; no more can go in."

Nan-in said: "Like this cup, you are too full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you the Buddha's teaching unless first you empty your cup?"

Like the professor, you want to learn something about the Buddha's teaching; that's why you are reading this book. But if you are there, then you are full. You are filled with own self. Even if you feel that you are empty, then you are not empty at all: you are still there. Who is feeling empty? Only the name has changed: now you call yourself 'emptiness'.

Only when **you are not** are you actually empty, can the tea of the Buddha's teaching be poured into you. Of course when you are not, there is really no need to pour the tea. When you are not, when you are truly empty even of yourself, the whole existence begins pouring, showering beauty from every direction. Only when you are not, then you effortlessly become full.

A professor of philosophy came to see Zen Master Nan-in. It was very compassionate of Nan-in to grant him an audience. Of course the professor must have come to Nan-in for the wrong reasons, because philosophy means intellect, reasoning, thinking, doubting, argument. And that is the perfect way to fail, to be unenlightened, to close yourself off to the Buddha's teaching.

Doubt, skepticism, argument are barriers, ego-boundaries. If you argue then you are closed, and also the whole mystery of enlightenment is closed to you. Whenever you argue, you must assert. Assertion is aggressive, violent; truth cannot be known by an aggressive mind, it cannot be discovered by violence or disclosed by force. Truth cannot be found in words, in arguments or by logic.

In fact no one can tell you the truth; at best, they can tell you how to find it for yourself. You can come to know truth only when you relax, surrender and empty yourself. And not only was the professor of philosophy full of himself—you are the same. Everyone carries their own assumptions, attitude, philosophy and preconceptions. Everyone is a professor, because you profess your identities, ideas, views, your heroic stories about yourself; you believe in them and preach them to others.

You have your opinions, concepts and egotism, thus your eyes are dull, they cannot see; your mind is stupid, it cannot know; your heart is closed, you cannot feel anything beyond selfish desire. Ideas and egotism create stupidity because they make the mind full. And how much tea can a full cup hold? Ideas and egotism are like dust on a mirror. How can a dusty mirror reflect? Your intelligence is covered by the dust of opinions, egotism; thus everyone who is full of opinions and ego is bound to be stupid and dull, incapable of reflexion.

We all know the feeling that “No one knows me as I really am. If they could only understand me rightly, they would give me more credit, more respect. In fact they would love me and dedicate their lives to me! But they are so dull, so full of their own stories and nonsense that they cannot see what a great being I am.” Guess what: everyone feels this way! And everyone who knows you feels the same way about **you**.

That’s why professors of philosophy are almost always stupid. They know too much about words and ideas. They are too full of themselves, too heavy to actually know anything about life. They are so much in the mind that they can’t have wings to fly in the sky. And neither can they have roots in the earth. Thus they remain trapped by abstractions, neither grounded in the earth nor free to fly.

And remember, you are the same. There may be a difference of quantity, but every unenlightened mind is qualitatively the same, because mind thinks, argues, collects and gathers knowledge, and becomes dull. Now you are full with ego and philosophy. The more philosophies and ego you have, the farther you are from enlightenment. If you gather the dust of philosophy, innocence is lost, you become closed; the mirror of the mind becomes dull and stupid.

Only innocent children are intelligent, are capable of learning. If you can retain your childhood, if you continuously cleanse the mirror of the mind and reclaim your childhood, you can remain innocent and intelligent. An enlightened mind is a non-philosophical mind, an innocent, intelligent mind. The mirror is clear, no dust has gathered; every day a continuous cleansing goes on. That’s meditation.

The professor of philosophy came to visit Nan-in. He must have come out of curiosity, to see the renowned Master and receive some fresh answers he could take back to his university and use to impress others. People who are filled with questions are always in search of new answers. But there are only so many fundamental questions, and all answers must be in response to those same questions: questions of life, meaning, purpose and freedom. There are always more questions than answers, thus new answers are valuable in the philosophical gossip market, the idle talk of professors.

But Nan-in would not give him any answers. To be obsessed with knowledge, with questions and answers, with gossip and idle talk, is foolish. Nan-in could have given him a new mind, a new being, a new existence in which all questions are answered, because Nan-in was not a stupid professor but a Master.

You must have come to this book with many questions, because the mind gives birth to questions. Mind is a question-creating mechanism. Feed anything into it, out comes a question, and many more questions follow. Give any answer to it, and immediately the mind converts it into many questions, many doubts. You are filled with questions and answers; your cup is already full. No need for Nan-in to pour any tea into it, you are already overflowing.

You do not need any new answers. All questions and answers and arguments are useless, a waste of time and energy. The only answer that matters is the method of self-transformation given by the Buddha. And that one answer solves all questions. Philosophy has many questions, many answers—an endless, exhausting and ultimately fruitless search. The teaching of the Buddha has only one answer; whatever the question, the answer remains the same. The Buddha said: “The ocean has a single taste: that of salt. This is the sixth amazing and astounding quality of the ocean.” — *Upasatha Sutta* [*Udāna* 5.5] You taste seawater anywhere, and the taste remains the same.

So your questions are really irrelevant. Whatever you ask, the Buddha gives the same answer. But that one answer is the master key: it opens all doors. The Buddha has only one answer, and that answer is meditation, emptiness: how to empty yourself of your ‘self’.

The professor must have been hot and tired after walking to Nan-in’s cottage. He must have been in a hurry. And Nan-in, observing him, must have said, “Wait a little.” Mind is always in a hurry, always in search of instantaneous overarching realizations. For the mind to wait, to be content with little, is almost impossible. It wants **the answer**, and wants it **now**!

But Nan-in was an Oriental; his ways were indirect and subtle. He was also enlightened; he would not give an answer, he will give an experience. Nan-in must have said, “You look tired. I will prepare tea

for you. Wait a little, rest a little. Let's have a cup of tea, and then we can discuss whatever you like."

In Oriental culture, especially high Japanese culture, a criticism is never stated directly; to do so is to lose face. So Nan-in created a situation where he could deliver his message without loss of face either for himself or his guest. 'Please have a cup of tea' is a subtle, compassionate Japanese way of saying, "You are fatigued and dull, asleep. You need to wake up."

Nan-in went into his kitchen, put the water on to boil and started preparing the tea. But he was well aware of the professor. Not only was the water boiling, the professor also was boiling within. Not only was the tea kettle making sounds, the professor also was continuously chattering, babbling within his busy mind. The professor must have been getting ready, thinking over what to ask, how to ask, from where to begin. Having brought many thoughts from his colleagues and students, many questions, he must have been in a deep monologue.

Nan-in must have been watching, hearing the noise of the professor's mental conversation with the ghosts of his thoughts, smiling within, knowing well that this man is so full that nothing really valuable can penetrate him. The only answer that matters—realization of emptiness—could not be given because there was no space to receive it. As a great teacher, Nan-in must have wanted the Buddha to become a guest in this professor's house. But the guest cannot enter into the house; there is no room. His house is already full!

Out of compassion, the Buddha always wants to become a guest within you. He knocks from everywhere, but the door is locked. And even if he breaks the door, there is no room. You are so full with yourself and rubbish from school and family, and all types of useless nonsense you have accumulated over many, many lives, you cannot even enter into yourself; there is no room, no space. You live outside, alienated even from your own being. Even you cannot enter within yourself; everything is blocked. No wonder you sit down to meditate and nothing happens!

Then finally when the time was right and everything was ready, Nan-in poured the tea into the cup. The professor was uneasy because he was full of expectations—ideas from other people about the proper way to

pour tea. You are not supposed to spill a drop! But Nan-in kept on pouring and the cup was overflowing; soon it would be spilling on the floor. Of course, in England when serving tea, that is the absolutely most incompetent thing you can do. So the professor shouted, "Stop! What are you doing? Are you mad?"

A professor will always accuse an enlightened person of being mad. The professor is a reasonable man, has so many rules, so many expectations, so many voices talking in his head telling him what to do, right and wrong, heavy concerns about ambition, fame, prestige and so on. Of course, being unenlightened, he thinks the way to success is to follow the rules. And now this Zen madman is breaking the most fundamental rule of serving tea, pouring it all over the floor! "By God, what would Mother say?"

Nan-in was saying by his actions, "No, you are the one who is mad. You are so alert to observe that the cup cannot hold any more, but why are you unaware of your own self? You are overflowing with opinions, doctrines, philosophies, scriptures. You know too much already; I cannot give you anything. You have come here in vain. Before coming to me you should have emptied your cup, then I could pour something very good into it.

"You are not only mad, you are also a coward. You are so addicted to 'being' and 'somethingness' and 'fullness' that you cannot allow your cup to be empty even for a single moment. The moment you see emptiness anywhere, you compulsively start to fill it. You are terrified of emptiness; you are intimidated because emptiness appears to you like death. You will fill it with anything, even with shit, but you will fill it. Idiot!"

Of course, as a cultured Japanese, Nan-in would never bluntly chastise an honored guest, even a barbarian Westerner. So he created a device, a situation, an experience by which he could communicate indirectly what he would never say openly, except perhaps to a disciple in whom already developed the proper receptivity. By over-emphasizing fullness, he pointed out the value of emptiness. This is Dhamma language, the subtle disclosure of experiential truth by the Enlightened Ones.

Real emptiness means there is no cup, no ‘self’ left even to be empty. All the walls have disappeared, the bottom has fallen out; all that is left is an abyss. Then the Buddha can pour truth into you. Much is possible—in fact more than you can even imagine now—if you allow it. But to allow is arduous, because first you will have to empty yourself of your ‘self’.

Nan-in was saying to that professor: “Bow down, surrender, empty your mind. I am ready to pour the tea of emptiness, the Buddha’s teaching.” The professor had not even asked one question and Nan-in had already given the ultimate answer, because really there is no need to ask the question. The question always remains the same.

Whether you ask or not, the question is always about suffering. The question can take many forms but deep down it is one: the anxiety, the anguish, the meaninglessness, the futility of this life—so much hardship and suffering, never knowing who you really are, and why? You want to know; but you are so full of fabrications, so stuffed with nonsense that you cannot absorb even a drop of truth.

The Buddha’s teaching is that the ‘self’ of which we are so proud, and on account of which we endure so much, is a fiction. He describes in detail how and why we fabricate the self, and how it causes the suffering that ruins our lives. He also describes how to attain the emptiness—*nibbāna*, coolness—that means the end of all preventable, self-caused suffering.

But even after you understand all this, it’s still just words and ideas. You have to do the work, you have to become tranquil enough to observe yourself and see how you cheat yourself of your real life in the service of this fictitious ‘self’. Only you can empty yourself enough to have the insight that leads to awakening; all we can do is use words to create situations that guide and hopefully encourage you. Have a cup of tea!

The Dhamma

The Way It Is

Let's talk about the Dhamma. *Dhamma* in Pāli, or *ḍharma* for the Sanskrit purists, has several important meanings. But what I want to talk about today is Dhamma in its most profound, essential sense.

Dhamma means 'the way it is'. More specifically, '**what** it is about the **way** it is that **makes** it the way it is.' In other words, we are talking about qualities of Being.

The English word 'is' is the third-person singular present tense of the verb 'to be': to exist, to occur, to remain, to manifest a certain state or quality. Being is the most important word in any language. We're not talking about having or doing, thinking or knowing—and certainly not about believing—we're talking about Being: **the way it is**.

And how is it? For almost everyone, **life is suffering**. In other words, the principal quality manifested by or in their existence is suffering.

Now I expect some of you to deny this: you will insist that 'I am not suffering, in fact I am enjoying'. And that may be true at this moment or at certain other moments in your existence. When you are in the prime of life you can get together a nice act that, temporarily at least, looks like not-suffering.

But **taken as a whole**, life is suffering. Why is it that the very first thing a newborn baby does is cry? Birth is suffering. Why is it that people do everything possible to avoid death? Death is suffering. And during our life there are so many other kinds of suffering. Everyone has good days and bad days. That's suffering. The Buddha said:

"That's the way it is, Ānanda. When young, one is subject to aging; when healthy, subject to illness; when alive, subject to death."
— *Jara Sutta* (SN 48.41)

Life begins and ends in suffering, and in between there is also suffering. Work is suffering; relationships are suffering; politics and broken

promises and all the stupid, ugly things that people say and do are suffering. So you can't deny that life is suffering.

The Buddha called this fact—that **life is suffering**, and that's just the way it is—the First Noble Truth. It is a very deep, deep truth. In fact, if you understand this truth as deeply as possible and actually realize it for yourself, you immediately become enlightened.

Ven. Sāriputta had traveled all over India in search of wisdom, but he was disappointed. After many years of looking for an enlightened teacher, Sāriputta finally met the Buddha. He asked the Buddha to summarize his teaching in as few words as possible. The Buddha replied, "All fabrications are subject to cessation." Sāriputta **got it**; in fact he got it so deeply, so thoroughly that he attained a high state of enlightenment on the spot.

To put it another way, "Whatever is born must also die." Whatever is created will disappear in time. Everything that **is**, is impermanent.

So when we talk about Dhamma, 'the way it is', this is the way it is: everything that **is**, that has being, that exists, is temporary and will disappear in time. This is the nature of being, the **way** it is that **makes** it the way it is. Because of this fact, there is suffering. This is the Second Noble Truth: the **cause of suffering**.

As soon as we desire to **be something**, we set ourselves up for suffering, because as the Buddha told Sāriputta, "All fabrications are subject to cessation." Whatever we desire to become is impermanent. So the desire and effort to be, to become, to exist, to do, to occur, to remain, to manifest and maintain a certain state or quality of being, is the cause of suffering.

We ourselves cause our suffering by being and becoming. Out of ignorance, we don't realize that this is going to cause suffering; we think we are going to enjoy. And of course there is a little enjoyment, now and then, in being. But mostly it is suffering, and we condition that suffering by our **desire to be**.

Is there a way out? Yes, and the Buddha hinted as much to Sāriputta when he said, "All fabrications are subject to **cessation**." Cessation of

being is going to happen; dissolution and death are going to occur no matter how we try to prevent it. This isn't news; it's the Dhamma, just the way it is: being causes suffering followed by cessation of existence.

But what if, instead of struggling to prevent cessation of being, we go along with it? What happens when we deliberately **seek out** and **explore** the cessation of being? Since it is inevitable that all fabrications are subject to cessation, what if we get to know cessation? What might we find if we overcome our fear of death, enter into it voluntarily and study it?

This is precisely how the Buddha discovered his enlightenment. This is meditation, this is tranquillity, this is emptiness: *suññata*. Many Buddhist teachers make a big deal of emptiness, as if it's something terribly esoteric and mystical. But emptiness is simply cessation of being—the ending, fading out or nonexistence of being. The realization of emptiness is called *nibbāna*.

Nibbāna literally means **cooling**, in the sense of a fire running out of fuel. Where does a fire go when its fuel is exhausted? It is extinguished; it goes out of existence. The temporary conditions for its being are finished, so it simply stops being. The fire doesn't really **go** anywhere; it just stops and cools down. This is *nibbāna*, this is *suññata*, this is emptiness.

