

*Divine coral-tree flowers and
sandal-wood powder fell from the sky*

DN 16



BHIKKHU BRAHMALI

Wisdom & Wonders
Sutta Series
No.1

Divine coral-tree flowers and sandal-wood powder fell from the sky

Wisdom & Wonders

Sutta Series

Volume 1, No.1

Bhikkhu Brahmāli

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Parts 1 & 2: youtu.be/cYoA0SCa8GA

*The gift of the dhamma excels all gifts;
the taste of the dhamma excels all tastes;
delight in the dhamma excels all delights.
The eradication of craving overcomes all suffering.*

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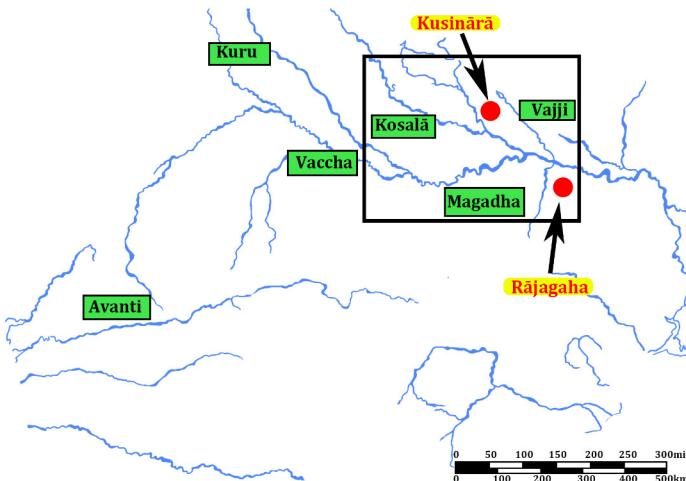
Wisdom & Wonders
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INTRODUCTION

The Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (The Great Discourse on the Buddha's Extinguishment) in the Dīghanikāya (DN16) records the last journey of the Buddha, when he walked from Rājagaha¹, (modern-day Rajgir, India) to Kusinārā² (modern-day Kushinagar, India) where he eventually passed away.



-
- 1 The capital of Māgadha, one of the four chief kingdoms of India at the time of the Buddha.
 - 2 Kusinārā was the capital of the Mallas. The Buddha said that in ancient times it had been Kusāvati, the royal city of Mahā-Sudassana.

This sutta is very interesting for many reasons one of which is that a sutta is a discourse by the Buddha, but the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta is a narrative of the Buddha's final journey.

As the Buddha knew that he was coming to his final days, he laid down his last instructions to his disciples on what to do when he passed away.

Along with giving us much insight into what the Buddha himself considered the core aspects of his teachings, the sutta also lays down the fundamental rules for the *saṅgha*: what kind of conduct and behaviour would ensure that the Buddha's dispensation would last far into the future. In doing so, he creates a beautiful framework that helps us understand all the other suttas.

As covering this whole sutta in detail would take a considerable amount of time, I'm only going to focus on some of its most important aspects.

Rājagaha

Nālandā

Pataligama

Koṭīgāma

Nādika

Beluva

Vesālī

Bhaṇḍagāma

Hattīgāmaka

Ambagāma

Jambugāma

Bhoganagara

Pāvā

Kusinārā

Kos

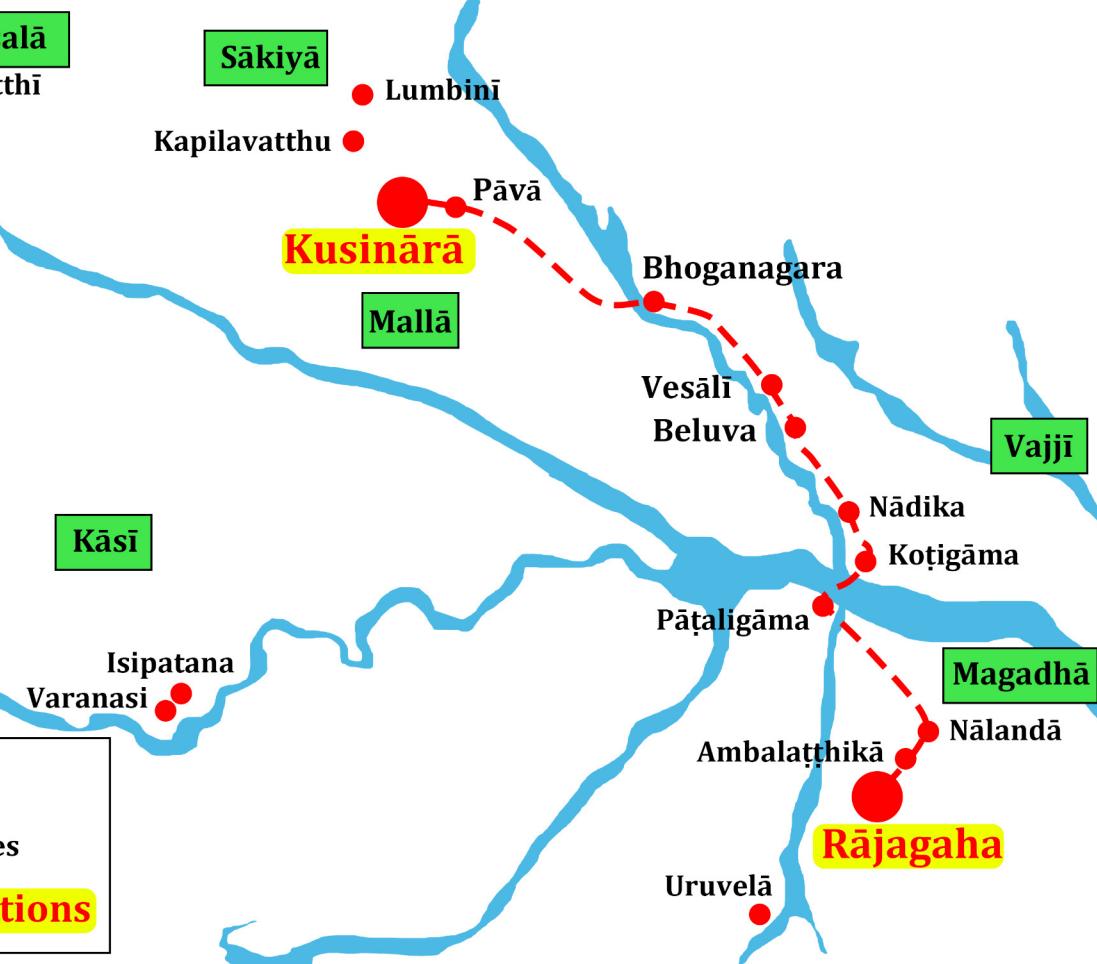
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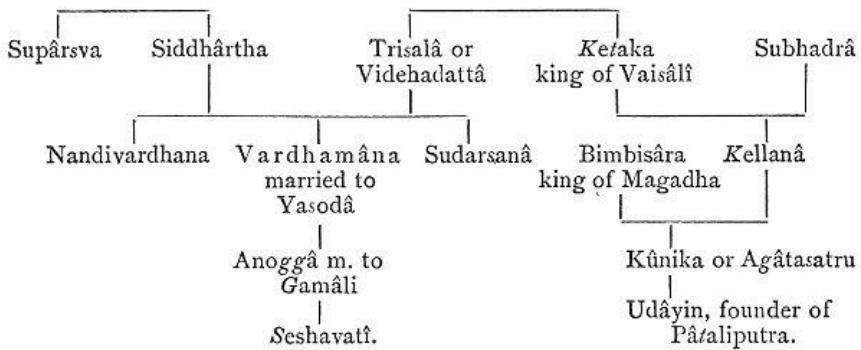
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THE LAST JOURNEY OF THE BUDDHA, WHEN
HE WALKED FROM RĀJAGAHA TO KUSINĀRA
WHERE HE EVENTUALLY PASSED AWAY





SEVEN PRINCIPLES

“Soon after Vassakāra had gone, the Lord said: ‘Ānanda, go to whatever monks there are round about Rājagaha, and summon them to the assembly hall.’

“Very good, Lord’, said Ānanda, and did so.”

Vassakāra, first mentioned here without prior appearance in any other sutta, was the chief minister of King Ajātasattu Vedehiputta³ of the Māgadha⁴. King Ajātasattu, contemplating an attack on the Vajjians⁵, told Vassakāra to visit the Buddha to find out what his chances of success were.

This conversation appears to be in conflict with Sāmaññaphala Sutta ([DN 2](#)), an earlier sutta. According to that discourse, King Ajātasattu had killed his father, but after having gained faith in the Buddha and came to regret the deed. It is strange that now he wanted to ask the Buddha for advice on how to conduct warfare!

³ King of Māgadha, who murdered his father Bimbisāra, to gain the throne, and conspired with Devadatta to kill the Buddha, but was later converted.

⁴ One of the four chief kingdoms of India at the time of the Buddha and had its capital at Rājagaha. Māgadha is identified with the modern South Behar.

⁵ One of the sixteen Great Nations. The names Vajjī and Licchavī were often synonymous.



The Buddha told Vassakāra that it was not possible to vanquish the Vajjians so long as they adhered to the seven principles he gave them.

"I taught the Vajjians these seven principles that prevent decline. As long as these seven principles that prevent decline last among the Vajjians, and as long as the Vajjians are seen following them, they can expect growth, not decline."

In my opinion, the purpose of the Buddha's statement was to discourage Vassakāra from invading the Vajjians, and to encourage the Māgadhans to take on these practices. Being the king's chief minister, whose job was to carry out the royal mandate, meant that Vassakāra did not take the *dhamma* on board. While the Buddha's intention was to calm him down, he immediately took it the wrong way and instead was contemplating how to use this information to attack the Vajjians. *"If the Vajjians are so strong, we have to use propaganda against them. We have to divide them internally,"* he concluded.



Wanting to give the monks a similar discourse to the one he had just given to Vassakāra, the Buddha asked Ānanda to gather all the monks staying in the vicinity of Rājagaha together in the assembly hall.

The Buddha went to the assembly hall and addressed the monks:

“Monks, I will teach you these seven principles that prevent decline. Listen and pay close attention, I will speak.”

Whenever the Buddha had an important teaching to dispense, he would assemble the monks and say: *“Listen and pay close attention.”* You see this in some suttas when the Buddha talked at his own initiative, rather than when he was asked to deliver a sermon.

The Buddha deemed these seven principles as being crucial for the future maintenance of his dispensation. Likewise, to ensure the future survival of the Buddhist teachings, we too must practise according to these factors.