This same phenomenon is also death, the cessation of existence. But when we explore this *suññata* in meditation, we find out something very interesting: the experience of cessation, of emptiness of being makes us feel **much more alive**! A completely enlightened person who has realized *nibbāna* is the most alive. To grasp this paradox, you have to understand the natural law of *kamma* (*karma*).

Kamma works by balancing opposites. In nature we find that when something moves too far out of balance on one side, there is a tendency for it to swing back toward the balance point. A pendulum is a good example.

The *kamma* caused by fabricating or creating being is **cessation**; the *kamma* of clinging to being and struggling to avoid death is **suffering**; and the *kamma* of embracing emptiness through meditation is **fullness**!

The more we try to prolong being and life, the more we suffer when it's time for death to restore the balance. Similarly, the more we deliberately seek *suññata* and willingly die to our fabricated being, the more we find we are filled with authentic life, consciousness and insight.

Suññata is not so paradoxical or contradictory when we understand *kamma* as the natural balance of opposites. *Kamma* does not mean there is some omnipresent god always spying on us and keeping a ledger of our good and bad actions. *Kamma* means that we ourselves observe our good and bad thoughts, words and actions, and create our being accordingly.

So when we pursue **happiness**, we experience frustration and bitterness in response; when we greedily seek **our own benefit**, we pull in harm and hardship; when we chase **wealth** we condition ourselves to miserliness and penury.

But when we seek out **emptiness**, being and life **spontaneously** flow to us; when we earnestly seek the **benefit of others**, we attain blessings and happiness automatically; when we generously **give away wealth**, more wealth seeks us out without effort. This intelligent use of the natural law of *kamma* is the basis of the Buddha's practical teaching.

The possibility of a way out of suffering is the Third Noble Truth, the cessation of suffering. And the method of attaining the cessation of suffering is the Fourth Noble Truth, the Eightfold Noble Path taught by the Buddha.

So the whole Dhamma, the teaching of the Buddha, can be summed up in just two words: suffering (*dukkha*) and emptiness (*suññata* or *nibbāna*). "All fabrications are subject to cessation." This is the Dhamma—the Four Noble Truths: the way it is, why it is the way it is, what you can do about it, and how to do it.

The Most Dangerous Man

The Buddha is Going to Get You

The Buddha is the most dangerous man who ever lived. He dared to look at **the way it is**, the way of being human, and tell the truth about it without compromise. He has shown that the ego is a complete falsehood, a fabrication. The most precious thing, the ego—that people ready to fight and kill, even die for—is phony. It's a fiction, just a story we tell ourselves and others.

And he even has shown in complete detail how it is done. The *Mūla-pariyāya Sutta* describes the root-structure of the reflexive consciousness of the 'I'-making and 'mine'-making process. Let's start by looking at the Pali words in just two lines of the Sutta.

*pathavim pathavito sañjānāti;
pathavim pathavito saññatvā pathavim maññati*

Next are the synonyms in English:

pathavim – earth; *pathavito* – as earth; *sañjānāti* – recognizes; *pathavim* – earth; *pathavito* – as earth; *saññatvā* – conception, idea, notion; *pathavim* – earth; *maññati* – to think, to conceive, to imagine.

And the translation...

“Perceiving earth as earth, he conceives notions about earth...”

The word *maññati* is the key to the deep meaning of this Sutta. We translate it as **conceive**. According to the dictionary, *to conceive* can mean: become **pregnant** with, form or **devise an idea** in the mind, form a **mental representation of**; **imagine**, or **become affected by** something. All these meanings apply, one after another, to the process of 'I'-making.

What the Buddha is describing here is a process that goes on in the mind of every unenlightened person. We take our immediate experience and conceive something in it; we conceive or **add something** to it that

was not present in the original experience. And what do we add? ‘I’ and ‘mine’.

Our original experience becomes **pregnant** with the possibility of ‘I’ and ‘mine’; we **devise a plan** or idea in our mind, how to add ‘I’ and ‘mine’ to our immediate experience; we form a **mental representation** of our immediate experience, adding the concept of ‘I’ and ‘mine’ to it; we **imagine** ‘I’ and ‘mine’ where they do not originally exist; and finally, we **become affected** by our own imaginary creation, and think our illusory ‘I’ and ‘mine’ were there all along. We have fully deceived ourselves.

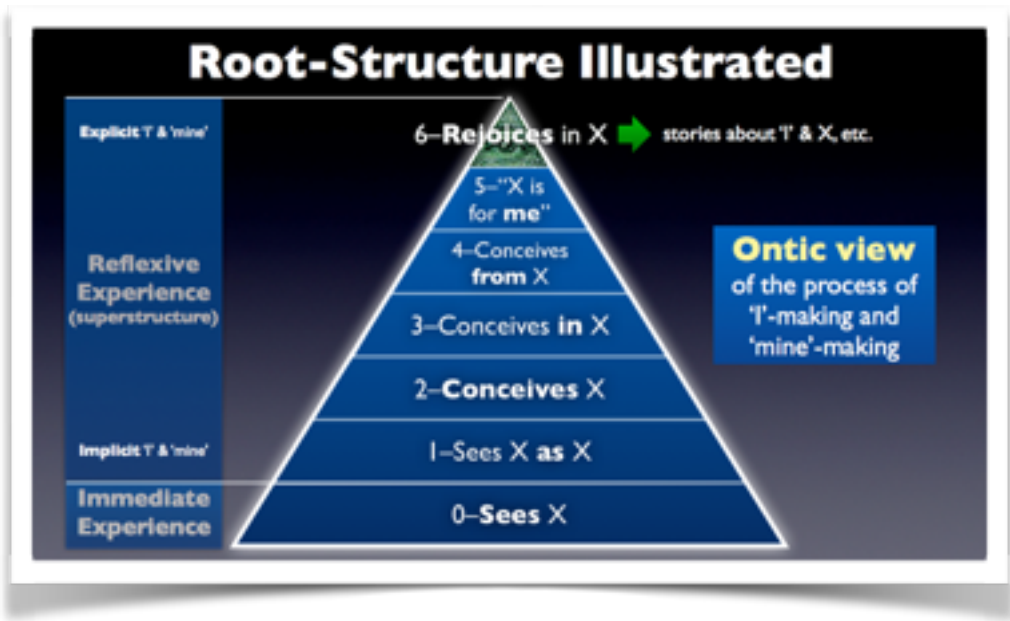
This conceiving occurs in six distinct stages described by the Buddha in the *Mūla-pariyāya Sutta*.

Root-Structure	
Process of ‘I’-making and ‘mine’-making	
1. <i>pathaviṃ pathavito sañjānāti;</i>	Sees earth as earth
2. <i>pathaviṃ pathavito saññatvā pathaviṃ maññati,</i>	Conceives earth as something more than earth (‘I’ and ‘mine’)
3. <i>pathaviyā maññati,</i>	Conceives in earth
4. <i>pathavito maññati,</i>	Conceives from earth
5. <i>pathaviṃ meṭi maññati,</i>	“Earth is for me”
6. <i>pathaviṃ abhinandati.</i>	Enjoys earth.

The processes of ‘I’-making and ‘mine’-making are intertwined with immediate experience, beginning implicitly but becoming more and more explicit with each stage.

Sees earth as earth	Recognizes the immediate experience
Conceives earth as something more than earth ('I' and 'mine')	Begins to implicitly imagine 'I' and 'mine' in the immediate experience; impregnates the immediate experience with the seed of 'I' and 'mine'.
Conceives in earth	Identifies with, admires and appreciates immediate experience. "I could enjoy being that."
Conceives from earth	Sees 'I' and 'my self' from the point of view of the immediate experience as its owner and enjoyer.
"Earth is for me "	Explicitly claims immediate experience as 'mine'.
Enjoys earth	Delights in immediate experience with attachment.

The Buddha then repeats the same six stages with the other elements (water, air, etc.). Here’s a diagram illustrating the structure of the root ego-identification process:



The process of 'I'-making and 'mine'-making that is the root-structure of our reflexive experience in unenlightened consciousness is illustrated as a pyramid, in which each stage becomes the support or foundation for

the next. In actual experience, these six stages run concurrently, like layers of software.

This is how 'I' and 'mine' are made. Normally the process is completely unconscious and automatic. When we observe this process in ourself in real time, as it occurs, bringing awareness into it in present time, it changes. It cannot hold power over us as before.

We start to see how our 'I', 'mine' and 'self' do not have independent existence as we would like to think, but are conditioned by immediate experience, senses and sense objects. The ego is unnatural; it is made, manufactured in the factory of mental bad habits and misconceptions.

The 'I'-making and 'mine'-making machine cannot be stopped by an effort of will, just as squeezing a sponge works only as long as we apply pressure; as soon as we let go, it springs back into its original shape. Similarly, we may temporarily hold or compress a sponge into any shape; but as soon as we release it, it returns to its original form. Stopping 'I'-making by an effort of will is similarly ineffective.

The practice of practical meditation is simply bringing awareness into the shadowy corners of the mind, seeing how it really operates. When we do this, the mind changes all by itself. Mindfulness and awareness is the medicine for the disease of ego-consciousness and attachment.

The above explanation is rather technical, but will be very useful if you decide to actually meditate on the root-sequence. So now let's go through a practical example. Suppose I see a car on the street. Seeing the car is the **immediate experience**, the raw sense data, the simple animal sensation of seeing. As yet there is no **meaning** attached to the experience.



Now the next step is **recognition**: “Hey, that’s a classic 1931 Duisenberg!” I recognize that it’s a car, and what kind of car it is. This is just a simple identification of the object: connecting the car with its category, nomenclature and other information in the filing system of my mind.

But then, my imagination starts **conceiving** ‘I’ and ‘mine’. I **project** ‘I’ and ‘mine’ **into** the car. Now it’s more than just a car: it’s a car **plus** ‘I’ and ‘mine’. Suddenly there is something there that did not exist before: a **relationship** with the car beyond the simple act of seeing it. I have begun the process of **acquisition**: making the car **mine**. At this stage the process is quite implicit, subtle and difficult to observe. But don’t worry; that will change soon enough.

My projection starts as **admiration** or appreciation: “Oh, that’s a *nice* car —a *beautiful* car.” I have identified the experience of seeing the car as a pleasurable experience—one that I would like to repeat again and again whenever I desire. An object must be perceived as pleasurable and also existing into the future to work as a basis for the process of ‘I’-making. This is because we want the object to confer some sense of continuity of existence upon our fabricated ‘I’. Solid, lasting objects like machines, buildings, land and countries are ideal bases for the process of ego-fabrication.

Then, I start to **see myself** in the car. I am **conceiving** ‘I’ and ‘mine’ **in** the car. Now I have projected my concocted ‘I’ out into space and into

the object. My point of view changes from my current actual location and situation to an imaginary one where 'I' have co-located with the object. I begin to dream of experiencing the world and life from that point of view.

Then I start to **imagine** myself driving the car, and see how the world would look from there. Now I am **conceiving** 'I' and 'mine' **from** the car. Essentially, I have identified with the object, **become** the object, and am now seeing it as my 'self'. Is this nuts or what? Wait, it gets better.

Then I conceive, "This car is for **me**—this is **my** car." I have made my **acquisition** of the car **explicit**, and I have made a vision of 'I' based on the car. I am in a dream world, a fantasy where the car is mine, beautiful women and rich men are falling at my feet, begging me for a ride. All this, and without even smoking anything!

Finally I walk away, now equipped with a new ego-identity based on the car, **making up stories** about 'I' and the car: "I'm going to get one of those cars. I will be a classic Duisenberg owner! Then I will enjoy driving around and being admired."

You may not be 'into' classic cars, but it is certain that you are 'into' something—projecting your feeling of 'self' into some sense experience or object that you identify with so strongly that for all practical purposes it becomes your identity. Musicians, for example, frequently identify with their instruments with such force that when asked "Who are you?" they automatically reply, "I'm So-and-so, the pianist. Pleased to meet you." People not identify with their possessions, but also with important places, times and relationships in their lives.

This is 'I'-making and 'mine'-making. You know this is true. You do it too. We all do. But only the Buddha observed it with such clarity that he could record the process in the *Mūla-pariyāya Sutta* and share it with others for use in self-observation and meditation.

Of course, as soon as we see ourselves doing this, we can't identify so much with the process. So the Buddha's path is not prohibition; he doesn't say, "You must give up this 'I'-making; stop this egotism!" His path is simply quiet, persistent self-observation, awareness and insight. Just like a single ray of light immediately dissipates the darkness, even a

little direct awareness of the normally unconscious process of 'I'-making and 'my'-making changes it completely.

Self-observation starts in meditation. If we continue with this process of self-observation after meditation, during our ordinary activities in life, gradually the habit of 'I'-making and 'my'-making will stop completely, fade away exactly like the morning star in the light of dawn. This is the Buddha's process of no-self, emptiness.

One day after watching your process of 'I'-making for some time, you spontaneously come to the insight, "Hey, I don't have to do this anymore." Bang, you're dead. No more 'I' and 'mine', no more *dukkha*. The Buddha got you!

The Meaning of Life

It's Ours to Choose

Our basic choice is to determine the meaning of our life. Specifically, we must choose whether to accept the default mode of being in the world and allow external forces to assign meaning to our life, or to assume that responsibility for ourselves.

We are in a difficult position. We find ourselves in an embodiment and situation we did not choose, in a world we do not understand or control. The meaning of our life is not immediately apparent. However, we require certain resources to maintain our existence, and it seems that these are under the exclusive control of others.

Under the circumstances, it is understandable that most people choose to allow their significance to be determined by others. The problem with this is that it makes us a slave of the world, both externally and internally. Not only do others dictate to us who and what we are, but we internalize and identify with the imposed external values.

However, to be other-determined is to lose our fundamental integrity, to cease to be an individual—a human being in the full sense of the term—and become a mere instrument of others' purposes, a commodity in an alien system of values.

In this position, we naturally feel debased. And indeed we are, for we have sold the dignity of our humanity, the meaning of our whole life, for the short-term satisfaction of material needs. To seek a solution for this indignity requires us to confront a terrible series of choices, a long history of allowing others to determine our meaning, and amend it to determine our meaning for ourselves.

For life or nature does not supply a meaning for our life, in and of itself. Our life is a blank slate upon which we can write whatsoever we choose. Then what meaning shall we create for ourselves? On what platform shall we stand to sail the stormy sea of life?

This is the terrible existential choice faced by every human being at each moment in our existence. Most of us fail to measure up to the challenge; we cave in, meekly accepting the conditioning of the world, in the hope that somehow life will go on as usual.

But of course, it won't: death is coming. One day, sooner or later, our existence will come to an end. And we choose our epitaph, the final significance of our life, by the choices of meaning we make every day. If we were to die today, what would be the headline of our obituary?