Any Buddhist group will face the problem of friction as it is a natural part of being human. So, it is always good to be reminded of the principles that create harmony and a sense of well-being.

“As long as the monks meet frequently and have many meetings, they can expect growth, not decline.

“As long as the monks meet in harmony, leave in harmony, and carry on their business in harmony, they can expect growth, not decline.

“As long as the monks don’t make new decrees or abolish existing decrees, but undertake and follow the training rules as they have been decreed, they can expect growth, not decline.

“As long as the monks honor, respect, esteem, and venerate the senior monks—of long standing, long gone forth, fathers and leaders of the sangha—and think them worth listening to, they can expect growth, not decline.

“As long as the monks don’t fall under the sway of arisen craving for future lives, they can expect growth, not decline.

“As long as the monks take care to live in wilderness lodgings, they can expect growth, not decline.

“As long as the monks individually establish mindfulness, so that more good-hearted spiritual companions might come, and those that have already come may live comfortably, they can expect growth, not decline.

“As long as these seven principles that prevent decline last among the monks, and as long as the monks are seen following them, they can expect growth, not decline.”

First of all, the emphasis here is on the monastic *sangha* as the core of Buddhism. When the *sangha* works well, Buddhism can prosper as a result. Of course, these principles are beneficial to any organization, not just only the *sangha*.

*AN INFOGRAPHIC OF THESE SEVEN PRINCIPLES

First Principle: FREQUENT ASSEMBLIES

The first principle to which the *sangha* needs to adhere is to hold regular and frequent assemblies. This could be one of the reasons a group of *sangha* are required to meet at the very least once a fortnight on *uposatha* days, the day on which the *sangha* assembles to confess any faults and to recite the *pātimokkha* (the monastic precepts).

Having frequent meetings allows the *sangha* to iron out problems and address potential ones in a skillful way. This helps the

community move forward with a sense of unity. This unity within the *saṅgha* community allows the *dhamma* to prosper and to ensure that the *saṅgha* as a whole advances in the right direction.

The idea of frequent assemblies is very important to all communities — the *saṅgha*, lay communities, families or even partners.

Second Principle: HARMONY

The second principle is closely related to the first one. Here, the focus is the manner with which the meetings are held: meeting in harmony, thus living in harmony.

An interesting thing about the word ‘harmony’ — *samagga* in Pali — is that it has two meanings: unity and unanimity.

The idea of unanimity is a very good principle to employ not just in the *saṅgha* but in any organisation. In practice, not every member of an organisation needs to agree, but the minority should be heard and efforts to accommodate them should be made. In this way, a middle way will be found where everybody will be reasonably happy. Consequently, it’s easier to move along in harmony when no one will feel trampled upon by others.

Third Principle: TEACHINGS

“Do not authorise what has not been authorised or abolish what has been authorised but perceive according to what has already been laid down.”

This principle is very important because it has a profound effect on how we understand the Buddhist teachings, including the monastic discipline and rules.

What the Buddha is saying here is that the monastic rules or the *vinaya* and the discourses or *suttas* — together the foundation of Buddhism — should not be abolished nor added to. Nonetheless, some discourses were added by later generations. It is, thus, important to distinguish the core teachings from the added information.

*The vinaya and the suttas together
are the foundation of Buddhism*

What the Buddha laid down were basically the four *nikāyas* (discourses): the long discourses, the middle discourses, the connected discourses, and the numerical discourses. Those discourses, plus the *vinaya piṭaka* (monastic code of conduct for both *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis*), form the core teachings of the Buddha.

*The four nikāyas and the vinaya piṭaka
form the core teachings of the Buddha.*

Fourth Principle: RESPECT FOR THE ELDERS

The principle is about *honouring, respecting, revering and saluting the elders of long standing — those who have long ordained, the senior figures and leaders of the sangha.*

In the *sangha* or any lay community, there is usually tension between respect for the natural authority of the elders and desire for democracy where everybody has a say. To find a balance between the two is important. And when we get that balance right, it works quite nicely.

I would add that not only should one respect the elders but one should also think that the elders ‘should’ be listened to. The translator seems to have missed out this part: the elders are worthy of being listened to because they have more experience.

Fifth Principle: LET GO OF DESIRE

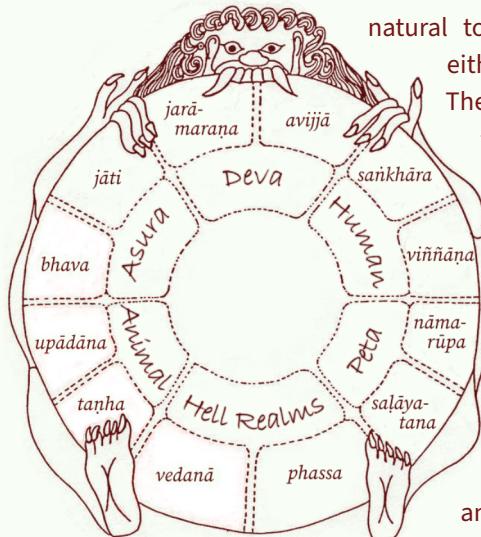
“Monks do not fall prey to the desires which arise in them and lead to rebirth.”

The fifth principle asks the question: what are these desires that arise in one and lead to rebirth? The answer lies in the second noble truth, which is about the desires that lead to rebirth or *ponobhavikā taṇhā*. *Ponobhavikā* literally means the ‘again existence’ or further existence in the future, and *taṇhā* means ‘craving.’ So, *ponobhavikā taṇhā* means the craving which leads to rebirth.

What are the cravings that lead to rebirth? They are *kāma taṇhā* or the desire for sensual pleasures, *bhava taṇhā* or the desire for existence, and *vibhava taṇhā* or the desire to be annihilated and exterminated.

Of all three kinds of cravings, *kāma taṇhā* is by far the most important that tie you down and ensure rebirth. The desire for sen-

WHEEL OF LIFE



Once we have a body and a mind, it is natural to experience the world as either pleasant or unpleasant. These experiences are called feelings (*vedanā*). They are represented on the Wheel of Life as an eye pierced by an arrow. As a direct result of these feelings, we start to desire (*taṇhā*). We try to get rid of unpleasant feelings and only have pleasant feelings. This craving is our normal

response to experiencing feelings and is represented as a person drinking beer. We want to make sure that these desires get satisfied, because not satisfying our craving is also felt as unpleasant. To do this we take things up, we grasp at things, and we



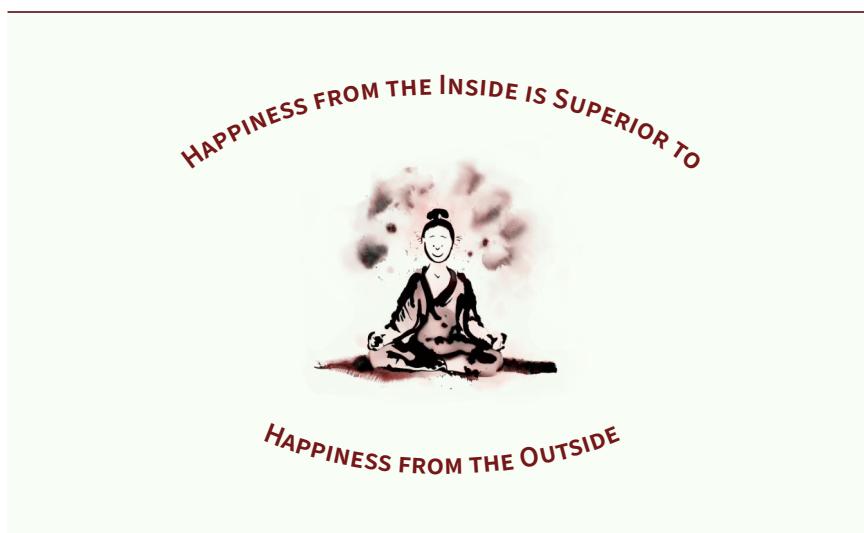
follow certain strategies (*upādāna*). We get ourselves an education, we get a job, we get into relationships, we buy a house, we have children, we adhere to a religion, we have political views. This is represented by a monkey reaching for fruit. Once we adopt certain strategies, we get established in a certain life pattern; we tend to exist (*bhava*) in a certain way. Because most people's strategies revolve around satisfying their sense desires, they live a sensual existence. *Bhava* is represented by sexual union or a person in late pregnancy



sual things in the world takes you perpetually around the round of *samsāra*, from one life to another. It is difficult for many people to take this message on board because the happiness of sensual pleasures is the only happiness they have.

When you hear this teaching, you may think, ‘Oh no, this is too much. The Buddha is asking too much. I can’t give up these things! My life will be miserable and pointless. I have to have some kind of happiness in the world!’

Although this seems to be a very tough message, it is a misunderstanding to think that giving up sensual pleasures is distressing. The whole point of the Buddhist path is to gradually give up certain unwholesome things and gradually accumulate more wholesome things. What you build up is the internal happiness that comes from practicing the Noble Eightfold Path.



When you build up wholesome happiness inside, your meditation improves. Consequently, it is natural that your interest in worldly things tends to die away as you have a more profound, more secure and more reliable sense of happiness. The happiness that comes

from inside of you is far superior to the happiness of sensuality from the outside. So, you needn't worry that you are giving up something and having nothing in return.

It's a slow process, but when that process starts to bear fruit, you realize that you are gaining far more than you are losing.

Always remember this important and interesting point of the *dhamma*: the one thing that ties you to *samsāra* more than anything else is your desire for worldly sensual pleasures.

Why do sensual pleasures tie you down? Because they are almost always about the future: somewhere I want to go, a house and a car I want to own, a kind of relationship I want to have, a holiday I want to take, and so on. Even while you are enjoying the results of that craving due to your hard work, there is still a residue of craving inside, still driving you towards the future. Rarely do you find lasting contentment in the realm of sensual pleasures.

*Rarely do you find lasting contentment
in the realm of sensual pleasures*

As this desire generally moves your mind towards the future, you project yourself into that future. What happens then is that your mind is somewhere else, not right here and now.

One of the reasons it is difficult to become peaceful in meditation is that we seem to be creating a future as we go along. It is this projection into the future that generates rebirth. On the other

hand, when all that craving dies away completely and you've stopped creating a future, the end of rebirth can finally happen.

It is especially important for monastics to let go of *kāma taṇhā* because with too much *kāma taṇhā* making life disturbing and difficult, one cannot really live a proper and correct monastic life.

Worldly cravings — including craving for a position, craving for a place in the hierarchy, craving for power, and craving to be famous — can cause lots of suffering.

All these things can sometimes creep into monastic life. If you look around the Buddhist world, there are so many hierarchies in many countries. Buddhism is supposed to be democratic, where the whole *saṅgha* works together and each member has a vote. Turning that into a massive hierarchy can cause problems. Once a hierarchy has been established, it is natural that people want to get to the top to have more power, more access to money, or more access to influence. I think that hierarchies in the world inherently lead to corruption. That's why the *saṅgha* in early Buddhism didn't even have abbots.

Sixth Principle: FOREST DWELLING

“As long as the monks and the nuns, the monastics, are devoted to forest lodgings, they can be expected to prosper and not to decline.”

I find this principle both interesting and powerful as it tells you why the forest tradition is so important — it upholds all aspects of Buddhism. If monks and nuns stop living in the forest, we can expect decline, not prosperity.

Buddhism relies on having forest monastics who properly and fundamentally practise Buddhist teachings in the right way.

Therefore, we should try our very best to encourage monastics to move towards the forest tradition as that is where one gets real results from meditation practice, which allows Buddhism to prosper.

This principle is very closely related to the previous one, as living in the forest is peaceful and offers very few sensual pleasures and desires, including a desire to be powerful, which is very dangerous since it leads to rebirth. As a forest monk in Australia, you may be more powerful than the kangaroos, but that's about it—not much of a hierarchy to boast about.

I always find forest monastics to be the most inspiring ones, with the way they practice and their ability to get into deep *samādhi*. And among them are the vast majority of the *ariyans*, the noble people in the world. I am not criticising everybody else; of course, you also find very good monastics who live in the city, who practise in a good way, who do a lot of good charity work. After all, not everybody is suited to living in the forest.

The big picture, however, is that in the long term, it's the forest *saṅgha* that will support Buddhism in the future.

Seventh Principle: SPIRITUAL COMPANIONS (KALYANMITTAS)

“As long as they preserve their personal mindfulness.”

This means as long as they remember to do this, good spiritual companions will come to them and those that are already with them will dwell at ease.

The idea here is that good spiritual companions — the *ariyans* or the noble ones — are very important to sustain the *saṅgha*. We should support them, listen to them, and live our life according to what the *ariyans* teach.

Learning the suttas by yourself is great, but one concern is that you may misinterpret or misunderstand them. While you can learn a lot by reading the suttas, certain profound teachings could be quite easily misunderstood unless you have a good teacher to point out the way. Concepts such as *anattā*, or non-self, is very profound and hard to comprehend unless we have a good guide.

When we have both *ariyans* and the Buddha's core teachings at the same time, we have the two pillars of Buddhism to keep us on the correct path without losing track of the essence of Buddhism.

*The two pillars to keep us on the right path:
the ariyans &
the Buddha's core teachings.*

This is why we should always welcome monastics and lay people who are *ariyans*. When we welcome them, we know that we are practising the right way, doing the right things and heading towards the right direction. As long as you keep on inviting and looking after good monastics, they will want to come again in the future. And when this happens, both the lay community and the *sangha* prosper as a consequence.

Those are the seven principles to be contemplated and practised both to uphold Buddhism and to avoid its decline.

An interesting point is that those above seven principles are only found in *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*. It is rather obvious that the Buddha taught these principles so that when he passed away the *dhamma* could carry on for a long time in the future even without his presence.

Some of the principles might be more relevant to lay people, but some — such as having good spiritual companions, having regular and harmonious assemblies, and respecting the elder — are relevant to everybody, both lay people and monastics.



VULTURE'S PEAK

“THIS IS MORALITY; THIS IS SAMĀDH; THIS IS WISDOM. SAMĀDH WHEN IMBUED WITH MORALITY BRINGS GREAT FRUIT AND PROFIT”

THE COMPREHENSIVE DISCOURSE

“And then the Lord, while staying at Vulture’s Peak, gave a comprehensive discourse, ‘This is morality; this is samādhi; this is wisdom. Samādhi when imbued with morality brings great fruit and profit. The mind when imbued with samādhi brings great fruit and profit. The mind imbued with wisdom becomes completely free from the corruptions; that is, from the corruption of sensuality, of becoming, of false views and of ignorance.”

Remember that the Buddha was talking about the core aspects of his teaching here. This particular passage occurs many times in this sutta as it is a summary of the Buddha’s teachings of the path: *sīla*, morality; *samādhi*, stillness; and *paññā*, wisdom.

This is a beautiful summary of the Buddhist path, showing us an essential structure or framework of how it works. The integral point about these three aspects of the path is that when *samādhi* is imbued with *sīla*, it brings great fruit and profit.

Sometimes people are only taught mindfulness meditation, not the whole path with all its aspects. It means their meditation practice is missing the *sīla* or morality aspect. When morality is absent, meditation will never bring great fruit. *Sīla* is a fundamental part of this practice.

*INFOGRAPHICS OR QUOTE

SĪLA — MORALITY
SAMĀDHIS — STILLNESS
PAÑÑĀ — WISDOM

Keeping the five precepts is a wonderful thing to do, and if you can do it, you should feel really happy. However, if you really want to succeed in meditation practice, you may have to do more than just keeping the five precepts.

The teaching above says: “*when stillness is imbued with sīla.*” Imbued means penetrated with, filled with, or pervaded with; in other words, stillness is filled up to the maximum with *sīla*. The point here is: *sīla* has to be as strong as possible for it to pervade *samādhi* to its maximum potential. We should keep in mind that *sīla* is one of the most profound things in Buddhism.

It seems obvious that most people understand *sīla* to mean the five precepts, but it actually means much more than that. *Sīla* is about our character, our habits, about who we are as human beings, or about the quality of our heart.

What gives rise to meditation? 'Sīla'

What is the quality of our heart?

- Is it a heart that is full of kindness and generosity?
- Soft and gentle towards other beings?
- Wanting to be beneficial for other beings?

If the answer is yes, it means that our *sīla* has started to become very profound.

Sometimes you can keep the five precepts very well and still have all kinds of defilements that stop you from maximizing your *samādhi* or your ability to meditate properly. We need to take *sīla* to its maximum potential to be able to meditate properly.

What does this mean?

When people say: "Oh, my meditation isn't going so well. What could be the reason? Could it be that I'm not meditating enough hours? Maybe I am using the wrong meditation object?" They're missing the point; those things have only a small impact on meditation.

When the Buddha talks about what gives rise to meditation, it's always *sīla*: habits, character, and the quality of your heart. *Sīla* is what really matters.

If your meditation isn't going well, you should ask yourself these vital questions:

How can I purify my mind a little bit more?

How can I have more understanding about people around me?

How can I have less anger and irritation?

This is what we should be working on if we want our meditation practice to improve.

This is one of many places in the suttas where you find this exact structure of the path. For example, in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta ([MN 10](#), [DN 22](#)), the *satipaṭṭhāna* practice is always described as being based on *sīla* and *ujuka ditṭhi*, straight view.

And then, you have *sīla* in the Noble Eightfold Path. The Path starts off with *sīla* and eventually comes all the way to right mindfulness and *samādhi*.

The noble eightfold path can be said to be a comprehensive version of the gradual training. It is also a comprehensive version of the 37 Aids to Awakening (37 Bodhipakkhiya dhammā). We will discuss both teachings later.

In fact, all the important teachings about the practice in the suttas are summarised by *samādhi* or stillness, imbued by morality or *sīla*, and *paññā* or wisdom.

Next, the Buddha talks about how wisdom, when imbued with stillness, has great benefits and bears great fruit. According to the suttas, the foundation for real, profound wisdom is always *samādhi*. When you read the standard description of how awakening happens according to a first-person perspective, it is always that *samādhi* is the *upanisa* or the cause for *Yathābhūtañānadassana* – seeing things according to reality.

*The more samādhi you have
the more powerful your wisdom is.*

Once you have wisdom imbued with stillness, your mind is liberated from the corruptions or *āsavas*. *Āsavas*, the root defilements in the mind, consist of sensuality, existence, and *avijjā*. I prefer to translate *avijjā* as delusion or misunderstanding of the nature of reality.

As we discussed in Principle 5, the second noble truth — the cause of suffering — involves three types of craving. The *āsavas* are closely related to the causes of suffering because we have the craving for sensuality, craving for existence, and craving for annihilation. The *āsavas* are what drives the cycle of rebirth and the perpetuity of *Samsāra*, the same way craving drives the cycle of existence, birth, and death.

Craving drives the cycle of existence

Desire for sensuality, desire for existence, and desire for annihilation are a result of *avijjā* or delusion. When we haven't seen reality as it is or haven't understood the idea of non-self, we may want to annihilate ourselves. "Oh, life is so miserable! I've had enough! The whole world hates me! I hate myself! It's time to make an end to all this misery in life!"

*IMAGE?

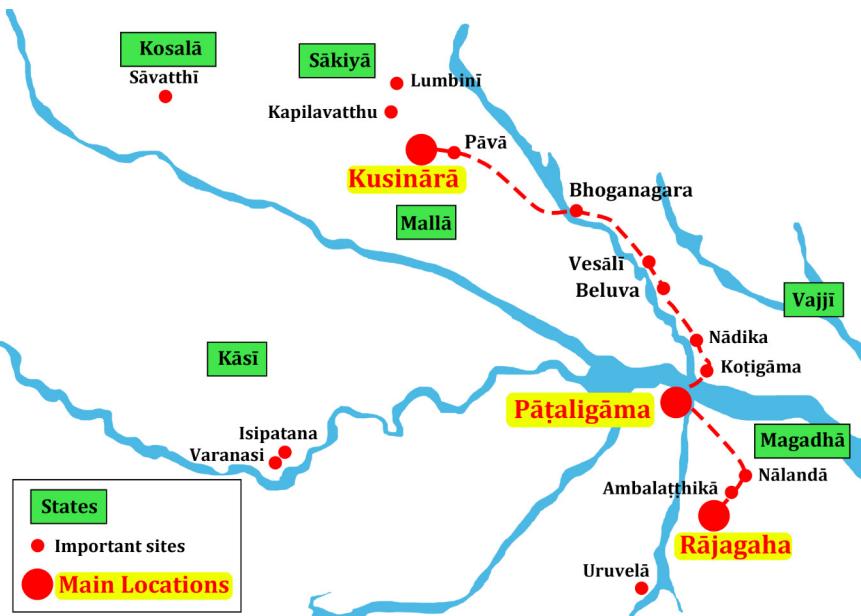
DELUSION - DESIRE FOR SENSUALITY, DESIRE FOR EXISTENCE, AND DESIRE FOR ANNIHILATION

People sometimes commit suicide when they feel miserable in life. This desire to end their existence is based on delusion or misunderstanding that there is something inside of us to be destroyed.