- **A Perpetual Adolescent**
- **An Ineffectual Idealist**
- **Sold Himself for Material Success**
- **A Series of Failed Relationships**
- **A Natty Dresser but no Soul**
- **A Life of Empty Pleasures**
- **A Pretentious Intellectual**
- **A Phony Religious Man**

And I'm being kind. For most of us, our actual life stories would sum up to even less-flattering captions. The suffering, dissatisfaction and failure we experience in life is a direct consequence of trying to find the meaning of our life, which is uniquely our own, in the marketplace of the world. But the world does not reflect us accurately; in fact, it reflects us not at all, but has its own purpose and meaning completely independent of our own.

The world wants to treat us as an object, a replaceable part in a genetic and social machine, a unit of economic production or political power, a quantum of flesh. It wants us to auction our life and identity in the marketplace to the highest bidder, subject to the impersonal law of supply and demand. The world wants us, in short, to make a deal, to submit our will to external control. And in most cases, we do.

It is very rare to find someone who is willing to address the challenge of being human, to see the true horror of the existential situation and fully accept it as it is. And rarest of all is the true individual, who takes upon himself the responsibility to determine his own significance, declare it to the world and accept the consequences without complaint.

But what is the use if one chooses a meaning for his life that is ugly, that causes suffering and harm to others, that brings no new beauty into the world? Then he has also failed, has become a sociopath, a psychotic. History is full of fools who put themselves above the law of compassion and exercised their individuality at the expense of others instead of for their benefit.

The greatest men of all time realized the truth for themselves and then became teachers, spreading the light of knowledge that dissipates the darkness of ignorance in all those who meet them. One should become a true Friend to all, calling them to find meaning and purpose in life beyond the venal purposes of the world. Thus the greatest and best meaning of life is to realize the highest of truths, the Four Noble Truths, and teach the best of all wisdom, the Noble Eightfold Path:

The Blessed One said, "Mindfulness of death, when developed & pursued, is of great fruit & great benefit. It gains a footing in the Deathless, has the Deathless as its final end. Therefore you should develop mindfulness of death.

“... whoever develops mindfulness of death, thinking, 'O, that I might live for the interval that it takes to swallow having chewed up one morsel of food... for the interval that it takes to breathe out after breathing in, or to breathe in after breathing out, that I might attend to the Blessed One's instructions. I would have accomplished a great deal' — they are said to dwell heedfully. They develop mindfulness of death acutely for the sake of ending the effluents.” — *Maranassati Sutta* (AN 6.19)

No Result from Meditation?

Mixing Many Paths, You Lose Your Way

Why do many people experience no result, or little benefit from meditation? In my own practice, I often wondered, “Why am I practicing? Why doesn’t this seem to be leading anywhere? Why aren’t I getting the results I read about in the books?” In my experience, there are three main reasons:

1. Mixing different teachings

If you’re mixing a little bit of yoga, maybe some T’ai Chi, a little New-Age positive-thinking philosophy, a little bit of the Buddha and this and that, you’re not going to get anywhere. Here’s why: each of these methods is a **system** with its own methods and aims, its own philosophy, tradition and culture. If you try to mix them, who knows what the result is going to be?

In India we used to call this *kiccarī-yoga*. *Kiccarī* is a dish you make by taking whatever is around in your kitchen and throwing it into a pot. So if you’re window-shopping, looking into different traditions, trying this and trying that, you’re not going to make much progress—if any at all.

In fact, it’s quite possible that by mixing different incompatible ideas and practices, you’ll get confused and mess up so badly it will set you back. Before you can make real progress in meditation, you have to make a **commitment** to a path and a teacher: someone who can show you an example of the perfection of your practice.

2. Not following the principles or precepts

Assuming that you’re practicing the Buddha’s path (although really this applies to every authentic type of meditation) not following the rules and regulations will hold back your progress. In the Buddha’s path there are five main precepts:

- **No killing**

- No stealing
- No sex
- No lying
- No intoxication

Especially celibacy—the ‘no sex’ rule—is very important for spiritual progress. I know from personal experience that if you’re not practicing celibacy, you’re not going to get very far. Or your progress is going to be extremely slow; it will take years for you to reach even a beginner level of proficiency in meditation. We don’t really have that much time.

Of course there are more precepts. There are always more rules that you can follow—in the Buddha’s teaching there are 227 precepts for monks—but these five are the main ones. Following them in your daily life without making a big deal of it will **accelerate** your progress tremendously.

3. Not duplicating the teaching

This is the most common, and also the most subtle reason people don’t make progress in their meditation practice. What do we mean by duplication?

The Buddha left literally thousands of Suttas, records of his teaching over a 45-year period, in the Pāli language. To really get the benefit, you have to make an **exact copy** of those instructions in your own mind. This is a fundamental issue in learning **anything**.

Whatever you could want to know comes from some source material; to learn it, first you have to duplicate that source material and create a model of it in your own mind. If you do this successfully, you can practice on the same level as your teacher.

I first started meditating according to the teaching of the Buddha late in life. Nevertheless, I got almost immediate benefit—profound cessation of suffering—in just a few weeks. But I personally know people who have been meditating, trying to follow the path of the Buddha, for many years without getting anywhere near the same results.

What's the difference? Simply that I know how to duplicate instructions, I follow the Buddha's precepts strictly, and I don't mix different paths and practices.

Skillful Living Network has published a four-hour online video series on how to learn and practice any subject: [Skillful Living 2: Becoming Genius](#). Please watch the series and take advantage of this great technique for learning. Learning how to learn is the most important thing that you can teach yourself. Once you learn that, you can teach yourself **anything**, especially meditation and spiritual life.

Meditation is very subtle. In fact, the highest results of spiritual practice can't even be expressed in words. But the **methods** of attaining self-realization and enlightenment certainly can be expressed; and by duplicating the Buddha's methods exactly and following them precisely, you are guaranteed success and results.

What happens if you don't duplicate or follow them? Well, who knows? The result is undefined. But we see many meditators who have been messing around unsystematically without results for years, even decades.

So if you really want success in your practice, try to **learn how to learn** by duplicating the original teachings—not somebody else's interpretation, not some contemporary new-age version. Go back to the original source, the Buddha's words in the Suttas.

It's even a good idea to learn the original language of the source teaching—in the Buddha's case, Pāli—at least enough to verify that the translation you're using is authentic. Then you can be sure that you're applying the right technique, and you can be certain of getting results in your meditation.

How to Deal with Sexual Energy?

A Phenomenological Methodology

One of our oldest friends wrote in with a great question: “What do you do with your sexual energy in celibate life?” Later we’ll examine the assumptions hidden in the wording of the question. But to prepare for that, first we have to understand that there is a difference between the Buddha’s teaching and Buddhism, or ‘Buddha-ism’.

-ism: *suffix* forming nouns denoting a system, principle or ideological movement.

We’re not part of any ideological movement; we’re simply following the Buddha’s original teaching. So even though I am an ordained monk in the Siam Pitaka of Sri Lanka I don’t consider myself a ‘Buddhist’, although perhaps others might. The Buddha’s original teaching in the Suttas is there for everyone to read and benefit from. Of course it helps to have a good teacher and good association, and that’s the main reason I became a monk. But there’s really no need for all the baggage of ‘Buddha-ism’.

Our interest is in what the Buddha said. So, what is the Buddha’s teaching? In our opinion, the Buddha’s teaching is a phenomenological methodology for eradicating suffering. What do I mean by that? Well, if you reviewed our Skillful Living 2: Becoming Genius series as recommended above, you would already know how to deal with specialized technical terminology.

Briefly, phenomenological means an approach concentrating on the study of consciousness and direct experience, rather than theory and philosophy. Many people start from a theory, and try to reason from the theory to the facts. Phenomenology starts from the experience—the facts and what we can see—and it goes on from there to build a theory.

A methodology is simply a collection of methods used in the pursuit of a particular area of study or activity. It’s simply an array of methods, and the Buddha’s teaching certainly contains a large selection of

phenomenological methods for the study of consciousness and direct experience.

So we're not 'Buddhists', we're phenomenologists; and we're not practicing a religion, we're applying the Buddha's methodology. And according to the Buddha himself, the purpose of his methodology is the elimination of suffering. Now, believe it or not, this leads directly to our topic.

Most people engage in sexual acts to try to reduce their suffering. Similarly most people take intoxication to reduce their suffering; they involve themselves in economic activity to reduce their suffering. Reducing or eliminating suffering is really the root motivation of most of our activities.

Despite this, in our experience, even after doing all these things we're still suffering. So from a phenomenological perspective, our efforts are only temporarily effective at best. Why? Because clearly, activity is not the way to eliminate suffering. So we are suffering.

The First Noble Truth is "There is suffering." Something must be causing this suffering, therefore the Second Noble Truth is "There is a cause of suffering." And what is that cause? The Buddha says it is "the assumption of a self or clinging to a self." [see SN 22.47, SN 22.89, MN 11 etc.]

So when somebody asks, "What do you do with your sexual energy in celibate life?" that question contains a number of assumptions. It assumes, for example, that a 'self' exists, that the self 'has' a body, that the body has a 'sexual function', that function generates 'sexual energy', and we have to 'do something' with that energy.

But all these are assumptions; none of them is necessarily true. Let's look at the first assumption, that we are a 'self'. The Buddha says that 'self' is simply an assumption. If you actually try to find a 'self' in your experience, you cannot find it anywhere. Yet we think, speak and act as if a 'self' exists. The Buddha calls this egoistic conceit [see SN 35.207, SN 36.3, MN 9 etc.]. We think that 'I' must be a 'self'; but actually there is no real need for a self or ego. In fact we're so much happier if we

don't have a 'self' or cling to it, or create all kinds of false stories about it.

Our so-called 'self' is like an actor who invents a very popular character — Mr. Spock from Star Trek for example. Once Leonard Nimoy created Spock, the character took on a life of its own. For years, people related to Nimoy as if he really was Spock. And he grew to hate it; it was a source of suffering for him. Poor Leonard Nimoy! People became so obsessed with stories about Spock that he even had to write a book titled *I'm Not Spock!*

Similarly, the 'self' that we assume we are is concocted—it's fabricated. And as the Buddha said, "All fabrications are subject to cessation." In fact those were his final words before his Unbinding. All fabrications are going to wither away and die.

What happens when your body becomes incapable of sex life because of old age and disease? Then what is going to happen to the 'self' you have fabricated to have sex? You have to look into yourself: who is desiring sex? Who is having sex? Who is that person, that 'self'? It is some 'I' that we fabricated.

I'm speaking from experience here. And by the way, I have a principle about that: I only speak or write about things from my own experience. It comes from the phenomenological approach we discussed above.

I've had personal experience with this problem of sex in spiritual life. It was very difficult for me to give up sex life. My mother was a Tantrik priestess! So, I was born with a ferocious clinging to sex. But then it became clear that sex is a cause of suffering, and if I wanted to get rid of my suffering, I was going to have to transcend it.

That realization led to a deep exploration of existentialism and ontology, which we documented in our series [Being in the World](#). That led to the Buddha's teaching, and the Buddha said, "Don't cling to a self." So I tried it—and guess what—it worked! As soon as I practiced the meditations recommended by the Buddha, in a short time I lost my clinging to sex.

Speaking from experience, this is the cure for the problem of sex. You may not like to hear this; but the Third Noble Truth is “There is cessation of suffering.” And the Fourth Noble Truth is, “The way leading to the cessation of suffering is this very Noble Eightfold Path.” So this is the method that leads to the solution of all problems of life.

The ignorant assumption that we have to have a ‘self’ is the origin of suffering. The process of Dependent Origination of our suffering from the assumption of a ‘self’ creates a chain of cause and effect that inevitably leads to suffering. In India during the rainy season, all the rivers flood. Suffering is compared to a flooding river. It happens all by itself; suddenly we’re overwhelmed with suffering and we don’t know why.

But the Third Noble Truth says there is an end to suffering. It’s possible—you can end your suffering—and the Fourth Noble Truth gives the path: **how** we can end our suffering. The Noble Eightfold Path is a specific methodology that we treat in detail on our blog. It is like a raft that enables us to cross over the flooded river of unwanted suffering born of egotism, and attain the blissful state of no-self.

What the Buddha Really Taught

Hint: it wasn't 'Buddhism'

Everyone today has heard of Gautama Siddhārtha, also known as the Buddha. And many people follow and derive benefit from teachings attributed to him. One of the most profound and important questions we address in Skillful Living Network is: “What is the Buddha’s original teaching?” Are the teachings and practices we know today accurate? Are they giving the full benefits? What did the Buddha really teach?

These questions became an important issue for me since I began practicing meditation according to the Buddha’s teaching. I started practicing Ānāpānasati (meditation on breath) because I was suffering, and I wanted relief. I already had tried many means to alleviate my suffering over a lifetime of research and practice—meditation, chanting, intensive psychotherapy—but frankly, none of it worked very well. Even after being a monk in a Vedic tradition for many years and becoming a guru, I was still riddled with anxiety and negative emotions. I did what most people do: just tolerated it the best I could.

Then in my 64th year, disaster struck: I discovered evidence that the spiritual path to which I had devoted the majority of my adult life was a fabrication. But instead of supporting my discovery, everyone in my spiritual community betrayed me—even my own disciples. I went through a crucible experience: a complete life meltdown, an utter upheaval. The mental and emotional suffering was total and acute: I discovered that I had no real refuge, that everything and everyone I had assumed would give me shelter was false and unreliable.

While in a condition of intense suffering, I began a crash program of research to find out what went wrong and how to fix it. Long story short, after a year of intense labor I found myself sitting on a beach in Thailand, contemplating the emptiness of conditioned existence. Surprisingly, it worked. After just a few weeks of meditation, my suffering not only evaporated, but I felt better than I ever had. I experienced many deep realizations of spiritual truth—amazing insights I had only read about before. I was deeply grateful and impressed, and

began seriously researching the teachings of the Buddha with the intention of sharing the amazing benefits I had experienced.

That's when my concern started. I found that by great good fortune, I had been introduced to the Buddha's original, effective views and methods. However, the vast majority of people who consider themselves Buddhists, or follow some teaching based on or derived from the Buddha, are thinking and doing something much different. Further study revealed that most sources claiming to represent the Buddha actually conflict with his original views and methods as recorded in the Theravāda Suttas. As a result, most Buddhists and lay followers are still stuck in the existential suffering from which I fortunately have been delivered. It turned out that the benefits I experienced are extremely rare.

My concern only grew when I took an overview of the contemporary Buddhist scene and began to meet people practicing Buddhist methods. Many teachers with the best intentions, especially in the west, were presenting derivative ideas and practices having little or nothing to do with the original teachings of the Buddha, merely for the sake of popularity. This observation in particular forced me to distinguish between the original teaching of the Buddha given in the Theravāda Suttas and contemporary popular 'Buddhism'.

Despite their obvious sincerity, from my perspective most Buddhist teachers were cheating their students of the full benefits of the Buddha's real teachings. Many followers of popular Buddhism are laboring for years, even decades, without obtaining the benefits I received in a few short weeks of practice. Seeing that gave rise to a desire to correct the situation through a program of education based on the Suttas.

I don't like to see people suffering unnecessarily. I would like everyone to experience the tremendous relief that I did. I would like to make it possible for anyone to attain complete enlightenment and freedom from the suffering of conditioned material existence. I would like to encourage them to set aside the crushing burdens of ignorance and kamma, as the Buddha encouraged me. I would like to see them empower themselves to realize their true nature, beyond all limitation. I would like, as far as I am able, to bring them to self-realization.

I received a free gift of immense value from the Buddha through his devoted servants. I feel obligated to pass on that wonderful gift to as many as possible. Thus the purposes of Skillful Living Network are:

- To restore awareness of the Buddha's **original** teaching and practices.
- To provide the **background** and **foundational knowledge** necessary to understand and practice the Buddha's original teaching and methods.
- To provide the **ancillary skills** (such as effective study, ontological analysis, phenomenology etc.) required to implement the Buddha's practices.
- To provide the **social support** necessary for people to gain the courage to resist the tide of superficiality and deviation, and attain the profound benefits of Buddha's powerful teaching themselves.

Original versus derived

You'll notice I maintain a consistent distinction between the original teachings and methods of the Buddha, and derivative Buddhist beliefs and practices. That's because they are different, often in very subtle ways. But even subtle differences in orientation and method can have a huge influence on the outcome of a practice. This will become clearer later on, as we explore the Buddha's ontology and the functions of chaos and feedback in the Buddha's original presentation of his Second Noble Truth: Dependent Origination.

For now, our working hypothesis is that there is an original teaching and derived teachings that are substantially different. How are they different? Let's consult the Buddha as he speaks of his original teaching:

“Know this, O monks: Now, as formerly, I teach of only *dukkha* (suffering, stress, **unsatisfactoriness**) and the elimination of *dukkha*.”
— *Alagaḍḍupama Sutta* [MN 22]

The Buddha said, “The *suttantas* are utterances of the Tathāgata, are of great profundity, have deep significance, are the means of transcending the world, and refer to *suññatā*.” — *Mahavara Sutta* [SN 2.48]

What is the Dhamma that is highest and most profound, that transcends the world and death in all their forms? The Buddha called it *suññatāppatisamyuttā*, which means Dhamma that analyzes *suññatā* (emptiness). Dhamma that discusses *suññatā* is the highest and most profound Dhamma. It transcends the world, transcends death, and is none other than the *amataḍḍhamma* (the immortal *ḍhamma*).

Now the newer, later versions of Dhamma — what are they like?

“When the discourses of the Tathāgata — deep, deep in their meaning, transcendent, connected with emptiness — are recited, the monks don’t listen, don’t lend ear, don’t set their hearts on knowing them; don’t regard them as worth grasping or mastering. But when discourses that are literary works — the works of poets, artful in sound, artful in expression, the work of outsiders, words of disciples — are recited, they listen, they lend ear, they set their hearts on knowing them; they regard them as worth grasping and mastering. Yet when they have mastered that Dhamma, they don’t cross-question one another about it, don’t dissect: ‘How is this? What is the meaning of this?’ They don’t make open what isn’t open, don’t make plain what isn’t plain, don’t dispel doubt on its various doubtful points. This is called an assembly trained in bombast, not in cross-questioning.” — *Ukkacita Sutta* [AN 2.46]

The Buddha said, “Emptiness is what I teach. A teaching that does not treat of emptiness is someone else’s teaching, an unorthodox teaching composed by some later disciple. All discourses which are utterances of the Accomplished One are profound, have deep significance, are the means of transcending the world, and deal primarily with emptiness (*suññatā*). On the other hand, a discourse of any kind, though produced by a poet or a learned man, versified, poetical, splendid, melodious in sound and syllable, is not in keeping with the teaching if not connected with *suññatā*.” — *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* [DN 16]

And also consider this:

“As for the qualities of which you may know, ‘These qualities lead to utter disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to Unbinding’: You may categorically hold, ‘This is the Dhamma, this is the Vinaya, this is the Teacher’s instruction’.”

— *Sattbhasana Sutta* [AN 7.79]

“A ‘position,’ Vaccha, is something that a Tathāgata has done away with. What a Tathāgata sees is this: ‘Such is form, such its origin, such its disappearance; such is feeling, such its origin, such its disappearance; such is perception... such are mental fabrications... such is consciousness, such its origin, such its disappearance.’ Because of this, I say, a Tathāgata — with the ending, fading out, cessation, renunciation and relinquishment of all interpretations, all speculations, all I-making and mine-making and obsession with conceit — is released through lack of clinging.”
— *Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta* [MN 72]

Analyzing the above quotes, it's clear the Buddha's teaching recorded in the Theravāda Suttas is based upon two principal themes:

- **The Flood (*dukkha*): being in the world is the cause of suffering, incompleteness, unsatisfactoriness; First and Second Noble Truths.**
- **The Raft (*suññata*): the world and phenomena are empty of real existence. Realizing this brings release from conditioned existence; Third and Fourth Noble Truths.**

Any teaching claiming to represent the Buddha's method must harmonize with these principles. Why? Realizing *suññata* is the key to cessation of *dukkha*. So any teaching not properly founded on *dukkha* and *suññata* is derivative, deviant and incomplete.

This fits perfectly with my **theory of religion**. I see religion in general as a fabrication, an artificially created organization that seeks to interpose itself between the aspirant and whatever enlightenment he is seeking. Religion offers to represent the aspirant like an attorney, agent or ambassador. Religions claim they make attaining enlightenment by the aspirant easier and more convenient. But do they really?

Religion often poses itself as having some unique relationship with the originating Deity or teacher of the spiritual path it claims to represent. It essentially claims the ability to get a special deal. Of course this is ludicrous, especially in the case of the Buddha's teaching, which is simply about the natural laws of being and consciousness. It would be as unbelievable as offering a special deal on gravity or the weather.

No, thank you. Because what happens if you accept this implausible offer is that the religious organization absorbs the time, energy and attention that would normally be invested in the aspirant's spiritual practice. The aspirant's misguided trust and confidence in the religion — sometimes mislabeled 'faith' — leads him to think that the religion is going to save him without further effort on his part. But any religious organization is a fabrication, a corporate abstraction like any bureaucracy, that exists mainly to propagate its own existence and well-being. Corporations pose as helping agents, offering to make our lives easier and more convenient, but we know their actual purpose is to make a profit at the customers' expense. There is no other reason for their existence. Similarly, large religious organizations exist only to exploit faithful but naïve people.

So what did the Buddha **really** teach? Did he teach all about esoteric spiritual realms, gods and goddesses, and arcane mystical rituals and rites to win merit and favors from them? No, that's a religion based on or derived from the original teaching of the Buddha. He may have touched on those things briefly, but the actual core of his teaching is *dukkha* and *suññata*, suffering and its cure.

The Four Noble Truths are only about *dukkha* and *suññata*:

1. **There is suffering (*dukkha*).**
2. **There is a cause of suffering.**
3. **There is cessation of suffering.**
4. **There is a path to the cessation of suffering: realization of *suññata*.**

Any teaching unrelated to *suññata* cannot claim to be the Buddha's original teaching. And we find in practice that meditation that does not aim for realization of *suññata* is more or less impotent. We will devote a section to a detailed discussion of emptiness later on.

The Flood and the Raft

The Simile of the Raft

The simile of the raft was given by the Buddha to explain his teaching. It begins with a man being chased by murderous thugs:

“Then the man, afraid, ... would flee this way or that. He would see a great expanse of water, with the near shore dubious and risky, the further shore secure and free from risk, but with neither a ferryboat nor a bridge going from this shore to the other.

“... Then the man, having gathered grass, twigs, branches and leaves, having bound them together to make a raft, would cross over to safety on the other shore in dependence on the raft, making an effort with his hands and feet. Crossed over, having gone to the other shore, he would stand on high ground, a brahman.

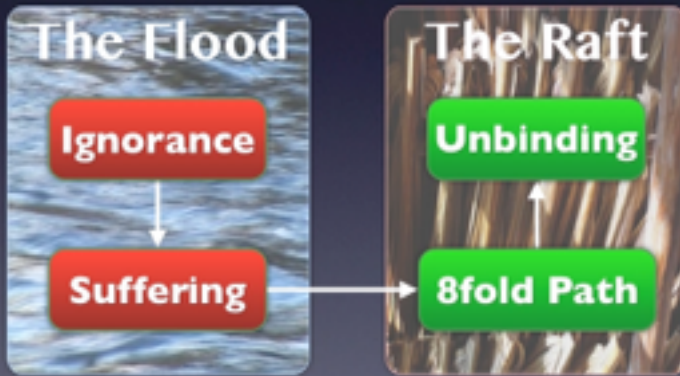
“... The great expanse of water stands for the fourfold flood: the flood of sensuality, the flood of becoming, the flood of views, and the flood of ignorance. The near shore, dubious and risky stands for self-identification. The further shore, secure and free from risk stands for Unbinding.

“The raft stands for just this Noble Eightfold Path: right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. Making an effort with hands and feet stands for the arousing of persistence. Crossed over, having gone to the other shore, he would stand on high ground, a brahman stands for the Arahant.” — *Asivisa Sutta* [SN 35.197]



This simile is very important. The Buddha's teaching can be divided into two main sections: the Flood and the Raft. In the Flood, Ignorance of reality leads to suffering. The Raft, the Buddha's teaching, is meant to take us across the Flood by taking the Noble Eightfold Path to Unbinding or Nibbāna.

The Flood and the Raft



Of course, actually it's a little more complicated than that...



The proper name for the Flood is the process of Dependent Origination. It explains how we trap ourselves in conditioned existence and create suffering. The Raft, the Noble Eightfold Path, is a step-by-step process leading to release or Buddhahood. The Flood and Raft together are called the Radiant Circle. This circle is the map of the Buddha's teaching; we will use this symbol to keep oriented amid the complexities of study and practice of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Now we are suffering, caught in the dangerous Flood of Dependent Origination. The Buddha's teaching gives us an unprecedented opportunity to move from danger to safety, from suffering to release by means of the Raft of the Noble Eightfold Path. In future installments, we will define and explain the stages of the Radiant Wheel according to the authentic teachings of the Buddha.

The Flood of Ignorance

Right View is the Cure

The first step on the path to enlightenment is getting rid of ignorance. What ignorance specifically? The ignorance that we have to have an ‘I’, an ego or ‘self’. The Buddha said:

“Monks, there are these four floods. Which four?

The flood of sensuality, the flood of becoming, the flood of views, and the **flood of ignorance**. These are the four floods.

Now, this Noble Eightfold Path is to be developed for direct knowledge of, comprehension of, the total ending of, and the abandoning of these four floods.” — *Ogha Sutta* [SN 45.171]

And ignorance is the first flood. All the other floods arise from ignorance, so we will cover it first. The Buddha says we have to develop the Noble Eightfold Path. The first element of the Noble Eightfold Path is right view. How do we develop right view?

“When — having entirely abandoned passion-obsession, having abolished aversion-obsession, having uprooted the view-and-conceit obsession ‘I am’; having **abandoned ignorance** and given rise to clear knowing — he has put an end to suffering and stress right in the here-and-now. It is to this extent that a disciple of the Noble Ones is a person of right view: one whose view is made straight, who is endowed with verified confidence in the Dhamma, and who has arrived at this true Dhamma.” — *Sammaḍṭhi Sutta* [MN 9]

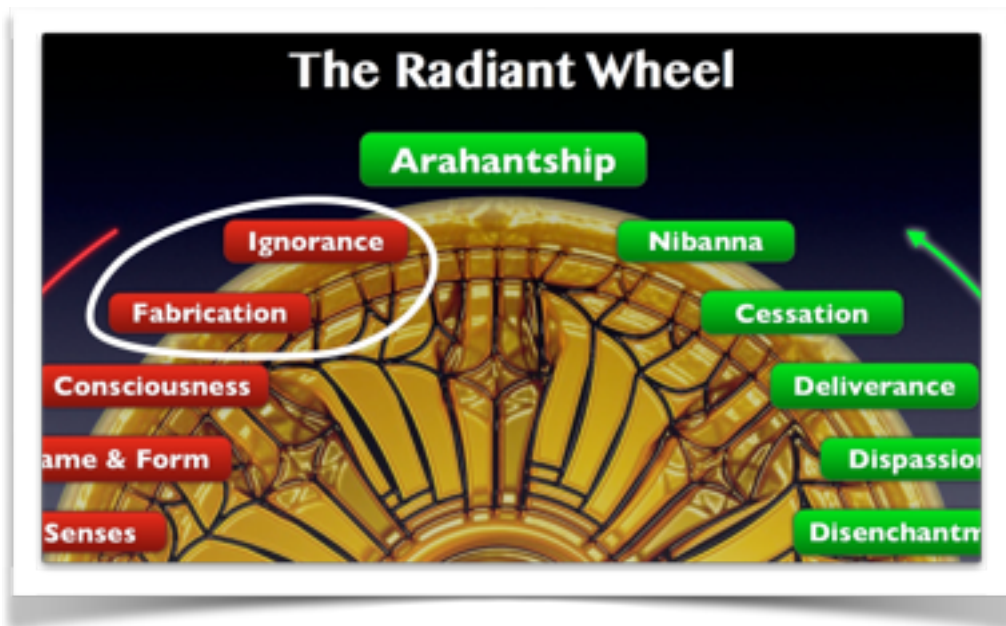
So, our prospects for enlightenment depend on our having Right View. What does that mean? That we understand that possessiveness, passion, obsession, aversion, and especially, the view and conceit of ‘I am’. ‘I am’ means a ‘self’, a false ego, a fabricated identity. We don’t need it; we’re actually much better off without it: much happier and more peaceful.

We create a false ego, a false ‘self’, and then we create desires based on it and make up stories about it: “I am this; I am that. I’m a member of

this family; I'm a citizen of that country. I'm an employee of this company; I am this, I am that, I am so many different things."

We change these 'I's like hats, put them on and take them off all the time. We base our behavior on our concept of 'I'. And this of course leads to the concept of 'mine'. So then 'I' have all this stuff that's 'mine', and I have to take care of it, to do this and that with it.

Pretty soon our whole life is taken up with 'I' and 'mine' and stuff, useless unnecessary activity. We have no time to actually **be**, without having to 'be somebody'. That's where all our suffering starts.