All of us have a feeling of *attā*, a sense of self unless we are an *ariyan*. We feel we have certain character traits inside of us. We feel 'I exist!' According to the suttas, this is the misperception of an *attā*. And as long as you have this misperception, the idea of annihilation can arise when you feel so much suffering and pain in life. You can also see the close relationship between delusion and *vibhava taṇhā* or desire for extermination.

The benefits of good morality

The Buddha has now moved on to Pāṭaliputta or Pāṭaligāma on the banks of the Ganges River. He is walking north towards his destination of Kusinārā.



At Pāṭaligāma, which would later become Pāṭaliputra, the capital of the Māgadha empire, and Patna of the present day, the Buddha was talking to some householders.

“And, householders, there are these five advantages to one of good morality and of success in morality. What are they?

“In the first place, through careful attention to his affairs he gains much wealth. In the second place, he gets a good reputation. In the third place, whatever assembly he approaches, whether of Khattiyas, Brahmins, householders, or ascetics, he does so with confidence and assurance.

In the fourth place, he dies unconfused. In the fifth place, after death, at the break-up of the body, he arises in a good destination, in a heavenly world.

“These are the five advantages to one of good morality (sīla), and of success in morality (sīla sampada).”

This advice embraces all factors concerning not only our apparent character but also our inner conduct. I would say that one of the most important but difficult parts on the Buddhist path is about getting our *sīla* right. Once we get it right, everything else tends to fall into place, including meditation, which in turns results in *paññā* or wisdom.

Sīla is much more profound than it appears.

The first success is *appamāda* or heedfulness. Heedfulness means to be careful, to be circumspect, to think properly about consequences before you act.

If you are a moral person who lives carefully, thinks properly and is reflective rather than acting on a whim, this will benefit your life as it will look after your worldly affairs, such as your money and wealth. There is an interesting connection between morality and worldly success: when you live an upright life, the carefulness with which you conduct yourself tends to have an effect in all aspects of life, in both spiritual and worldly affairs. This is why *appamāda* is one of the roots of the *dhamma*.

APPAMĀDA - HEEDFULNESS



ONE OF THE ROOTS OF DHAMMA

The second success is a good reputation. If you are morally good, you get a good reputation in the world, especially among those people who are good.

The third success is the confidence you have when you approach any kind of assembly. If you are an immoral person, you might feel that other people are judging you; on the other hand, if you live well, you have nothing to fear as you know that there's nothing in you that can be blamed.

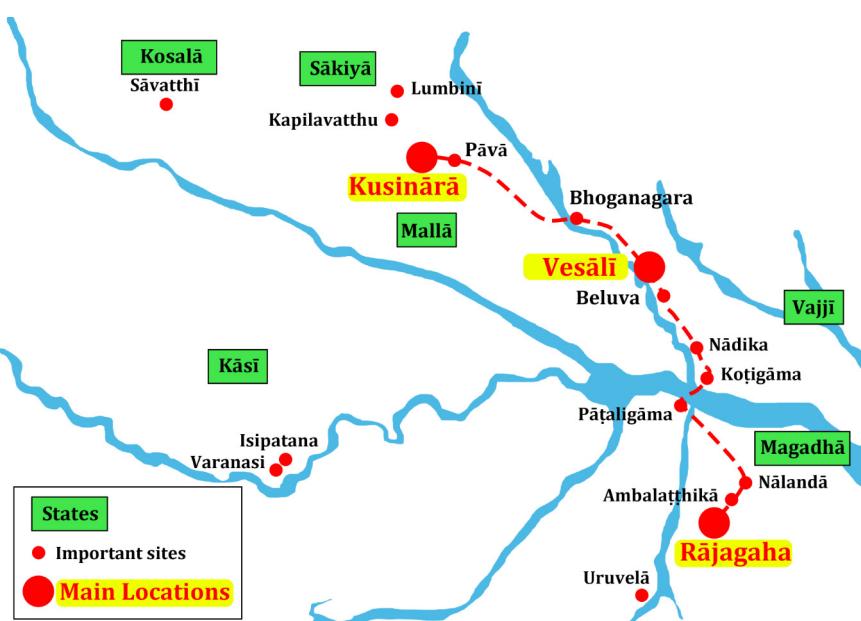
The fourth success is that you will die unconfused. People who are immoral tend to be confused because mindfulness is not present. Mindfulness is what enables you to keep a pure mind.

The fifth success is a good destination. If you are nice and kind to other people, you are being your own best friend because kindness you give others will lead to your own happiness and benefits in the future. So, be your own friend! Don't be your own enemy.

*IMAGE OR INFOGRAPHIC
OF FIVE ADVANTAGES OF GOOD MORALITY
SILA - HEEDFULNESS,
REPUTATION,
CONFIDENCE,
CLEAR MIND AT DEATH,
GOOD FUTURE

LAST RAINS RETREAT

Now, I am going to skip some parts and discuss the period when the Buddha was staying at Vesāli for his last rains retreat.



“During the rains, the Lord was attacked by a severe illness with sharp pains as if he were about to die. But he endured all of these mindfully, clearly aware, and without complaining. He thought, ‘It is not fitting that I should attain final Nibbāna without addressing my followers and taking leave of the order of monks. I must hold the disease in check with energy and apply myself to the force of life.’ And he did so, and the disease abated.”

The Buddha is now getting towards the very end of his life, attacked by severe illnesses with sharp pains. This reminds us that the Buddha was human just like the rest of us; He too had the same kind of physical problems. When you get old, even if you are a Buddha, you still have to go through the problems of old age with the body falling apart. It is these kinds of passages in the suttas which remind us of the Buddha's humanity.

It is very important to remember that the Buddha is one of us, a human being. In many places in the suttas, he talked about his own life and his own defilements — his problems with anger and desire when he was still a lay person before he became a Buddha. He also said he had had a wrong view.

It's very important to remember that because the Buddha was one of us, his life has incredible significance for us. What he says about his own life, including the way he lives and becomes awakened, all relates directly to our own. Many of the Buddha's suttas are autobiographical where he talks about his own practice to inspire us: *“This is what I did. You should be doing the same.”*

If you put the Buddha on the wrong kind of pedestal, he becomes out of reach and his biography becomes irrelevant to us. We can't follow what some gods did, nor can we follow what the cosmic principle did, because we're not one of them.

*The Buddha is a human being
who has taken the human conditions
to its highest potential*

When we recognize that the Buddha is a human being, he is, then, special because he has taken the human condition to its highest potential, a very remarkable deed. Starting out as a human being just like us, he has become an *arahant*, fully awakened. Once we understand that, the suttas, where he talks about his own practice, become meaningful and powerful examples of how we all should practice.

“Then the Lord, having recovered from his sickness, as soon as he felt better, went outside and sat down on the prepared seat in front of his dwelling. Then the Venerable Ānanda came to him, bowed down to him, sat down on one side and said, ‘Lord, I have seen the Lord in discomfort, I have seen the Lord patient, enduring. And Lord, my body was like a drunkard. I lost my bearings and things were unclear to me because of the Lord’s sickness. The only thing that was some comfort to me was the thought the Lord would not attain final Nibbāna until he has made some statement about the order of monks.’”

Although he was already a stream-enterer, Venerable Ānanda still found it very hard to cope with the fact that the Buddha was about to pass away. Everything became unclear to him as he lost his

mindfulness due to the sadness that resulted from his attachment to the Buddha. This shows us how powerful attachments can be. The Buddha's passing away is obviously a very powerful occasion and has a very strong effect on everybody.

Ven. Ānanda said his only comfort came from the Buddha's promise that he would not pass away before providing guidance about the order of monks. This seems to refer to a statement about who is going to be the next leader after the Buddha passes away.

The Buddha replied:

"But, Ānanda, what does the order of monks expect of me? I have taught the dhamma, Ānanda, making no 'inner' and 'outer'. The Tathāgata has no 'teacher's fist' in respect of doctrines."

This is one of the most important statements in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta about how the Buddha taught. He starts off by saying '*Anantaram abāhiram*'. The phrase implies that there is no inner circle of disciples that receive special teachings, nor are there outer disciples who are less important.

*There are no secrets in the teachings
of the dhamma.
Everything is available to everyone.*

In Buddhism, everything is plainly laid out for all to see and understand. The purpose of the *dhamma* is to create happiness in the world, enabling people to improve their lives and moving away from suffering and towards happiness. The purpose is always about compassion for all beings.

Having an ‘inner’ and an ‘outer’ circle of people is a way of controlling people by creating sects and cults. The Buddhist teaching is not like that at all.

However, this does not mean that it is necessarily wise to teach everything to everybody. Sometimes some people are not ready for certain teachings as they are very profound and hard to understand. There is a time for everything.

At the beginning of the path, you learn the basics and as you progress you learn more profound things.

‘And the *Tathāgata* has no teacher’s fist’ means that no teachings are withheld, so there is nothing else to be revealed in the very final moment. The Buddha is open with the *dhamma* out of compassion for the world so that everybody can benefit from this remarkable and astonishing teaching that is so simple yet so profound. Then, the Buddha adds:

*“If there’s anyone who thinks, ‘I shall take charge of the order,’ or, ‘The order should refer to me,’ or ‘Let him make some statement about the order.’ But the *Tathāgata* does not think in such terms. So why should the *Tathāgata* make a statement about the order?”*

What the Buddha is saying here is ‘I’m not appointing a successor, nor am I saying that somebody is going to take over from the *Tathāgata* and lead the order.’

This is a very important statement. There is no successor — nobody to take the place of the Buddha. The Buddha is the origina-

tor of the *dhamma* — everything should be referred to his teachings.

'The Tathāgata does not think in such terms' means that the Buddha does not think: 'I am in charge of the order. The order should refer to me.' This is interesting, isn't it? Because we think of the Buddha as the leader, as the person everybody goes to when they have a problem; for instance, when the *saṅgha* can't decide on something, they ask the Buddha for clarification. But the Buddha doesn't think of himself like that.

The Buddha thinks of himself as someone who has understood everything that has to be understood about worldly happiness and suffering and who has a message for people who are willing to listen. He delivers that message out of compassion for the world because he understands the difference between suffering and happiness, not because he sees himself as a leader. So, from his point of view, why should he appoint somebody else when there is no need for one in the first place?

Being a leader means you inherently have a problem of having a vested interest and going back to the concept of hierarchy. Also, leaders are tied to gaining honour and fame and suchlike. The Buddha has no such interest. He only wants to use the *dhamma* to help people get out of suffering and find happiness instead.

This is one of the beautiful things about the Buddha that I always like to focus on: he never had a vested interest in being a teacher. By that, I mean there was nothing for him to gain by being a teacher. In fact, the Buddha lost: time to meditate and peace. Not only didn't he get anything out of it, but it was a burden for him to teach the world. His compassion and motivation to teach is so pure. I love reading the suttas because I know that they are taught out of compassion for everyone in the world.

Then, the Buddha continues:

“Ānanda, I am now old, worn out, vulnerable; one who has traversed life’s path. I have reached the term of life, which is eighty. Just as an old cart is made to go but held together with straps, so the Tathāgata’s body is kept going by being strapped up, as it were. It is only when the Tathāgata withdraws his attention from outward signs, and by cessation of certain feelings, enters into the signless stillness of samādhi of mind, that his body knows comfort.”

This passage highlights the idea of Buddha’s mortality and old age. He talks about his physical condition, comparing his body to an old cart that is falling apart. He says that his body is full of painful feelings and that it’s only when he enters a special stillness known as the ‘*animitta ceto samādhi*,’ usually attained by the *ariyans* only, that his body feels comfortable. This signless *samādhi* is a mind state where we’re not paying attention to any particular object, and almost all *samādhi* objects cease so that the mind is basically blank. For that reason, there is very little feeling left, apart from the feeling that has to do with that particular state of *samādhi*. It’s very similar to the *jhānas* and other kinds of *samādhis* in the sense that you are taken away from the ordinary worldly feelings, the body in particular.

No other refuge

“Therefore, Ānanda, you should live as an island unto yourself; being your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge; with the dhamma as an island, with the dhamma as your refuge, with no other refuge. And how does a monk live in this way, as an island unto himself with no other refuge?”

‘We should live as an island unto ourselves’ means that we shouldn’t depend on anything or anyone else in this world. It is a very diffi-

cult thing to do. A vast majority of people take refuge in all kinds of things. And how do you know what you are taking refuge in? It's when things change and move in a different direction and you feel a sense of suffering, you know you had refuge in that thing.

When you take refuge in worldly things, you will be likely to get upset. The world doesn't always go in the way we want because it is unreliable and uncertain, and thus is not the right place to have a refuge.

The contemplation of '*anicca*' or impermanence will remind us that things change, and then we are ready to accept the reality and do not get so easily upset.

This is what the Buddha taught: reminding us of the uncertainty of these things. When we remember that, we come back to ourselves, and we sit down in meditation. When we go inside of ourselves, we become peaceful and feel independent from worldly phenomena. We feel that we have the strength and power inside of ourselves to withstand things. This is what internal refuge is about.

The more we go inside ourselves, the more we find happiness and independence from worldly things. The more independent we feel, the more strength and stability we feel inside ourselves.

When we practice the dhamma and meditation

We are an island unto ourselves

Where we have strength and stability inside

This is what meditation and the *dhamma* practice can give you when you practice in the right way. One of the qualities of the stream-enterer is being independent of other people in the world; It's one way you can judge whether somebody is an *ariyan* or not.

You are not just an island or a refuge unto yourself, but the *dhamma* is your refuge as well. Normally we talk about the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha, or the Triple Gem, but here the Dhamma is singled out. Why? Because the Buddha is a person about to die, and the Saṅgha is similar to the Buddha in that it consists of individuals who can die; whereas, the Dhamma is the teachings that are always available to you to take as a refuge in this particular sense. What does taking refuge in the Dhamma mean?

While working towards the goal, we still have some attachments to things to some extent due to our sense of self. What we should do is to slightly move the focus of the attachments. Rather than attaching to worldly things, we try to have a bit of attachment towards the *dhamma* instead.

I like comparing the concept of attachment to climbing a ladder. When you climb a ladder, you attach yourself to one rung to prevent yourself from falling off. Then, as you attach to the higher rung, you can let go of the lower one. The Path is a little bit like that — when you move up the *dhamma* ladder, you attach to something higher while letting go of the lower.



The strange thing about climbing up the *dhamma* ladder is that the higher the rung, the looser your grip becomes. Your attachment lessens because there is a greater sense of ease as you move up this ladder. Whereas, on the lower rung, you have a less developed mind and thus a firmer grasp on attachments.

The fact that the *dhamma* is singled out here is an important point. When we think about the Triple Gem, what are we thinking of?

Since the Buddha is no longer alive, he is not somebody you can meet in person. Therefore, when you think of the Buddha, you don't have so much attachment to him although he originated this path.

The real *saṅgha*, the *ariyan saṅgha*, are more like a theoretical entity. You really don't know who the *ariyans* are. You only know that as long as the path is available, there will be people who make the breakthrough and realize the *dhamma*. However, it's difficult to pinpoint who these *ariyans* are. You may have a feeling that a certain person who has the right conduct may be an *ariyan*, but it's hard to be sure. As long as we attach to individuals, even those we believe to be *ariyans*, there's always a risk that we are wrong, and then get disappointed and/or disillusioned when it turns out that they are not; for instance, when they disrobe.

'Here, Ānanda, a monk abides contemplating the body as body, earnestly, clearly aware, mindful, having put away all hankering and fretting for the world, and likewise with regard to feelings, mind and mind-objects. That, Ānanda, is how a monk or a nun or a lay Buddhist even, lives as an island unto himself with no other refuge.'

You'll probably recognize the above teaching as the four *satipaṭṭhānas*. You can summarize them simply as mindfulness of breathing

since it fulfills all the four *satipatṭhānas*. You don't need anything beyond that.

Next, you have ‘*ātāpi*’, which means something like ‘with energy’ or ‘energetic’. The word *viriya* is similar in meaning. When the mind is bright, clear and energetic, we have an ideal way of meditating. For a lot of people, that doesn't happen so very much. When you have a busy life, you're often either tired or restless with lots of thoughts.

Next, you have ‘*sampajāno*’ or ‘*sampajañña*’, which are very important words on the Buddhist path. *Sampajañña* or clear awareness basically means having clarity about what is happening in the present moment and whether you're doing the right thing. We sometimes talk about mindfulness as merely being aware of what is happening now, but it's not enough to be just aware.

Ajahn Brahm often tells a story of a guard at a wealthy woman's house as a metaphor.

The wealthy woman tells the guard: “I'm going out for the day. Please look after things!” And the guard says: “No problem, ma'am. I've been at a mindfulness course, so I know how to be mindful.” And then the lady goes away. During the night, this guard is standing there at the gate of the house and a burglar arrives. The burglar picks open the gate, and the guard is being mindful: “A burglar is picking open the gate... picking open the gate... picking open the gate...” “The burglar is walking in ... walking in... walking in... The burglar is carrying television out... carrying television out... carrying television out...” After the night is finished, the lady comes back and says, “What happened to all my valuable possessions?” And the guard replies: “Oh, I was really, really mindful. I saw the burglar going in, coming out...’

The point of that story is that mindfulness by itself is not enough. You need to have ‘*sampajañña*’, which is full awareness or clear comprehension. “I'm now watching the breath... watching

the breath... Having thoughts of ill will... Wait a minute!" Clear comprehension kicking in! "I'm not supposed to be thinking bad thoughts. Okay, back to the breath again." This is what clear comprehension is about. It tells you whether or not what you are doing at any particular time is suitable and leads you in the right direction.

Next, you have 'mindful'. It's quite interesting that mindful is mentioned there because *satipaṭṭhāna* is sometimes translated as the foundations of mindfulness, which to me means something that allows mindfulness to arise or come into existence.

Here, however it indicates that mindfulness is already there; you have to be mindful already to do *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. So, mindfulness is not the result of the practice; it is actually what you put into the practice from the very beginning. In other words, you need to develop all the other aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path for mindfulness to arise before you come to *satipaṭṭhāna*.

*All the other aspects of
the Noble Eightfold Path are needed
for mindfulness to arise*

You have to do these things in the right sequence. If you do them in the wrong sequence, it's not going to work.

This is why meditation teachers often start with allowing the mind to settle down so that mindfulness can arise. Then, you get into a good mood and cultivate the right attitude. When the attitude is right and you feel happy in the present moment, mindfulness tends to arise as a natural consequence.

When mindfulness has arisen, you can do *satipaṭṭhāna*. You can then watch the breath and all other things.

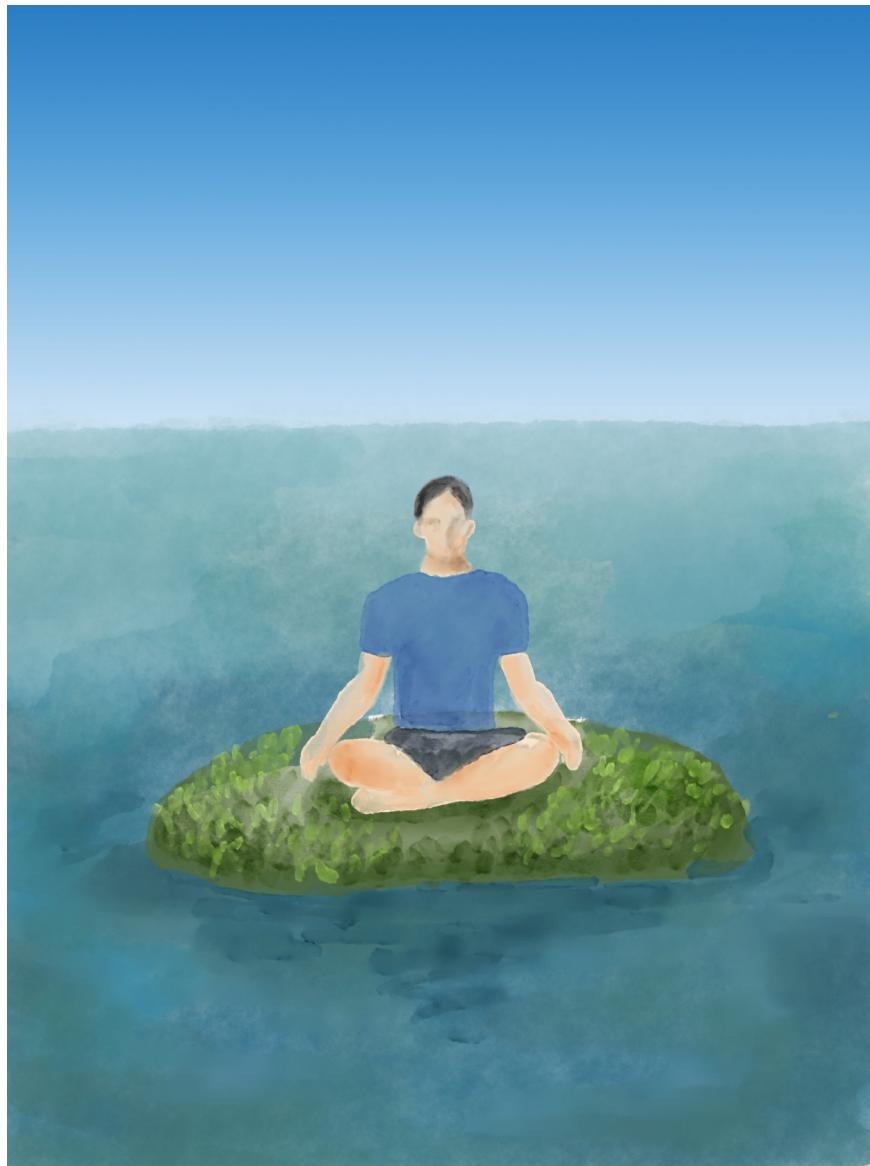
If you attain these states in the wrong order, you will find it very hard to meditate because you're going to need to put in a lot of force, making your practice quite unpleasant.