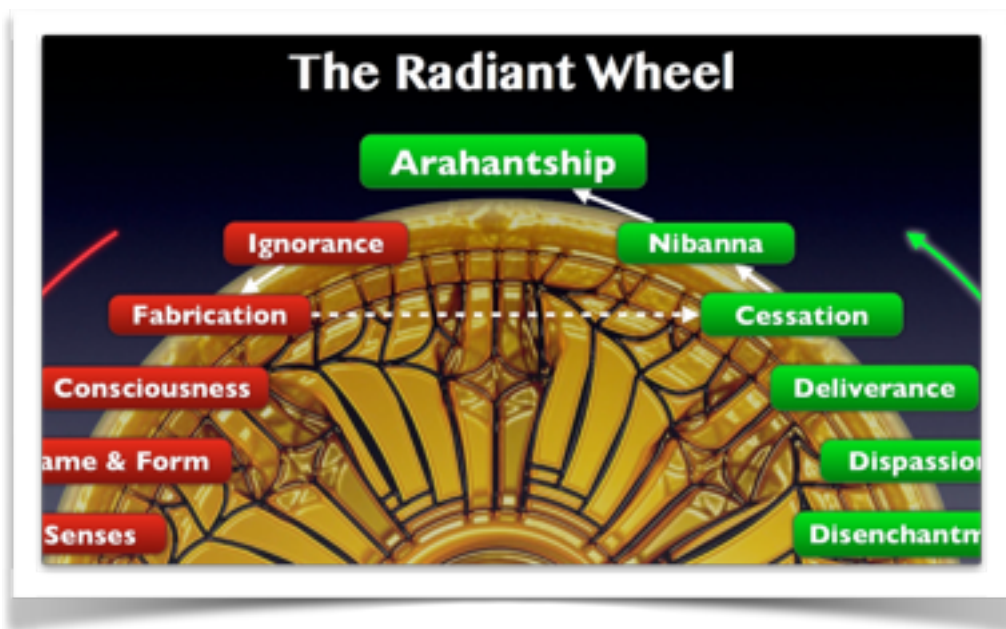


If we look closely at the cycle of Dependent Origination, we see that the cycle of becoming begins from ignorance, and this ignorance is precisely that we must have a 'self'. As soon as we can let that go; as soon as we can see very clearly that we don't need it, then we can stop fabricating a false ego, creating a lie about who and what we are.

And what is the lie? That 'I' exist — 'I' the great 'me'! The 'self' is a lie. And the sooner we get rid of it, the sooner we can see that all the other conceits and obsessions based on it are actually useless. If we can stop the process of fabrication, the creation of a false 'I', we could go directly

to cessation of conditioned existence on the Noble Eightfold Path—and that means the end of our suffering, and then we can easily go to *nibbāna*, the step before Unbinding.

We really want to short-circuit Dependent Origination and go directly to cessation if we can. If we can't, if our practice is not that advanced, we can catch the cycle lower down, at contact, but it's hard. It's better if you have Right View—if you know from the beginning of your practice that the idea is to stop the fabrication of the false 'I'.



Of course you can't stop fabrication immediately because it is a very old habit. But through observation and insight, gradually you'll find out how to stop it. This is the key to attaining enlightenment. Think over this insight and use it to practice in a way that stops your suffering. That's what this is all about.

And finally, a little poem I composed in December 2012:

*I have seen the beauty of the sun
Beyond the covering of cloud.
Right view, practice, concentration
Will get you there without a doubt.*

The Trap of Fabrication

You Can't Make this Stuff Up

Ignorance gives rise to fabrication as discussed above. The Buddha calls the process of Dependent Origination 'this/that causality':

"When this is, that is... When this isn't, that isn't."
— *Vera Sutta* [SN 10.92]

So the root cause of all of our suffering is ignorance. And what is that ignorance?

"What is ignorance? Not knowing suffering, not knowing the origination of suffering, not knowing the cessation of suffering, not knowing the way of practice leading to the cessation of suffering: This is called ignorance.

In other words, ignorance of the Four Noble Truths. And ignorance automatically gives rise to fabrication by this/that causality.

"And what are fabrications? These three are fabrications: bodily fabrications, verbal fabrications, mental fabrications. These are called fabrications." — *Paticca-samuppada-vibhanga Sutta* [SN 12]

And how are bodily fabrications, verbal fabrications and mental fabrications defined?

"In-and-out breaths are bodily fabrications. Directed thought and evaluation are verbal fabrications. Perceptions and feelings are mental fabrications." — *Culavedalla Sutta* [MN 44]

Ignorance of the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path and the process of Dependent Origination is the cause of fabrication and thus, the cause of all suffering.

Why is ignorance the cause of fabrication? If we don't know how suffering is caused and created, we still have to do something about our suffering: so we make something up! If you don't know how to stop suffering, then you're going to make stuff up. "Oh, I know; I'll create an

‘I’! Hmm, that didn’t work — I’ll create another ‘I’, a different ‘I’. I’ll create so many ‘I’s and ‘selves’ and identities.”

All of this creates *kamma*. And by the law of *kamma*, every time we create an ‘I’ in the mode of ignorance, we’re going to suffer in the mode of ignorance. Every time we create an ‘I’ in the mode of desire or passion, we’re going to suffer in the mode of passion. Every time we create an ‘I’ in the mode of goodness, we’re going to experience goodness — and that’s what the Noble Eightfold Path is all about. It begins from goodness and approaches the transcendental.

If you don’t know how to stop ignorance, you’re going to make stuff up. Therefore:

“From ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications.
— *Avijjapaccaya Sutta* [SN 12]

How to get out of ignorance and stop fabrication?

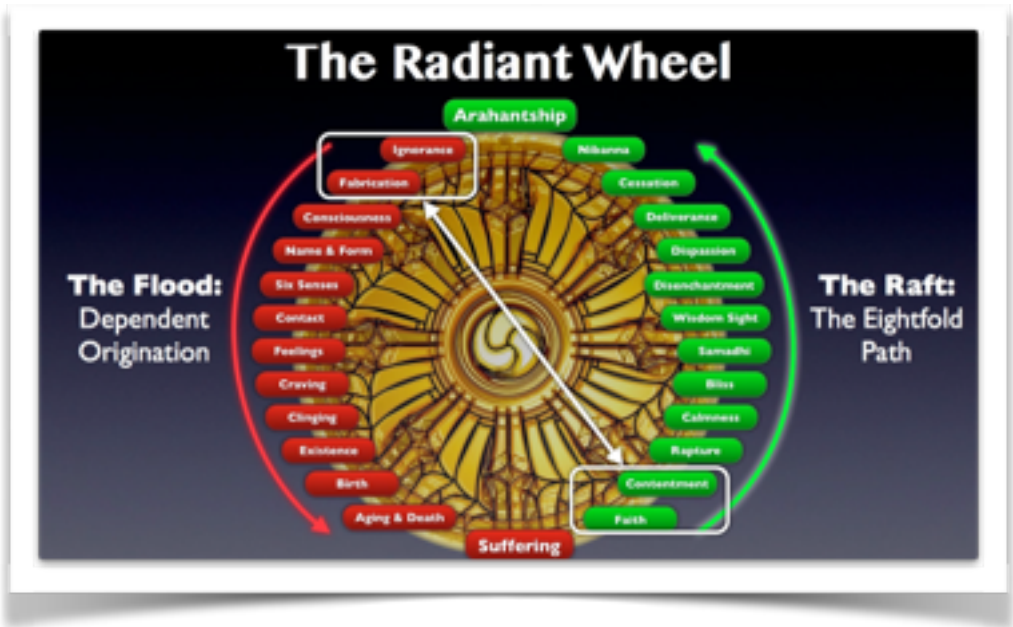
“When a disciple of the noble ones discerns fabrication, the origination of fabrication, the cessation of fabrication, and the way of practice leading to the cessation of fabrication, then he is a person of **right view** — one whose view is made straight, who is endowed with verified confidence in the Dhamma — and who has arrived at this true Dhamma.

Notice how similar this quote is to the Four Noble Truths.

“And what is fabrication? What is the origination of fabrication? What is the cessation of fabrication? What is the way of practice leading to the cessation of fabrication?

From the origination of ignorance comes the origination of fabrication. From the cessation of ignorance comes the cessation of fabrication. And the way of practice leading to the cessation of fabrication is just this very Noble Eightfold Path.” — *Sammāditthi Sutta* [MN 9]

So by following the Noble Eightfold Path, we can eliminate the ignorance that leads to fabrication of a false ego, a false ‘self’, which is the cause of suffering. How do we do that?



We can see that there is a reciprocal relation between the elements of ignorance and fabrication in Dependent Origination, and faith or integrity and contentment or confidence in the Buddha's teaching on the Noble Eightfold Path. We discuss this relation further in the next section.

From Suffering to Contentment

All it Takes is Integrity

Suffering isn't static; when we are in the crucible of suffering we writhe and wiggle, struggling to end our pain. In terms of Dependent Origination, we fabricate many different 'I's trying to end the suffering. But as long as the false identities we fabricate are based on ignorance—desire or aversion—we cannot end our suffering. Indeed, we simply perpetuate it.

Why? Any 'I' created out of ignorance or passion will result in suffering in ignorance or passion. For example, someone is suffering, and they desire to stop suffering, so they go out and get drunk, or have sex. They have just increased their suffering: on top of whatever suffering they had, now they also have to deal with drunkenness or sexuality and its consequences according to the law of *kamma*.

Relief from suffering can only come from fabricating an 'I' based on goodness. Therefore we must develop faith and integrity, and make a commitment to serve something greater than ourselves, something holy and pure. In the teaching of the Buddha that is the Noble Eightfold Path.

We saw in the section above that there is a relation between ignorance and fabrication in Dependent Origination and the stages of faith and contentment in the Noble Eightfold Path. Faith means confidence in the Buddha's teaching, that begins from knowledge and understanding of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, and following the Precepts of the Vinaya:

- **No lying**
- **No stealing**
- **No killing**
- **No sex**
- **No intoxication**

Once we commit to studying the teaching of the Buddha and follow at least the first five Precepts, everything changes. Suffering begins to recede and good things start to happen. Why? We are creating good *kamma* based on goodness instead of bad *kamma* based on ignorance and passion. If we keep this up for some time, we attain contentment and satisfaction based on confidence in the Buddha's teaching. We try it and it reduces our suffering, just as promised.

But we're not done yet; we still have to reduce and eliminate the causes of suffering: ignorance and fabrication. That will require study and practice, but at least we are no longer lost in suffering. We know the way out; we just have to learn and implement the practice of the Eightfold Path, the Raft for crossing the Flood of suffering. And the Eightfold Path begins with Right View and observing the first five Precepts:

“How is one an individual who practices for his own benefit and for that of others? There is the case where a certain individual himself abstains from the taking of life and encourages others in undertaking abstinence from the taking of life. He himself abstains from stealing and encourages others in undertaking abstinence from stealing. He himself abstains from sexual misconduct and encourages others in undertaking abstinence from sexual misconduct. He himself abstains from lying and encourages others in undertaking abstinence from lying. He himself abstains from intoxicants that cause heedlessness and encourages others in undertaking abstinence from intoxicants that cause heedlessness. Such is the individual who practices for his own benefit and for that of others.” — *Sikkha Sutta* [AN 4.99]

These are the five precepts, the basis of a life lived in goodness. As long as we follow them, good fortune will come our way. As soon as we violate them, suffering is coming.

Why it's Hard to Meditate

It's Trained Into Us

School training:

- **Aversion to learning skills (aphasia)**
- **Aversion to following expert instructions (most teachers are failures)**
- **Aversion to solitary activities (groupthink conditioning)**
- **Aversion to creative thinking (meditation is art!)**
- **Aversion to inner life (forced extroversion)**

Aphasia: Partial or total lack of comprehension of spoken or written language. The chronic aphasia experienced by most students is a symptom of misunderstood terminology.

- **Google “Lost in the Meritocracy—How I traded an education for a ticket to the ruling class” (Atlantic).**
- **Then watch our video on effective study techniques.**

Teachers: Most teachers are losers in the game of education. Don't believe me? Look at the GRE (Graduate Record Exam) scores for teachers—low in both math and verbal. So you spent 12 of the most formative years of your life being bullied by a loser. No wonder you have resistance to following instructions; most of the instructions you have received have been given by incompetents.

Groupthink: School is not about education; it's social conditioning. Don't think so? 40-year teaching veteran John Taylor Gatto, twice Teacher of the Year in New York City, researched the origins of the government-mandated school system. His conclusion after reading the original architects of school? “School is a twelve-year jail sentence.”

Art: Have you ever taken a class in school that encouraged you to do original work? That allowed you to structure your own time? That supported you to express yourself freely? School actively discourages creative thinking and filters out creative people for social suppression.

Extroversion: School forces extroversion and punishes introversion. You have to be ready any time if the teacher calls on you. The playground is a battlefield, the halls full of bullies. You have to have your guard up; then there's the popularity contest.

The modern corporate environment is very similar to school. It reinforces all the bad mental habits trained into us by schooling. No wonder you can't meditate! You have to be ready to fight your mind to overcome the bad habits you absorbed in school.

Let's close with a little poem:

*There's no one and nothing on this earth
From which I would not gladly part
To win the pearl of infinite worth
Upon the lotus of my heart.*

You Don't Need a Guru

The Buddha Gave us the Path

You don't need a guru or religious organization to attain enlightenment. People who represent or manage religious institutions will always put roadblocks in your path. Why? After all, just like doctors make money when you're sick, professional holy men profit from your spiritual disempowerment. Their jobs depend on your not attaining enlightenment; because once you do, you won't need them anymore.

So they try everything to convince you that you are unqualified, attaining enlightenment is very hard, it takes a long time—years and years—and there are deep dark secrets that only a guru can impart. All that is nonsense. Any intelligent person who correctly duplicates and properly applies the original teaching of the Buddha can realize substantial attainments in a relatively short time. That is my experience, beyond any doubt. At the end of his life the Buddha said:

“It may be, Ānanda, that to some among you the thought will come: ‘Ended is the word of the Master; we have a Master no longer.’ But it should not, Ānanda, be so considered. For that which I have proclaimed and made known as the **Dhamma** and the **Discipline** [*vinaya*], **that shall be your Master when I am gone.**” — *Mahā-parinibbāna Sutta* [DN 16, Part 6]

So there is no need for lineage, tradition, commentaries, rituals, religious organizations, sectarian politics, seniority, etc. These are all obstacles on the path. Today anyone can use the Internet to research the Suttas and learn the Buddha's original teaching, put it into practice in private and reap the benefits. The age of the professional holy man is over. Just like travel agents, they have been made redundant by the Internet.

“Now, Kalamas, don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, ‘This contemplative is our teacher.’ When you know for yourselves that, ‘These qualities are skillful; these qualities are blameless; these qualities are praised by the wise; these qualities, when adopted and

carried out, lead to welfare and to happiness’ — then you should enter and remain in them.”

— *Kalama Sutta* [AN 3.65]

The Buddha is teaching phenomenology: experience his method and see the result for yourself. Nor does the Buddha recommend practicing in a group:

“Indeed, Ānanda, it is impossible that a monk who delights in company, enjoys company, is committed to delighting in company; who delights in a group, enjoys a group, rejoices in a group, will obtain at will — without difficulty, without trouble — the pleasure of renunciation, the pleasure of seclusion, the pleasure of peace, the pleasure of self-awakening. But it is possible that a monk who lives alone, withdrawn from the group, can expect to obtain at will — without difficulty, without trouble — the pleasure of renunciation, the pleasure of seclusion, the pleasure of peace, the pleasure of self-awakening.” — *Maha-suññata Sutta* [MN 122]

Solitary practice is highly recommended by the Buddha. After all, he himself attained enlightenment through solitary practice. And in our experience, solitude is a powerful help along the path. It shouldn’t take very long to realize tangible spiritual benefits if you are willing to actually follow the Buddha’s instructions.