Let's come back to the sutta. In addition to clear mindfulness, it says '*Having put away hankering and fretting for the world*.'

What it refers to is your reaction to the world around you, especially your reaction to the sensory impressions. Either we like them (desire) or we dislike them (aversion). So, a good translation here could be '*Having put away desire and aversion*' or '*...like and dislike in regard to the world*'. The world here probably refers to the five senses. The very fact that you have '*put away desire and aversion for the world*' means that at this stage you are already quite detached from the world.

This is why the Buddha calls it '*having nothing else as your refuge, only the dhamma; only yourself as a refuge*'. You have given up desire and attachment. It is thus much easier to do your meditation practice as you can just observe being drawn into the object by desire or aversion.

Then we have the same thing about feelings — certain feelings among feelings, about mind states or mind qualities or *citta*, and finally mind objects or *dhamma*. We will have a closer look at mind objects later on when we get to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta.



HAVE NOTHING ELSE AS YOUR REFUGE,
ONLY THE DHAMMA; ONLY YOURSELF AS A REFUGE

The Buddha continues, “... and those who now in my time, and afterwards live in this way, they will become the highest, if they are desirous of learning.” Learning here is *sikkhā kamma*, which means desirous of training. In other words, if you have a desire to train and practice in the right way, you will get the highest results as a consequence.

All that we hold dear and beloved

“Ānanda, have I not told you before, all those things that are dear and pleasant to us must suffer change, separation, and alteration? So how can this be possible? Whatever is born becomes compounded, is liable to decay. That it should not decay, this is impossible.”

One of the standard phrases you see in the suttas is ‘*Whatever that is dear and pleasing to us must become otherwise.*’ This is one of the famous five contemplations the Buddha recommends that we do all the time.

It is interesting that even Ānanda, a stream-enterer, has to be reminded of impermanence. You can see how deep-seated some of these attachments are, which is why we need to constantly remind ourselves of this fact. And when you do, you undermine the desires for and the attachments to worldly phenomena, which results in more clarity of mind. There are many types of intoxication that lead to a lack of clarity. A very important one is the lack of clarity that comes from attachment and desire for those that are agreeable and likeable to us.

Just by remembering that, you regain clear awareness, and consequently, you know the right way to practice.

There is a sutta called the Piyajātika Sutta (Born From Those Who Are Dear) in the Majjhima Nikāya ([MN87](#)), in which Queen Mallikā says to her husband King Pasenadi that the Buddha has

said that sorrow and sadness come from people who are dear to you, and King Pasenadi gets really upset: “You can’t say that! Everybody knows that it is joy and happiness that comes from those people who are dear to you!”

That is what most people think, right? “Oh, all these people who are so close to me... All I get from them is happiness and joy.”

Hearing this, the Queen sends someone to ask the Buddha to explain, to which the Buddha says: “Well, if somebody in your family dies, what happens? How do you feel? Do you feel sad or happy? If somebody in your family gets really sick, what do you feel about that? You feel terrible again.”

As usual, the Buddha turns ideas upside down, then reframes it in a different way.

The Buddha goes through a long list of how those who are dear to us can cause us suffering. Eventually the messenger who listens to the explanation understands the point and goes back to the palace so that Queen Mallikā tells the king how it works, “If your son, Prince Viḍūḍabha, got sick, how would you feel?”

And the king says: “Terrible! I’d feel absolutely awful!”

“That’s what the Buddha means when he says that those who are dear to you are the cause for suffering and problems in life.” And she goes on with all the important people in the king’s life to show that ultimately each one of them has to get sick, die and disappear.

This is Piyajātika — suffering born from those who are dear. It is beautiful to remember this valuable teaching.

However, this doesn’t mean that people who are dear to us always cause us suffering and nothing else, because if that was the case, you wouldn’t want to have any dear ones at all. You would walk into a forest and disappear, not wanting to meet anyone again. That’s not the right way either.

*|IMAGE OF A PERSON CRYING AT A CEMETERY?

There is some happiness, but we tend to forget the suffering that also comes from these kinds of relationships. Separation has to come one day, and by remembering this fact, we can gain a bit of clarity.

As a result, you are able to be kind, patient, and reasonable rather than getting carried away by what happens in life.

Once this teaching on Piyajātika goes deep in your heart, it starts to have a real effect on your life, making you happier as an individual. It doesn't make you uncaring, but it makes you a better

person, while not being too caught up with people and things in life. After renouncing his faculties, the Buddha then says that he will also have to pass away:

“And that has been renounced, given up, rejected, abandoned, forsaken, the Tathāgata has renounced the life force.”

The Buddha is driving home the point that even he is impermanent, and even the *dhamma* is impermanent as one day it will disappear from this world.

“And the Lord went with Ven. Ānanda to the Gabled Hall in the Great Forest. When he got there he said, ‘Ānanda, go and gather together all the monks living in the vicinity of Vesālī, and get them to come to the assembly hall.

‘Very good, Lord,’ said Ānanda and did so. He then returned to the Lord, bowed down to him, stood to one side and said, ‘Lord, the order of monks is gathered together. Now is the time for the Lord to do as he sees fit.’”

Bodhipakkhiyā Dhammas.

Again here, the Buddha assembles the monks, which means that there must be an important message to give to the whole *saṅgha*.

“Then, the Lord entered the assembly hall and sat down on the prepared seat. Then he said to the monks, ‘Monks, those matters which I have discovered and proclaimed should be thoroughly learnt by you, practiced, developed and cultivated, so this holy life may endure for a long time, that it may be for the benefit and happiness of the multitude, out of compassion for the world, for the benefit and happiness of devas and humans. And what are those matters?’”

The Buddha is going to tell us about those matters he has discovered, what he has seen through his awakening experience. This is ‘*abhiññā*’ — the essence of his discovery.

In later Buddhism, these teachings became known as the ‘37 *bodhipakkhiyā dhamma*’. *Bodhipakkhiyā* are all the practical aspects of the Buddhist path that we are supposed to do so that we give rise to awakening.

Basically, the 37 *bodhipakkhiyā dhamma* can be summarised as the Noble Eightfold Path, and the Noble Eightfold Path can, in turn, be summarised as *sīla*, *saṃādhi* and *pañña*.

The Noble Eightfold Path can also be further elaborated into the gradual training which I will discuss elsewhere. Isn’t it beautiful how the Buddha’s teachings can be contracted down or expanded in different ways simply because they are different ways of looking at the same thing? And all of those are equally valid ways of looking at this path.

Let’s have a quick look at these 37 *bodhipakkhiyā dhammas*. They are so vital that the Buddha singles them out as the essential things that should be remembered and practiced. An important issue here is how they are to be learnt: *sādhukam uggahitvā* or *uggaṇhāti*. At the time of the Buddha, it would have meant by reciting them.

A group recital is a good way to ensure that the teachings are stable and kept for the future. When you recite together in a group if one person gets it wrong and the average in the group are correct, the group would remind those who get it wrong. This is how the suttas were kept correct and stable in the early days while oral recitation of the suttas was the only way.

So, you learn them thoroughly, then keep practicing. This is very important: the teachings have to be practiced, developed and cultivated. Why is that so important? Because it is only when you

cultivate the teachings fully and realise them for yourselves that they become truly stable.

Once you have clear comprehension about what the Buddha said, knowing what they are in your own heart and not simply reciting them like a parrot, the teachings become stable and solid. There is no doubt about the interpretation of what they are. And remember that if you don't practice the teachings, they are liable to get lost and won't be passed on to future generations.

It is also interesting to note here that this is the path, but in what sense can it be said that you realize the path?

By investigating your body after *samādhi*, when your mind is very still, you can see that everything is impermanent. When you see that everything — the five *khaṇḍhas* or components of existence — is suffering, you understand, for the first time, the kind of mind that is required for attaining stream entry, for having insight.

That kind of mind is completely peaceful and pure with no defilements, filled with joy and happiness, strengthened by powerful *samādhi*, and endowed with *upekha* to see things without being influenced by desire and aversion.

*Without sīla,
the mind can never be pure*

When you understand the quality of mind, you understand the importance of *sīla*. Without *sīla*, the mind can never be pure. You then understand the power of meditation because you see how it empowers the mind as well as giving joy, happiness and steadiness that will enable you to penetrate the teachings. This is how you

understand the path that is part and parcel of the Four Noble Truths

Now, let's have a look at the 37 *bodhipakkhiyā dhammas*.

*AN INFOGRAPHIC ON BODHIPAKKHIYĀ DHAMMAS

First, we have the four applications or four focuses of mindfulness, which constitute the seventh factor of the Noble Eightfold Path. Next are the four right efforts, the sixth factor of the Noble Eightfold Path.

The third group is the four *iddhipādas* or the four steps to spiritual power, also part of the Noble Eightfold Path because it is part of the *samādhi* aspect.

Next are the five spiritual faculties, the abilities that you attain when you become an *ariyan* and these faculties become stabilised as your faith, your confidence in the Buddha's teaching becomes stabilised.

The seventh factor of awakening, which is the second last one there, is an expansion of the Noble Eightfold Path, further developing the ideas of *sammāsati* and *sammāsamādhi*. It shows you the process that happens from practicing the *satipaṭṭhāna* all the way to the highest aspects of *samādhi*.

So, all of these come together in the Noble Eightfold Path. They are just different aspects or ways of remembering what the Noble Eightfold Path is all about.

And perhaps you would ask what about the Four Noble Truths? How can we have Buddhism without the Four Noble Truths? Where are the Four Noble Truths?

It is in the first factor of the Noble Eightfold Path: Right View. Right View is about how we approach reality or how we look at the world, which is basically the Four Noble Truths.

What about dependent origination? Where can we find it?

It is in the Four Noble Truths. The second noble truth is dependent origination in the forward order, and the third noble truth is dependent origination in the cessation order. Only when each of the conditions described ceases one after another is suffering eventually eradicated.

The forward order is when you have ‘*avijjā*’, the ignorance or delusion at the beginning. That delusion is caused by craving and it follows you through all the steps and causes you suffering. This is equivalent to the second noble truth: craving leading to suffering. The third noble truth is the ending of *avijjā* or delusion. And through that, craving ends.

So, you can see how everything fits together very beautifully. The teachings that you may have thought of as dry and theoretical, like dependent origination or the Four Noble Truths, are actually essential parts of the path because both of them concern our outlook and thus fall into the idea of Right View.

My point here is that Buddhist teachings are very pragmatic, and even some aspects that may seem theoretical are also part of the path in a very real sense.

*A COMPREHENSIVE INFOGRAPHIC OF RIGHT VIEW?

A CHART OF THE EIGHTFOLD PATH WITH OTHER
TEACHINGS INCORPORATED AS
AJAHN EXPLAINS ABOVE?

All Conditioned Things Are of the Nature to Decay

“Then the Lord said to the monks, ‘And now monks, I declare to you all conditioned things are of the nature to decay, strive on untiringly. The Tathāgata’s final passing will not be long delayed. Three months from now the Tathāgata will take his final Nibbāna.”

These are the famous words that the Buddha also says on his death bed towards the very end. *Vaya dhamma saṅkhāra... appamādena sampādeta.* It is interesting that this is the Buddha’s final advice before his passing away: all conditioned things have the nature to decay. This is, in a sense, another summary of the Buddha’s teachings.

By remembering very simple summaries like that, we can go a very long way on the Buddhist path. All *saṅkhāras* have the nature to decay. And what are these *saṅkhāras*? What are these conditioned phenomena? Everything.

When you look at the world and at yourself, both internally and externally, you see that everything is part of conditioned phenomena. This reminds you that you cannot rely on any of these things because they are conditioned. Once the conditions change, the phenomenon itself will change.

*All phenomena are
always subject to change*

The recollection that phenomena are always subject to change is enough for us to be mindful and to know what we have to do: we must not be intoxicated, we must not waste our life with silly things, and we must be clear about the *dhamma* and practice in the right way.

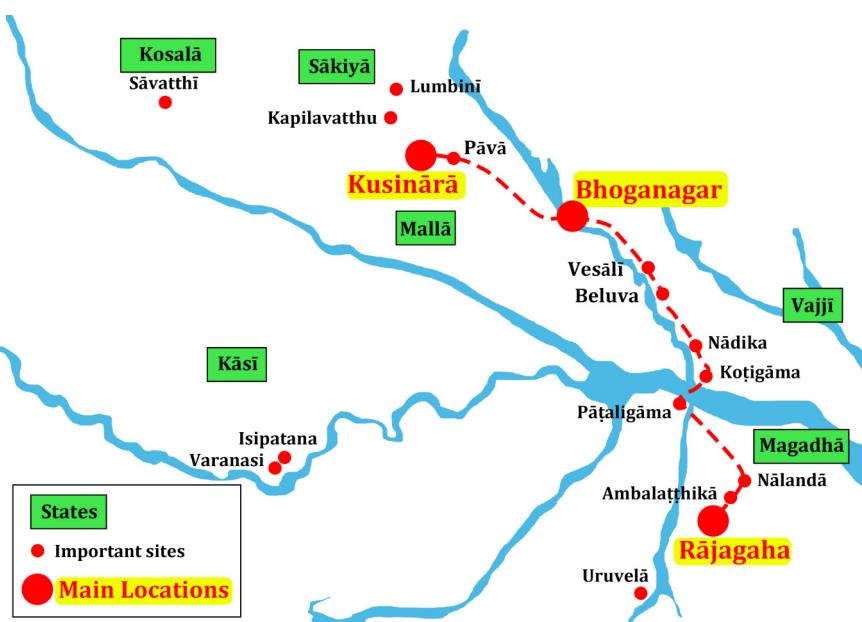
The most powerful advice of all is to always remember to get regular spiritual input in your life because even this teaching of *vaya dhamma saṅkhāra* can be forgotten after a while.

Even in monastic life sometimes you forget, let alone in lay life when there are so many distractions. Now and again, read a sutta or listen to a nice *dhamma* discourse. Whenever you feel you are losing track of your practice, go back to the Buddha's discourses to remind you of the basics.

What are those basics? *Vaya dhamma saṅkhāra*. Or, just be kind. Perhaps, just one word —‘kindness’ — is all you need on the Buddhist path. When you have those simple qualities, you will progress fast and get all the benefits from the *dhamma* as a consequence.

THE FOUR CRITERIA

"At Bhoganagara the Lord stayed at the Ānanda Shrine. And here he said to the monks: 'Monks, I will teach you four criteria. Listen, pay close attention, and I will speak.' 'Yes, Lord', replied the monks."



These are the famous four criteria known as the four Mahāpadesa in Pāli. They are often cited as an approach for deciding what is and isn't the Buddha's teaching.

“Suppose a monk were to say, ‘Friends, I heard and received this from the Lord’s own lips: ‘This is the dhamma this is the discipline, this is the Master’s teaching’, then, monks, you should neither approve nor disapprove his words. Then, without approving or disapproving his words, his words and expressions should be carefully noted and compared with the Suttas and reviewed in light of the vinaya.

“If they, on such comparison and review, are found not to conform to the Suttas or the vinaya, the conclusion must be: ‘Assuredly this is not the word of the Buddha, it has been wrongly understood by this monk’, and the matter is to be rejected.

“But where on such comparison and review, they are found to conform to the Suttas or the discipline (the vinaya), the conclusion must be: ‘Assuredly this is the word of the Buddha, it has been rightly understood by this monk.’ This is the first criterion.”

The discourse on Mahāpadesas gives the Buddha's explanation on why monks should collect *suttas* and the *vinaya* after his passing.

The Buddha doesn't say that you should not listen to other arahants. He says that when anybody claims to have a teaching that comes from the Buddha, you should compare that teaching with those that you already know are the words of the Buddha, already in the *suttas* or the *vinaya*.

Though the job of collecting *suttas* and the *vinaya* was finished a long time ago, we can apply the Mahāpadesas principle to modern teachings to evaluate whether they are real *dhamma*.

“Suppose a monk were to say, ‘In such and such a place there is a community with elders and distinguished teachers. I have heard and received this from that community.’ And what he has heard is, ‘This is the dhamma, this is the discipline, this is the Master’s teaching.’”

“Suppose a monk were to say, ‘In such and such a place there are many elders who are learned, bearers of the tradition, who know the dhamma and discipline and the code of rules and they say, this is the dhamma, this is discipline, this is the Master’s teaching.’”

“Suppose a monk were to say, ‘In such and such a place there is one elder who is learned, I have heard and received this from that elder. And again, this is the dhamma, this is the discipline, this is the Master’s teaching.”

In the above cases, they all go back to ‘*This is the Master’s teaching.*’ And it’s only the Buddha’s teachings that should be included in the canon. Although there are a few exceptions, such as some teachings from Ven. Sāriputta, generally speaking, all the teachings come from the Buddha.

“...and then but where on such comparison and review they are found to conform to the suttas and the vinaya, then the conclusion must be assuredly this is the word of the Buddha, it has been rightly understood by this monk.”

So, what is not included in the four main *nikāyas* of the Pāli canon and the *vinaya*, especially the *pātimokha* rules, are not really part of what we call the word of the Buddha.

Now, let’s skip a little and go towards the end, close to the Buddha’s passing away.

THE GREAT PASSING

'Then the Lord said to Ven. Ānanda, 'It might happen, Ānanda, that Cunda the smith should feel remorse thinking, it is your fault, friend Cunda, it is by your misdeed that the Tathāgata gained final Nibbāna after taking his last meal from you.'"

The story here is that the Buddha is getting very close to Kusinārā where his passing away is going to be. Just before he arrives at Kusinārā, he has a meal at Cunda the smith, who offers him a strange food called *sūkaramaddava* in Pāli. Nobody knows exactly what it means; *sūkara* means pig and the meaning of *maddava* is very unclear. However, it is this meal that causes the Buddha to be very sick with diarrhoea, and soon after, the Buddha dies.

The Buddha has renounced the life faculty three months before he is supposed to die. And now he eats some food that is obviously bad and appears to be dying from that food. So, a question people sometimes ask is: "What did the Buddha really die from?"

One way of finding out which answer is true is to do a comparative study of various *suttas*. The Mahāparinibbāna Sutta exists in different traditions. It exists in Chinese translation as well as in Sanskrit translation. In other translation, there is no mention of

the food the Buddha ate before he died. The issue about food is not part of every translation. On the other hand, I think that it is very common that people die of food poisoning, right?

Furthermore, in a sutta, the Buddha says '*I could actually live on for an aeon.*' This is very strange — how can you live on for an aeon with an ordinary human body like this?

There seems to be even more conflicting narratives in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta. On one hand, you have natural explanations: dying of old age or of eating food that has gone bad. On the other hand, you have a slightly supernatural event where Māra coming to the Buddha, asking: "*Please take parinibbāna! We don't want you around anymore!*" And the Buddha says, "*Oh yeah, maybe you have a point!*" The Buddha is listening to Māra? That doesn't sound like the Buddha, the wisest person in the world. He's supposed to know what he's supposed to do; he's not supposed to take advice from Māra. So, there's a little bit of tension in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta between the natural phenomenon on one hand, and the supernatural on the other hand.