...Then Ven. Malunkyaputta, having been admonished by the admonishment from the Blessed One, got up from his seat and bowed down to the Blessed One, circled around him, keeping the Blessed One to his right side, and left. Then, dwelling alone, secluded, heedful, ardent, and resolute, he **in no long time** reached and remained in the supreme goal of the holy life for which clansmen rightly go forth from home into homelessness, knowing and realizing it for himself in the here and now. He knew: “Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for the sake of this world.” And thus Ven. Malunkyaputta became another one of the arahants. — *Malunkyaputta Sutta* [SN 35]

There are dozens of quotes similar to these.

So we should carefully study the original teaching of the Buddha in the Suttas, try them exactly as given and observe the result. Then there is no need to become dependent on anything external. We see that

representatives of various religious organizations spend the majority of their time and energy trying to sell people on the idea that you need a guru, you need a religious organization—when the original teaching of the Buddha says exactly the opposite. Look, I know, I used to be a guru myself. I resigned when I saw through the whole scam.

The Illusion of Hierarchy

Just Another Abstract Fabrication

Hierarchy is the default system of social organization on this planet. But hierarchies are not real entities; they are abstractions. They are not alive and have no real physical existence. They are simply collections of agreements among people. Software! But even though they are only virtual, they can still generate *kamma* just like any other fabrication.

Nevertheless, hierarchies like religions, nations and corporations have tremendous power in our lives. Only because we choose to let them, of course. We are hypnotized to believe that they are real. Hierarchies build upon one another until we have created huge mountains of abstractions. By they are as fragile as a house of cards; any accidental shock can bring them tumbling down.

Hierarchical abstractions in the external world mirror the hierarchies of false ego that we fabricate internally. Want to be a teacher? Start a school. Want to become rich? Start a corporation. Powerful? Run for office or start your own political party or even country. Since these hierarchies are all nothing but abstractions, it's cheap and easy. Then take a title, and presto, you just created whatever false ego you want.

Of course, getting others to recognize you might take a little promotion and negotiation. But by creating a fictitious entity you can start conversations where you can adopt the false ego you created. Be all you want to be! Just be ready to back up the lie you created with equally fabricated proof. It's all just illusion, blowing smoke.

Really there are no such things as corporations, countries, religions and so on. Can you show me a religion? a corporation or a country? Where are they? At best they are simply thoughts in our minds, or records of agreements on paper. They are fabrications that we are hypnotized to believe in.

Nor do we ourselves really exist in the way that we have fabricated. The proof of this is that we all have to die. Temporary existence is empty of real being. Only things that are eternal are real.

So what are we really? Underneath all the masks, we are simply a space where stuff shows up. A really big space, where everything from the ego and mind to the universe, eternity and God show up. A really, really big space, empty of all conditioned existence: unconditioned awareness. One who realizes this becomes enlightened.

This helps to explain the fact that corporate hierarchies are universally out-of-integrity. Any hierarchical organization begins from the lie that it is a real entity. So if the very first step of creating a fictitious entity is a lie, how can such an organization ever develop integrity? It's not possible.

This brings us to the question of leadership. Since a hierarchical organization is based on a lie, how can its leaders have integrity? They can't. They have to step very carefully around the unquestioned—and unquestionable—assumption that the hierarchy is a real entity. For as soon as the falsity of that assumption is brought out into the light, the whole house of cards collapses.

Let's take religion as an example, since most other hierarchies are based on it. A extraordinary enlightened being shows up and shares his illumination with others. He frees his friends and disciples from their oppressions and benefits them spiritually. Then gradually, usually after the death of the founder, a hierarchical organization develops, with the founder as the nominal head. Over time, the organization's leaders find ways to rationalize and justify the most heinous acts by twisting the founder's instructions. Those instructions are gradually changed for convenience, until they are unrecognizable as the original teaching. In fact, they often become its diametric opposite.

The leaders of any hierarchical organization are under enormous pressure to perform. To keep their privileged positions, they must show how their leadership benefits the entire group. In the process they almost always develop behaviors that, in an individual context, we would label sociopathic. But these are rationalized in the basis of 'the greatest good for the greatest number', even when they are obviously unfair or injurious to individuals.

Seeing all this clearly, an actually enlightened person with a commitment to integrity certainly would be unable to participate in any

hierarchical organization. If you look at life from integrity, there's very little worth doing except attaining enlightenment and sharing it with others. How can anyone attain enlightenment—which is ultimate truth—while participating in a hierarchy based on a lie? Especially, how can anyone lead such an organization and pretend to be enlightened?

The conclusion we have reached is that religious and other hierarchies are corrupt and out of integrity. They are not worthy of our participation.

The Digestion Metaphor

Truth Goes Down Easy

The process of Dependent Origination is similar to the process of digestion. Both are mechanical processes that process an input into an output. In both cases, the quality of the output is completely dependent on the quality of the input: GIGO (computer acronym meaning ‘garbage in, garbage out’). If we stop eating, the process of digestion also stops. Similarly, we can stop the process of Dependent Origination from generating *kamma* by stopping the first stage of fabrication.

No metaphor is perfect, but the number of similarities between Dependent Origination and digestion can help us understand how we unnecessarily create suffering for ourselves. All suffering is due to *kamma*. Karma is created by the process of Dependent Origination. Dependent Origination starts from ignorance and fabrication, and passes through these intermediate stages to death and suffering:

“From ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications.
From fabrications as a requisite condition comes consciousness.
From consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-and-form.
From name-and-form as a requisite condition come the six sense media.
From the six sense media as a requisite condition comes contact.
From contact as a requisite condition comes feeling.
From feeling as a requisite condition comes craving.
From craving as a requisite condition comes clinging.
From clinging/sustenance as a requisite condition comes becoming.
From becoming as a requisite condition comes birth.
From birth as a requisite condition, then aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair come into play.
Such is the origination of this entire mass of stress and suffering.”
— *Paticca-samuppada-vibhanga Sutta* [SN 12.2]

Similarly, to begin the process of digestion we eat some food. If we are skillful, we eat food that is nicely prepared, appropriate for our physiology and state of health. Then our eating results in the pleasure of satisfying tastes, health and energy. However, if we are ignorant and eat

unskillfully, then the process of digestion will give rise to all kinds of suffering: tastelessness, indigestion, indolence and chronic disease.

So the object of the Buddha's teaching is to help us stop generating *kamma* that leads to suffering, and start generating the kind of *kamma* that leads to realizing our original Buddha-nature. How can we do this? By changing the nature of our fabrication, and ultimately by stopping fabrication completely.

We cannot stop fabrication immediately, because it is such a deeply ingrained habit. Just as it would be impractical to simply stop eating. But just as we can change our diet from junk food to healthy food, we can change the quality of our fabrication from ignorance and passion to goodness. That is the purpose of the precepts, the five main rules followed by all who study the teachings of the Buddha:

- **No killing**
- **No lying**
- **No stealing**
- **No sex**
- **No intoxication**

If we follow these rules, then our meditation and study of the Path will go much more smoothly—and so will the rest of our life.

The Power of Faith

Integrity is the Key to Advancement

What are we doing when we exercise faith to create contentment? We are short-circuiting the process of Dependent Origination to avoid death and suffering.

Death does not only apply to the body; it also affects our 'I' or self. Our false self is born and dies dozens of times a day. For example, in the morning we are our family self, then we go to school or work, and put on a different self. Then when we come home in the evening we again are born as a family person. That is a temporary death for most of our selves.

Great suffering can cause the permanent death of a false self. For most of us, death of the self is involuntary and causes suffering. But when we begin to develop faith in the Eightfold Path, we deliberately let certain 'I's die: for example, selves that want to break the Precepts. So we allow the drunkard and the licentious selves to die so that the moral ones can live. This is the secret to avoiding suffering.

In the beginning this takes some inner struggle. But as we become more expert, we can arrest the process of Dependent Origination closer to its origin. Then the selves die before they are even 'born'. That is how we attain very desirable states higher on the Eightfold Path. Remember, emptiness is the goal of the Eightfold Path:

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

"Any feeling whatsoever... Any perception whatsoever... Any fabrications whatsoever...

"Any consciousness whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: every consciousness is to be seen as it actually is with right discernment as: 'This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.'

“Seeing thus, the instructed disciple of the noble ones grows disenchanted with form, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with fabrications, disenchanted with consciousness. Disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, he is fully released. With full release, there is the knowledge, ‘Fully released.’ He discerns that ‘Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.’” — *Alagaddupama Sutta* [MN 22]

Contentment

Satisfaction with Your Being

Contentment is the result of faith. If out of faith, one becomes devoted to the teaching of the Buddha, having confidence by his own experience that the Noble Eightfold Path factually leads to the elimination of suffering, then he experiences contentment. What is contentment? Steadiness of mind. We can develop this steadiness of mind by cultivation of the qualities of goodness:

“As for the qualities of which you may know, ‘These qualities lead to dispassion, not to passion; to being unfettered, not to being fettered; to shedding, not to accumulating; to modesty, not to self-aggrandizement; to contentment, not to discontent; to seclusion, not to entanglement; to aroused persistence, not to laziness; to being unburdensome, not to being burdensome’: You may categorically hold, ‘This is the Dhamma, this is the Vinaya, this is the Teacher’s instruction.’” — *Gotami Sutta* [AN 8.53]

Specifically, contentment is the result of freedom from greed. Contentment means we limit our desires to our possessions, and do not agitate our minds by seeking more:

“Therefore, monks, you should train yourselves thus: We will be content with whatever robe, alms, lodging or medicines we may get. We will enjoy the use of these things without clinging or foolish attachment, not committing any offense, aware of the danger and wisely avoiding it.” — *Santuttham Sutta* [SN 16.1]

On a deeper level, contentment arises when consciousness is released from form. Practice of contentment as a discipline of consciousness can lead directly to deliverance:

“If a monk abandons passion for the properties of form, feeling, perception, fabrications and consciousness, then owing to the abandonment of passion, the support is cut off, and there is no landing of consciousness. Consciousness, thus not having landed, not increasing, not concocting, is released. Owing to its release, it is steady. Owing to its steadiness, it is contented. Owing to its contentment, it is

not agitated. Not agitated, he (the monk) is totally unbound right within. He discerns that ‘Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.’” — *Upaya Sutta* [SN 22.53]

Thus in the context of the Buddha’s teaching, contentment is far more than a moral value; it can be a shortcut to complete Enlightenment. By development of contentment leading to dispassion, consciousness cannot find a place to land in name and form. Thus one short-circuits the process of Dependent Origination and directly attains deliverance.

The people who make a living by running temples and teaching meditation don’t know this secret, but here it is in the words of the Buddha himself. And how do we realize such contentment? By renunciation of lust and desire, and development of goodness. Many people need to practice meditation to reach such contentment, but you can also attain it by following the precepts and sending good wishes to others. There is a saying in India that one can attain liberation just by practicing celibacy. And my guru used to say that “Virtue is its own reward.” Here we see the confirmation of these wise sayings by the Buddha.

Emptiness

The Theme of the Buddha's Teaching

Right from the beginning we should understand that the teaching of the Buddha is about emptiness:

“Emptiness (*suññata*) is what I teach. A teaching that does not treat of emptiness is someone else's teaching composed by some later disciple.”
— *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* [DN 16]

Understanding that the teaching of the Buddha is about emptiness is Right View.

“And what is right view? Right view, I tell you, is of two sorts: There is right view with effluents—siding with merit, resulting in acquisitions [of becoming]—and there is Noble Right View, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path.” — *Maha-cattariṣaka Sutta* [MN 117]

In the beginning of practice we can't help but seek some merit and becoming a better person. But as soon as possible we should shift our view to emptiness. Without Right View we are not on the Noble Eightfold Path. We are practicing some other teaching, and we do not know what the result will be.

“In the course of the future there will be monks who won't listen when discourses that are words of the Tathāgata — deep, deep in their meaning, transcendent, connected with emptiness — are being recited. They won't lend ear, won't set their hearts on knowing them, won't regard these teachings as worth grasping or mastering. But they will listen when discourses that are literary works — the works of poets, elegant in sound, elegant in rhetoric, the work of outsiders, words of disciples — are recited. They will lend ear and set their hearts on knowing them. They will regard these teachings as worth grasping and mastering.” — *Ani Sutta* [SN 20.7]

Now, what does the Buddha mean by emptiness?

“It is said that the world is empty because of being empty of self or of things pertaining to a self.” — *Suñña Sutta* [SN 35.85]

In other words, there is no real existence in the phenomena of the world. And why does the Buddha think emptiness is so important?

“Ānanda, I do not envision even a single form whose change and alteration would not give rise to sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair in one who is passionate for it and takes delight in it.” — *Maha-suññata Sutta* [MN 122]

So if we want to attain the object of the Buddha’s teaching—the elimination of suffering—we must realize emptiness. This is not an impossible task; many Arahants have attained it in the past.

“The Arahants have emptiness (*suññata*) and signlessness as their object.” — *Dhammapada* 92

And of course, the Buddha’s own realization was fully based on emptiness:

“Now, as before, I remain fully in a dwelling of emptiness.” — *Cula-suññata Sutta* [MN 121]

So if we want to enjoy the full benefits of the Buddha’s teaching and methods, we should accept from the very beginning the Right View: our objective is to realize emptiness.

Dependent Origination

The Process of Being and Becoming

In our talks so far, we have portrayed the Buddha's teaching as The Flood of suffering, which is overcome by The Raft of the Noble Eightfold Path. The Flood is also expressed as the first two Noble Truths: suffering and the cause of suffering. The cause of suffering is the generation of *kamma* by the process of Dependent Origination with 12 steps. Let us discuss this process in more detail.

“Now what is dependent origination? From birth as a requisite condition comes aging and death. Whether or not there is the arising of Tathāgatas, this property stands — this regularity of the Dhamma, this orderliness of the Dhamma, this this/that conditionality. The Tathāgata directly awakens to that, breaks through to that. Directly awakening and breaking through to that, he declares it, teaches it, describes it, sets it forth. He reveals it, explains it, makes it plain and says, ‘Look’.” — *Paccaya Sutta* [SN 12.20]

This/that conditionality means a correlation of phenomena, and also signifies causation. Because of birth, we must die; because of clinging, we must suffer. This is not just a fabrication of the Buddha. If you carefully observe yourself you will also see it.

“When this is, that is. From the arising of this comes the arising of that... From ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications. What's there in this way is a reality, not an unreality, not other than what it seems, conditioned by this/that. This is called dependent origination. And what are dependently originated phenomena? Aging and death are dependently originated phenomena: inconstant, compounded, dependently co-arisen, subject to ending, subject to passing away, subject to fading, subject to cessation.” — *Paccaya Sutta* [SN 12.20]

Real existence is permanent, eternal without any change. Conditioned existence is temporary, with a beginning and end, changeable and unreliable. Conditioned existence is generated by the process of dependent origination. Here the Buddha gives the stages of the process:

“From ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications.
From fabrications as a requisite condition comes consciousness.
From consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-and-form.
From name-and-form as a requisite condition come the six sense media.
From the six sense media as a requisite condition comes contact.
From contact as a requisite condition comes feeling.
From feeling as a requisite condition comes craving.
From craving as a requisite condition comes clinging.
From clinging/sustenance as a requisite condition comes becoming.
From becoming as a requisite condition comes birth.
From birth as a requisite condition, then aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair come into play. Such is the origination of this entire mass of stress and suffering.” —
Mahatanhasankhaya Sutta [MN 38]

The process of dependent origination is very scalable — *kamma* and suffering can manifest within an instant, or it can take lifetimes. Insight meditation practice — *vipassana* or *ānāpānasati* — interrupts the flood of dependent origination and stops the generation of *kamma* by bringing mindfulness into the process. If you try it, you will find that it works. More on that next time.