There's also a very curious thing at the very end, just before the Buddha is about to die. The Buddha is at Kusinārā and Ven. Ānanda asks the Buddha: "*Why are you going to die here in this dinky little town? Why don't you consider dying in one of the big cities?*" The big cities at that time were Sāvatthī, Rājagaha, Vesāli, Champa, Kosambi, and Saketā. Pāṭaliputta is not included here because Pāṭaliputta became a very big city shortly after the Buddha's passing. (This shows you again that we are dealing with early discourses, as no change has been made in the translation to accommodate later developments.)

One possible explanation is that the Buddha became unexpectedly sick towards the very end and died before reaching the Sakyān country, Sāvatthī or suchlike. Anyway, my point here is that I prefer natural explanations.

Immediately after the Buddha passes away, supernatural explanations start to emerge. And you can see why that is the case. There's a feeling of great lack in the *saṅgha* and in the people. It is like a hole, something missing in people's life, which needs to be filled, and they start asking questions about the Buddha's life and who the Buddha actually was. And then legends and myths like the above start, such as the Jatakas and the commentaries, start to proliferate.

It is quite likely that this is how some of mythological elements also made their ways into the *suttas* and how the Bodhisattva idea arises both in the Theravada and later in the Mahayana traditions.

I'm making this little point because it's important to have a critical eye instead of saying '*Sadhu!*' and blindly accepting everything. Otherwise, you'll end up believing all kinds of crazy stuff.

Let's come back to the story of the Buddha's passing away. The Buddha says:

"Cunda's remorse should be dispelled in this way. 'This is your merit, Cunda! This is your good deed, that the Tathāgata gained final Nibbāna after taking his last meal from you! For, friend Cunda, I have heard and understood from the Lord's own lips that these two almsgivings are of great fruit, of very great result, more fruitful and advantageous than any other.

"Which two? One is the almsgiving after eating which the Tathāgata attained supreme awakening; the other is that after which he gained Nibbāna-element without remainder at his final passing. These two almsgivings are more fruitful and profitable than all others. Cunda's deed is conducive to long life, to good looks, to happiness, to fame, to heaven and to lordship and to supremacy.' In this way, Ānanda, Cunda's remorse is to be expelled."

The way the Buddha looks after individuals is quite touching. Even though he usually teaches large assemblies, hundreds of monks, or hundreds of lay people, he actually remembers individuals and dangers towards them. In this case, it is Cunda, for whom the

*AN IMAGE OF CUNDA OFFERING FOOD TO THE BUDDHA?

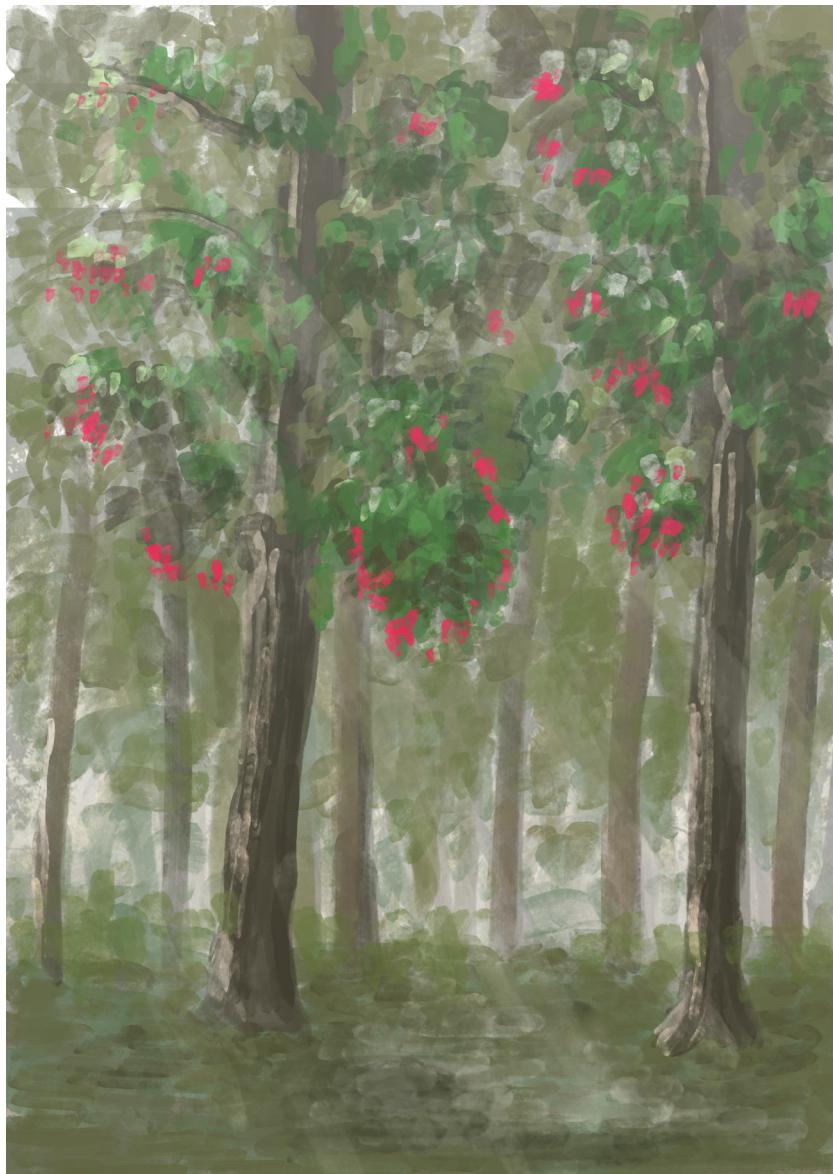
Buddha has a sense of gratitude for his offering and his efforts to support him on the very last few days of his life. The Buddha asks Ven. Ānanda to go back to Cunda and make sure that he doesn't fall into depression or sadness by telling Cunda that what he has done is, in fact, a very positive deed.

It's so beautiful and so touching that the wisest being with the most insight in the whole world does this very simple human thing to make sure that everybody is happy. The mind that is really developed in the *dhamma* and in the right way is a mind that has gratitude and thankfulness. It's a very rare quality to find in the world, as it can be very difficult to develop real gratitude in your heart. Thus, one sign to indicate that somebody is really developed is that they have a sense of gratitude in them.

Now, we're skipping a little bit more to get closer to his final passing away:

“The Buddha said, ‘Ānanda, these Sal trees have burst forth into an abundance of untimely blossoms, which fell upon the Tathāgata’s body, sprinkling it and covering it in homage. Divine coral-tree flowers fell from the sky, divine sandal-wood powder fell from the sky, sprinkling and covering the Tathāgata’s body in homage. Divine music and song sound from the sky in homage to the Tathāgata. Never before has the Tathāgata been so honoured, revered, esteemed, worshipped and adored.

“And yet, Ānanda, whatever monk, nun, male and female lay-follower dwells and practices the dhamma properly and perfectly fulfils the dhamma way, he or she honours the Tathāgata, reveres and esteems him, and pays him the supreme homage. Therefore, Ānanda, ‘We will dwell practicing the dhamma properly and perfectly fulfil the dhamma way!’ This is how you should practise.”



DIVINE CORAL-TREE FLOWERS FELL FROM THE SKY
NEVER BEFORE HAS THE TATHĀGATA BEEN SO HONOURED, REVERED, ESTEEMED,
WORSHIPPED AND ADORED

This is so important to remember. Oftentimes we do too many rituals, and they just become endless. However, it is not by doing rituals but by practicing the path that we pay homage to the Buddha. The Buddha says that the practice is what matters and it is what he wants us to do.

*It is by practicing the path
that we pay homage to the Buddha.*

Now we skip forward again to another little passage.

“Then Subhadda approached the Lord, exchanged courtesies with him, and sat down to one side, saying ‘Venerable Gotama, all those ascetics and Brahmins who have orders and followings, who are teachers, well-known and famous as founders of schools, and popularly regarded as saints, like Pūraṇa Kassapa, Makkhali Gosāla, Ajita Kesakambalī, Pakudha Kaccāyana, Sañjaya Belatṭhiputta, and the Nigaṇṭha Nāṭaputta — have they all realised the truth as they all make out, or have none of them realised it, or have some realised it and some not?’”

This is one of the eternal questions that people always ask themselves. Who are the *arahants* in the world? What are the right religions? Even today, it's so hard to know who has become an *ara-*

hant. So many people look like they have their act together. How do we decide these things? There is one nice way to do this.

“Enough, Subhadda, never mind whether all, or none, or some of them have realised the truth. I will teach you dhamma, Subhadda. Listen, pay close attention, and I will speak.”

“Yes, Lord,’ said Subhadda, and the Lord said, ‘In whatever dhamma and discipline the Noble Eightfold Path is not found, no ascetic is found of the first, the second, the third or the fourth grade. But such ascetics can be found, of the first, second, third and fourth grade in a dhamma and vinaya where the Noble Eightfold Path is found.’”

People or ascetics of the first, second, third and fourth grade refers to stream-enterers, once-returners, non-returners and arahants. And wherever the Noble Eightfold Path is found, that is where you find these noble beings. The Noble Eightfold Path includes two very important factors: Right View at the beginning and Right Samādhi at the very end. If those factors aren't there, then there are good grounds for being dubious as to whether these people have truly achieved awakening.

Upon hearing this, Subhadda decides to ordain and becomes the Buddha's last personal disciple.

Skipping forward, we're coming even closer to the Buddha's passing away.

“And the Lord said to Ānanda, ‘Ānanda, it may be that you will think, ‘The Teacher's instruction has ceased, now we have no teacher!’ It should not be seen like this, Ānanda, for what I have taught and explained to you as dhamma and vinaya will, at my passing, be your teacher.”

The underlying principle emphasised throughout the Mahā-parinibbāna Sutta is once again reinforced.

*After the Buddha has passed away,
the suttas he taught have become our teacher.*

This doesn't mean that we cannot listen to other teachers. We can because there are many inspiring, good, and interesting teachers in the world that have an ability to present the *dhamma* in various nice ways.

If there is a clash of opinion, then it's the teaching of the Buddha that decides who is right and whose teachings we should follow. Please remember that apart from the four *nikāyas*, everything else is not the teaching of the Buddha.

You have to be very careful when you listen even to me, not to accept what I say as if it were the absolute truth because what I say will not be one hundred percent accurate. By studying and learning with a sense of caution and a sense of investigation as well as by practicing in a right way, you will move forward on the path as a consequence.

I'm not saying that we shouldn't need teachers. It is only when you are taught that you gradually learn to be independent. You gradually learn to see things for yourself and start to make your own decisions on how to interpret the *dhamma* in the right way.

That is the beauty with this approach — you start with teachers and gradually learn a sense of independence in these teachings.