The Origin of Consciousness

No Consciousness Without Senses

Most spiritually-oriented people believe that consciousness is eternal, and that it passes from lifetime to lifetime. The Buddha does not support that view in his theory of Dependent Origination. According to the Buddha, consciousness of the external world is born from fabrication of a false ego.

Who is conscious? To have consciousness, there must be a conscious self. But the Buddha teaches that there is no permanent self. The permanence of self and consciousness is an illusion. The Buddha says:

“Apart from a requisite condition, there is no coming into play of consciousness.” — *Mahatanhasankhaya Sutta* [MN 38]

In other words, consciousness has a cause, and that cause is the fabrication of a false ego or temporary self. By consciousness, the Buddha means awareness of the external world through the six senses, including the mind.

“Just as fire is classified simply by whatever requisite condition in dependence on which it burns — a fire that burns in dependence on wood is classified simply as a wood-fire; ...a fire that burns in dependence on rubbish is classified simply as a rubbish-fire — in the same way, consciousness is classified simply by the requisite condition in dependence on which it arises.” — *Mahatanhasankhaya Sutta* [MN 38]

Just the arising of the body depends on availability of appropriate nutrition, the arising of consciousness depends on the nutriment of fabrications. Fabrications are imaginary stories beginning with “I am...” We believe in these stories, elaborate them and make commitments based on them as if they were real.

“He assumes fabrications to be the self, or the self as possessing fabrications, or fabrications as in the self, or the self as in fabrications. He assumes consciousness to be the self, or the self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in the self, or the self as in

consciousness. This, monk, is how self-identity view comes about.” —
Maha-punnama Sutta [MN 109]

In our passion to realize our desires, we don't realize that any fabricated self is temporary. In other words, whatever is born due to the process of Dependent Origination has to change and ultimately die. This is the cause of all stress and suffering:

“He does not discern, as it actually is, inconstant form as ‘inconstant form.’ He does not discern, as it actually is, inconstant feeling as ‘inconstant feeling’ ... inconstant perception as ‘inconstant perception’ ... inconstant fabrications as ‘inconstant fabrications’ ... inconstant consciousness as ‘inconstant consciousness.’ He does not discern, as it actually is, stressful form as ‘stressful form’ ... stressful feeling as ‘stressful feeling’ ... stressful perception as ‘stressful perception’ ... stressful fabrications as ‘stressful fabrications’ ... stressful consciousness as ‘stressful consciousness’.”
— *Udana Sutta* [SN 22.55]

We cannot stop fabrications immediately, because we think our life depends upon it. Therefore we simply go on suffering by creating false selves, synthetic identities and artificial consciousness. These feed the process of Dependent Origination, which inevitably produces suffering through the mechanism of *kamma*. But if we simply stop fabrication of false selves, the entire process of Dependent Origination immediately collapses.

“Now, a well-instructed disciple of the noble ones — who has regard for noble ones, is well-versed and disciplined in their Dhamma; who has regard for men of integrity, is well-versed and disciplined in their Dhamma — does not assume form to be the self, or the self as possessing form, or form as in the self, or the self as in form. He does not assume feeling to be the self... does not assume perception to be the self ... does not assume fabrications to be the self... He does not assume consciousness to be the self, or the self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in the self, or the self as in consciousness.” — *Udana Sutta* [SN 22.55]

This view is the secret of Enlightenment.

The Tamed Sage

Tames Himself Alone

A friend wrote: “I attempted to post your video on a Buddhist chat site but the owner of the site has become quite fundamentalist of late and deleted it.”

This is understandable. Religious people attached to hierarchy do not like to see independent meditators making progress. They always try to put stumbling blocks in our path, because we do not support their hierarchy game. They would do well to contemplate this story from the Suttas:

Prince Jayasena, who was always pacing up and down, always roaming about on foot, approached the novice Aciravata:

“Let the reverend Aciravata teach me Dhamma as he has heard it, as he has mastered it. Perhaps I could understand the meaning of what the good Aciravata says.”

The monk replied, “If I were to teach you Dhamma, prince, and you were to understand the meaning of what I say, that would be good; but if you should not understand the meaning of what I say, you must not question me further on the matter.”

The prince agreed. Then the novice Aciravata taught Dhamma to Prince Jayasena as he had heard it, as he had mastered it. When this had been said, Prince Jayasena spoke thus to the novice Aciravata:

“This is impossible, good Aciravata, it cannot come to pass that a monk abiding diligent, ardent, self-resolute, should attain one-pointedness of mind.” Then Prince Jayasena, rising from his seat, departed.

Soon after Prince Jayasena had departed, the novice Aciravata approached the Buddha; having approached and greeted the Buddha, he sat down at a respectful distance. As he was sitting down at a respectful distance, the novice Aciravata told the Buddha the conversation he had with Prince Jayasena. When this had been said, the Buddha spoke thus to the novice Aciravata:

“What is the good of that, Aciravata? That Prince Jayasena, living as he does in the midst of sense-pleasures, enjoying sense-pleasures, being consumed by thoughts of sense-pleasures, burning with the fever of sense-pleasures, eager in the search for sense-pleasures, should know or see or attain or realize that which can be known only by renunciation, seen by renunciation, attained by renunciation, realized by renunciation — such a situation does not exist.

It is as if, Aciravata, there were a great mountain slope which two friends might approach; one friend might remain at the foot while the other climbs to the top. Then the friend standing at the foot of the mountain slope might ask the one standing on the top: ‘My dear friend, what do you see?’ He might reply: ‘My dear friend, I see delightful parks, delightful woods, delightful stretches of level ground, delightful ponds.’ But the other might speak thus: ‘This is impossible, it cannot be.’

Then the friend who had been standing on top of the mountain slope might come down to the foot and taking his friend by the arm, make him climb to the top of the mountain slope. After giving his friend a moment in which to regain his breath, he might say: ‘Now, my dear friend, what is it that you see as you stand on the top of the mountain slope?’ He might reply: ‘As I stand on the top of the mountain slope, I see delightful parks, delightful woods, delightful stretches of level ground, delightful ponds.’

His friend might say: ‘Just now, my dear friend, we understood you to say: This is impossible.’ He might reply: ‘That was because, hemmed in by this great mountain slope, I could not see what was to be seen.’

Even so but to a still greater degree, Aciravata, is Prince Jayasena hemmed in, blocked, obstructed, enveloped by this mass of ignorance. Indeed, that Prince Jayasena, living as he does in the midst of sense-pleasures, enjoying sense-pleasures, being consumed by thoughts of sense-pleasures, eager in the search for sense-pleasures, should know or see or attain or realize that which can be known, seen, attained and realized by renunciation — such a situation does not exist.” —
Dantabhumi Sutta [MN 125]

Those who are addicted to the false pleasures of hierarchy, enjoying domination of others in the name of religious teaching, hemmed in by groups of followers addicted to and obstructed by sense pleasures,

cannot perceive what can be clearly seen by those who face the reality of meditative insight utterly alone. The Buddha confirms this:

“Ānanda, a monk does not shine if he delights in company, enjoys company, is committed to delighting in company; if he delights in a group, enjoys a group, rejoices in a group. Indeed, Ānanda, it is impossible that a monk who delights in company, enjoys company, is committed to delighting in company; who delights in a group, enjoys a group, rejoices in a group, will obtain at will — without difficulty, without trouble — the pleasure of renunciation, the pleasure of seclusion, the pleasure of peace, the pleasure of self-awakening. But it is possible that a monk who lives alone, withdrawn from the group, can expect to obtain at will — without difficulty, without trouble — the pleasure of renunciation, the pleasure of seclusion, the pleasure of peace, the pleasure of self-awakening.” — *Maha-suññata Sutta* [MN 122]

Continuity of Identity

Who Are You?

One of our viewers wrote:

You said, “The self that we were when we were a small child is no more, now we are adults and we have a different self.” But there is some continuum, we do have memories from childhood.

The question of continuity of identity is very deep. The illusion of a continuous identity, taken to extremes, has led to theories of eternity on which most spiritual teachings, including some branches of Buddhism, are based. But the Buddha taught that eternal existence and continuous identity are illusory. The truth is contained in the theory of Dependent Origination that forms the core of the Buddha’s teaching.

The difficulty in comprehending this teaching begins with our language. Ordinary language contains the assumption that identity remains the same, at least for the duration of this life. This assumption prevents us from seeing what is really going on. Expressing the truth requires special terminology, an esoteric language. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu writes in his excellent book *Practical Dependent Origination*:

“The Buddha used two kinds of language to teach his doctrines. One was everyday language, which was used to teach ordinary moral lessons to people deluded by the concept of a continuing existence. These people experienced an ego. They were possessive because of their deep-rooted mental Clinging. On the other hand, Dhamma language was used to teach people who were only mildly deluded (people with sharp mind) for them to understand the Absolute Truth [*paramattha-sacca*], and to stop them from embracing the concept of a continuing existence.

“The doctrine of Dependent Origination is an Absolute Truth; therefore, Dhamma language must be used to explain it. It is contrary to the teaching of morality (about worldly goodness, which supports the concept of an ego). Everyday language cannot be used to discuss the doctrine of dependent origination. However if Dhamma language were used, people could not understand it, and turned to everyday

language to figure things out. Ultimately, the problem will not only be about comprehension but also about misunderstanding the law of Dependent Origination. This is the basic difficulty in teaching the doctrine. It is also why the Buddha initially hesitated to teach upon his enlightenment.”

In Dhamma language, the terms ego, identity, mind, self, birth and death have different meanings than in ordinary language. Ordinary language or religious language assumes that ego, identity, mind and self are permanent, or even eternal. Dhamma language assumes none of this; in fact it assumes that all these things are temporary, with a beginning and an end.

In ordinary language, birth and death refer to the physical body, and can occur only once in a lifetime; in Dhamma language, birth and death also apply to ego, identity, mind and self, and can occur many times over, even in a single day.

For example, at home with wife and kids, a man may have the self of a husband and father—kind, compassionate and loving. Then he leaves home and goes to his office, where he creates the self of a businessman—shrewd, calculating and competitive. What happened to the kind father? He is dead—or in suspended animation—but he will be resurrected when the man returns home in the evening.

In this way our identity is always changing. Our mind contains not one, but many overlapping, different and often conflicting identities competing for dominance, all claiming to be our real self. They spring into existence out of ignorance, based on desire and intention; they live for some time, nourished by their associated *kamma*; and when that *kamma* is exhausted, they age, suffer and die. They may exist on a time scale of a fraction of a second to many lifetimes. But the Buddha teaches that there is no permanent self in any of this.

This is why I said in a previous episode, “The self that we were when we were a small child is no more, now we are adults and we have a different self.” And in reference to this it was said. If this is clear, let’s continue with our discussion of Dependent Origination. If not, post a comment and we will explain in more detail.

Consciousness and Name and Form

A Sensitive Feedback Loop

Lately we have been trying to penetrate to the core or essence of the Buddha's original teaching: the theory of Dependent Origination. Unsurprisingly, we have had several viewers write with questions. This concept is very difficult to understand unless you are advanced in meditation.

Ānanda: "It's amazing, lord, it's astounding, how profound this Dependent Origination is, and how deep its appearance, and yet to me it seems as clear as can be."

The Buddha replied: "Ānanda, don't say that. The law of Dependent Origination is so profound that sentient beings are unable to comprehend it. They are unable to understand what I teach; likewise, they are unable to perceive the process of Dependent Origination. Consequently, they are perplexed just like with a ball of entangled thread, a jumble of [long stringy] *muñja* grass. They cannot free themselves from sufferings, states of deprivation, degeneration and transmigration."

— *Maha-nidāna Sutta* [DN 15]

In the process of Dependent Origination, once a false self has been fabricated out of ignorance, it gives rise to a particular type of consciousness, and that consciousness gives rise to a particular type of name-and-form. Or does it? In some texts, the Buddha says that name-and-form gives rise to consciousness. In yet others, he says both:

"If one is asked, 'From what requisite condition does name-and-form come?' one should say, 'Name-and-form comes from consciousness as its requisite condition.'

...If one is asked, 'From what requisite condition does consciousness come?' one should say, 'Consciousness comes from name-and-form as its requisite condition.' — *Maha-nidāna Sutta* [DN 15]

What is going on here? There is a feedback loop in the process of Dependent Origination between the stages of consciousness and name-

and-form. I first discovered the powerful relation between consciousness and name-and-form in 2003, when I was doing postgraduate-level work in ontology.

My research showed that if a person lacks an ontological description of a phenomenon (name-and-form), they will miss that phenomenon even if it happens right before their eyes. On the other hand, if a person has an adequate ontological description of a phenomenon, they will recognize it naturally and spontaneously, even when experiencing it for the first time. This is the feedback between consciousness and name-and-form. We can recognize a phenomenon for what it is only when we have ontological categories for it.

A simple example would be someone who studies and memorizes the shapes and locations of the constellations. Then as soon as he sees the stars at night, he can easily recognize the patterns of the constellations. Others who lack the ontological categories of constellations see only meaningless shapeless clouds of stars.

Similarly, a person who studies the process of Dependent Origination in detail can, with this ontological background, easily recognize the different steps in their own experience. Then they can influence the feedback loops, the most sensitive points the process to improve the quality of the result. Others cannot recognize the stages of Dependent Origination, and so are unable to exert any control over the process, even though it is occurring in their own minds.

Name-and-Form and Ontology

Categories of Being

To continue our discussion of name-and-form, we consider the term roughly equivalent to ontology, in the sense of an organized system or classification of categories of things that can exist in one's universe. One's ontology, or collection of name-and-form, determines the contents of consciousness by delimiting the types of phenomena that one expects to be conscious of. This sets up the process of Dependent Origination to create the consciousness and being that you desire.

For example, if you want to have the being and consciousness of a musician, you load the ontology of music: the categories of name-and-form that apply to music. If you want to have the being and consciousness of a leader, you load the ontology of leadership: the categories of name-and-form that apply to being a leader. Consciousness and name-and-form are so intimately related that they may as well be considered as two aspects of one thing.

"Then the thought occurred to me, 'Name-and-form exists when what exists? From what as a requisite condition is there name-and-form?' From my appropriate attention there came the breakthrough of discernment: 'Name-and-form exists when consciousness exists. From consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-and-form.'"

Then the thought occurred to me, 'Consciousness exists when what exists? From what as a requisite condition comes consciousness?' From my appropriate attention there came the breakthrough of discernment: 'Consciousness exists when name-and-form exists. From name-and-form as a requisite condition comes consciousness.' — *Nagara Sutta* [SN 12.65]

So the consciousness and being that we develop depend on the ontology that we load into the space of name-and-form, according to our desire. Normally our desire is for some kind of mundane beingness. But what happens when our desire is transcendental? What happens when all we desire is Absolute Truth? Something very interesting occurs: we short-

circuit the process of Dependent Origination and go directly to the stage of dispassion.

“Then the thought occurred to me, ‘This consciousness turns back at name-and-form, and goes no farther. It is to this extent that there is birth, aging, death, falling away, and re-arising, i.e., from name-and-form as a requisite condition comes consciousness, from consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-and-form.

From name-and-form as a requisite condition come the six sense media... Thus is the origination of this entire mass of stress. Origination, origination.’ Vision arose, clear knowing arose, discernment arose, knowledge arose, illumination arose within me with regard to things never heard before.”
— *Nagara Sutta* [SN 12.65]

Why? Because a desire for Absolute Truth such as emptiness or realization of Dependent Origination itself does not require the six senses, sense contact or birth. The interaction of consciousness and name-and-form is such a sensitive point in the process of Dependent Origination that we can use it to short-circuit the entire process of becoming. The same is true of other feedback loops in the process of Dependent Origination, such as between the stages of Contact and Feelings.

“It is just as if a man, traveling along a wilderness track, were to see an ancient path, an ancient road, traveled by people of former times. He would follow it. Following it, he would see an ancient city, an ancient capital inhabited by people of former times, complete with parks, groves, and ponds, walled, delightful. ...

“In the same way I saw an ancient path, an ancient road, traveled by the Rightly Self-awakened Ones of former times. And what is that ancient path, that ancient road, traveled by the Rightly Self-awakened Ones of former times? Just this Noble Eightfold Path: right view, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

That is the ancient path, the ancient road, traveled by the Rightly Self-awakened Ones of former times. I followed that path. Following it, I came to ... direct knowledge of the origination of consciousness ... direct knowledge of the cessation of birth and death. I followed that

path.”

— *Nagara Sutta* [SN 12.65]

Not a Valid Question

Want to Rephrase That?

From the questions that have been asked so far, I can see that many viewers are having trouble with the Buddha's original teaching of the impermanence of the self. The Buddha often rejected questions that would force him to take an extreme position, or that assumed the eternal existence of a self or something belonging to a self.

The Blessed One said, "From ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications... From birth as a requisite condition, then aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair come into play. Such is the origination of this entire mass of stress and suffering."

When this was said, a certain monk said to the Blessed One: "Which aging and death, lord? And whose is this aging and death?"

"Not a valid question," the Blessed One said... When there is the view that the soul is the same as the body, there isn't the leading of the holy life. And when there is the view that the soul is one thing and the body another, there isn't the leading of the holy life. Avoiding these two extremes, the Tathāgata points out the Dhamma in between: From birth as a requisite condition comes aging and death." — *Avijjapaccaya Sutta* [SN 12.35]

The Buddha's criterion in accepting a question rested on whether the answer would be useful for the elimination of suffering. Thus he rejected any question that would lead to useless speculation, or that did not forward the cessation of suffering. Here's another example:

"Monks, there are four nutriments for the maintenance of beings who have come into being or for the support of those in search of a place to be born. Which four? Physical food, gross or refined; contact as the second; intellectual intention the third; and consciousness the fourth. These are the four nutriments for the maintenance of beings who have come into being or for the support of those in search of a place to be born.

When this was said, Ven.-Moliya-Phaggunā said to the Blessed One, “Lord, who feeds on the consciousness-nutrient?”

“Not a valid question,” the Blessed One said. “I don’t say ‘feeds.’ If I were to say ‘feeds,’ then ‘Who feeds on the consciousness-nutrient?’ would be a valid question. But I don’t say that. When I don’t say that, the valid question is ‘Consciousness-nutrient for what?’ And the valid answer is, ‘Consciousness-nutrient for the production of future coming-into-being.’” — *Phaggunā Sutta* [SN 12.12]

In other words, the elements of the process of Dependent Origination, such as consciousness, are simply phenomena devoid of a self or belonging to a self.

The Buddha also had a methodology for answering questions. He did not regard all questions equally.

“There are these four ways of answering questions. Which four? There are questions that should be answered categorically [straightforwardly yes, no, this, that]. There are questions that should be answered with an analytical (qualified) answer [defining or redefining the terms]. There are questions that should be answered with a counter-question. There are questions that should be put aside. These are the four ways of answering questions.”
— *Pañha Sutta* [AN 4.42]

In general, the Buddha favored those topics and questions that lead directly to the cessation of suffering.

“...those things that I have known with direct knowledge but have not taught are far more numerous [than what I have taught]. And why haven’t I taught them? Because they are not connected with the goal, do not relate to the rudiments of the holy life, and do not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to Unbinding. That is why I have not taught them.

“And what have I taught? ‘This is stress... This is the origination of stress... This is the cessation of stress... This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress’: This is what I have taught. And why have I taught these things? Because they are connected with the goal, relate to the rudiments of the holy life, and lead to disenchantment, to

dispassion, to cessation, to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to Unbinding. This is why I have taught them.” — *Simsapa Sutta* [SN 56.31]

He therefore deliberately set aside certain topics and questions that did not contribute to attaining cessation of suffering:

“...what is undeclared by me? ‘The cosmos is eternal,’... ‘The cosmos is not eternal,’... ‘The cosmos is finite’... ‘The cosmos is infinite’... ‘The soul and the body are the same’... ‘The soul is one thing and the body another’... ‘After death a Tathāgata exists’... ‘After death a Tathāgata does not exist’... ‘After death a Tathāgata both exists and does not exist’... ‘After death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist,’ are undeclared by me.

“And why are they undeclared by me? Because they are not connected with the goal, are not fundamental to the holy life. They do not lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, calming, direct knowledge, self-awakening, Unbinding. That’s why they are undeclared by me.

“And what is declared by me? ‘This is stress,’ is declared by me. ‘This is the origination of stress,’ is declared by me. ‘This is the cessation of stress,’ is declared by me. ‘This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress,’ is declared by me. And why are they declared by me? Because they are connected with the goal, are fundamental to the holy life. They lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, calming, direct knowledge, self-awakening, Unbinding. That’s why they are declared by me.”

— *Cula-Malunkya Sutta* [MN 63]

The Real Secret of Abundance

Your Intentions Come Back to You

Desire is not the key to abundance. Naively wishing on a star will not bring you the rewards you seek. Methods based on selfish desire, as presented in the video “The Secret,” lead not to abundance but to suffering. The real secret of abundance is consciously using the law of *kamma*. This is done through the process of Dependent Origination that we have been discussing.

You can achieve whatever material rewards you are seeking simply by cultivating certain intentions, thinking certain thoughts and speaking certain words. What kind of intentions, thoughts and words? Those directed towards the welfare of others, directed towards creating value for others, directed towards the well-being of others.

You can create whatever kind of being and *kamma* you want through the process of Dependent Origination. But you have to be willing and able to see that whatever being you create is a false self, a temporary identity subject to aging and death. And you have to be willing to let go of previous selves created out of ignorance, out of desire.

Most people misuse the process of Dependent Origination by creating false selves out of ignorance, to serve a selfish desire. This creates *kamma* for suffering equal to the enjoyment one desires. And then they create even more suffering by being attached to those selves.

Instead, we use our intelligence to deliberately create a false self whose desire is the benefit of others. Then by the law of *kamma*, as much enjoyment as we desire for others automatically flows to ourselves. And when those selves’ duration is finished, because we know from the beginning they are temporary, we can easily let them go without a great deal of suffering.

If you think about this and analyze your experience, you can easily see that it is exactly what you are doing when you have a successful career or business. You are creating a self that provides value for others, so you generate the *kamma* to receive value in return. By these examples are

on the level of mundane material value. When you generate transcendental spiritual value for others, the rewards you receive in return multiply by an astonishing amount.

If you are willing to take responsibility for the enlightenment of millions of people, tax your brain and engage your resources to create the skillful means whereby they can attain perfect enlightenment, you will receive uncountable blessings. This is exactly what the Bodhisattva vow is about, and the process of Dependent Origination explains how it works, and why it works.

“Monks, for one whose awareness-release through good will is cultivated, developed, pursued, handed the reins and taken as a basis, given a grounding, steadied, consolidated, and well-undertaken, eleven benefits can be expected. Which eleven?

“One sleeps easily, wakes easily, dreams no evil dreams. One is dear to human beings, dear to non-human beings. The devas protect one. Neither fire, poison, nor weapons can touch one. One’s mind gains concentration quickly. One’s complexion is bright. One dies unconfused and — if penetrating no higher — is headed for the Brahma worlds.”

— *Mettanissamsa Sutta* [AN 11.16]

Overcoming Anger

Like Taking Poison Yourself to Hurt Another

Anger is just projected suffering; you try to project your suffering on another person. You wish that they would suffer the way you are suffering. It doesn't do anything but make you even more miserable.

Hate is when anger becomes an attitude. It's premeditated anger — planned instead of spontaneous. Anger and hate destroy the angry person. Buddha said:

An angry person is ugly and sleeps poorly. Gaining a profit, he turns it into a loss, having done damage with word and deed. A person overwhelmed with anger destroys his wealth. Maddened with anger, he destroys his status. Relatives, friends, and colleagues avoid him. Anger brings loss. Anger inflames the mind. He doesn't realize that his danger is born from within. An angry person doesn't know his own benefit. An angry person doesn't see the Dhamma. A man conquered by anger is in a mass of darkness. He takes pleasure in bad deeds as if they were good, but later, when his anger is gone, he suffers as if burned with fire. He is spoiled, blotted out, like fire enveloped in smoke." — *Kodhana Sutta* [AN 7.60]

The best way to overcome anger and hate is to make *mettā*. *Mettā* means loving kindness. We should direct loving kindness toward all beings, and especially toward those who we hate or who hate us. That will balance the *kamma* and lead to all kinds of benefits.

"Monks, for one whose awareness-release through good will is cultivated, developed, pursued, handed the reins and taken as a basis, given a grounding, steadied, consolidated, and well-undertaken, eleven benefits can be expected. Which eleven?

"One sleeps easily, wakes easily, dreams no evil dreams. One is dear to human beings, dear to non-human beings. The devas protect one. Neither fire, poison, nor weapons can touch one. One's mind gains concentration quickly. One's complexion is bright. One dies unconfused and — if penetrating no higher — is headed for the Brahma worlds." — *Mettā Sutta* [SN 46.54]

Generating *mettā* is one of the most powerful methods taught by the Buddha. Practice it and you will see: you will become a king, a star, a god.

The Fire Sermon

View of a World Aflame

The Fire Sermon is one of the Buddha's most striking Suttas, at least in terms of its imagery. Here's how it starts:

“Monks, the All is aflame. What All is aflame? The eye is aflame. Forms are aflame. Consciousness at the eye is aflame. Contact at the eye is aflame. And whatever arises in dependence on contact at the eye — experienced as pleasure, pain or neither-pleasure-nor-pain — that too is aflame. Aflame with what? Aflame with the fire of passion, the fire of aversion, the fire of delusion. Aflame, I tell you, with birth, aging and death, with sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, and despairs.” — *Adittapariyaya Sutta* [SN 35.28]

He makes similar statements in regard to the ear and sounds, the nose and aromas, the tongue and flavors, the body and touch, the intellect and ideas. Of course, the Buddha is talking about the process of Dependent Origination, which shows how the consciousness developed with name-and-form through the six senses becomes feeling through contact. That feeling, when clung to, is the cause of all birth, death and suffering.

As soon as we understand this natural mechanical process of becoming, we gain the ability to exercise control over it. We can observe Dependent Origination in ourselves and manipulate its sensitive points to change the outcome of the process. The most sensitive points are the feedback loops between consciousness and name-and-form, and between contact and feeling.

Once we crave and cling to a feeling, it's too late; we will be swept by the flood of sensation into becoming, birth and suffering. But if we can stop the process of Dependent Origination before clinging, we can short-circuit it and go directly to *samāḍhi*, or absorption in meditative consciousness. If we can influence the process even earlier, at the feedback loop between consciousness and name-and-form, we can go directly to dispassion.

The Buddha talks about this at the end of the Fire Sermon:

“He grows disenchanted with the intellect, disenchanted with ideas, disenchanted with consciousness at the intellect, disenchanted with contact at the intellect. And whatever arises in dependence on contact at the intellect, experienced as pleasure, pain or neither-pleasure-nor-pain: He grows disenchanted with that too. Disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, he is fully released. With full release, there is the knowledge, ‘Fully released.’ He discerns that ‘Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.’”

— *Adittapariyaya Sutta* [SN 35.28]

In other words, by changing our name-and-form, our ontology or model of how the world and life work, we can see through the illusory existence, the false promise of enjoyment, and directly attain dispassion without going through the rigors of monkhood and meditation. That is the realm of the Bodhisattva, and we will discuss that exalted subject in future episodes.

The Ultimate Weapon

Kill 'em with Kindness

The ultimate weapon is not nuclear, biological or electromagnetic. It is not cyber, propaganda or intelligence. It is certainly not ballistic, economic or religious.

The ultimate weapon is giving sincere blessings.

For example, if you use a gun or other physical weapon, someone will always have a bigger or better one. If you use money or propaganda as a weapon, someone will always have more money or a bigger propaganda network. If you start a religious or political group, there is always a bigger one that will be against you.

But who can oppose you if all you are doing is offering blessings? And blessings have real power, especially if you understand the psychology.

If I bless someone, “May you be happy,” at once he realizes that he is not happy. He desires happiness and has made strenuous efforts to attain it, but he has not been successful. Within himself he desires to see that other beings are also unhappy, for that will minimize his embarrassment at being unhappy. Nevertheless, if I sincerely wish him happiness, it must mean that I am so happy that I don’t mind if others are also happy. He feels that I am in a superior position to him; thus he feels defeated.

Similarly, if I bless someone,

“May you be peaceful, may you have integrity, may you have everything you need; may you gain knowledge and wisdom, may you attain enlightenment, may you become a Buddha...”

He will have no way to attack me without revealing that he is fallen, in an inferior position. After all, what kind of miscreant would criticize someone who offers him blessings?

Therefore, as Jesus said: “Love your enemies. Bless those that hate you. Do good to those who despise and use you.”

If we were to start an ordinary religious group, offering phony salvation, a bogus conception of spiritual life, requiring no standard of integrity, transferring all responsibility to some all-powerful omnipresent but invisible deity, we would get so many followers, money and property. I know, because I already did it!

But if I say, “Come and be happy. Be peaceful and meditate. Live with integrity. Learn how to get everything you need. Gain knowledge and wisdom. Attain complete enlightenment and become a Buddha,” everyone runs away screaming—especially the religious people! That is the power of the ultimate weapon of giving blessings.