



FOUR
NOBLE
TRUTHS

Four Noble Truths

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu

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Introduction

On at least two occasions, the Buddha said that all he taught was *dukkha* and the ending of *dukkha* ([MN 22](#); [SN 22:86](#)). This means that if you want to understand his teachings, *dukkha* is a good word to know.

Its primary meaning is simple enough—*pain*—but it covers all levels of pain, from acute physical suffering and mental anguish to subtle levels of stress in very refined, even blissful, states of mind. Unfortunately, there's no single English word that can encompass all these levels of intensity. Fortunately, though, the fact that we have separate words for pain, suffering, and stress helps to clear up some of the difficulties that the Buddha faced, given that his language had only one word to cover all these things. In the course of this book, I will usually translate *dukkha* as *suffering*, but occasionally I'll use *pain* or *stress* where they seem to fit better into the context.

The main point to remember, though, is that *dukkha* is the primary focus of everything the Buddha taught. If you're interested in solving the problem of suffering, then his Dhamma, or teaching, is where to look. If you're interested in other issues, you can look somewhere else.

In his first talk, the Buddha taught that the path to the end of suffering started with right view concerning four noble truths: suffering, its origination, its cessation, and the path to its cessation.

Here, too, it's good to look at the words the Buddha used for "truth" and "noble": *sacca* and *ariya*.

The early Buddhist texts define *sacca* as whatever is undeceptive and doesn't turn out to be other than what it seems. The way the texts use this word shows that a "truth" can mean either (1) a fact as a reality in and of itself or (2) an accurate statement about that reality. This double meaning is important to keep in mind for two reasons. The first is that it's directly related to the solution of the problem of suffering. In the search for an end to suffering, you're looking for accurate statements that describe how to reach the reality of suffering's end. The second reason is

that the Buddha made statements about truth that sometimes seem contradictory if you assume that “truth” can be only a reality or only a statement. But once you realize that the word has these two meanings, the seeming contradictions disappear.

And not only that: Understanding the Buddha’s insight into the relationship between pain as a reality and the words inspired by that reality, helps you understand how best to make use of the four truths in practice.

The Buddha called these truths *ariya*, noble, for at least four reasons. The first is that they inform a path of practice that leads not just to the temporary ending of individual pains, but to a deathless dimension where all pain and suffering is transcended for good. Only a search that seeks the deathless, he said, can be rightly called noble ([MN 26](#)). Any search aimed at a lesser happiness was, in his eyes, not noble at all because that lesser happiness would inevitably lead to disappointment. The noble truths are noble because they show the way to the noblest of goals: a happiness that would never disappoint.

The second way in which the truths are noble has to do with the fact that the Pali word for *noble* also means *universal*. These are truths that apply to all beings everywhere, regardless of gender, race, nationality, or cultural background—they’re true even for beings on other levels of the cosmos—because they focus on the structure of how suffering is caused in any mind.

Because these truths are universal in serving the noblest of goals, they’re also noble in the sense that they’re *preeminent*. On the one hand, they’re preeminent in the world at large in pointing to the unique way to the best goal possible: deathless happiness. All other truths are subordinate to them in this regard. On the other hand, they’re preeminent specifically in their relation to the other truths the Buddha taught. Even though he learned many, many things in the course of his awakening, he realized that all the lessons with the potential to lead others to awakening were contained within these four truths ([SN 56:31](#)). So they form the context in which all the other truths he taught have to be understood. An image from the Pali Canon, the earliest extant record of his teachings, states that just as the footprint of the elephant

can contain all the footprints of all land animals, the four noble truths contain all skillful teachings ([MN 28](#)).

And finally, the truths are noble because they're *ennobling*. They require you to adopt a noble attitude toward your suffering. To begin with, this means admitting the suffering inherent in the way your mind normally clings and craves. To adopt the truths is to step back from your likes and dislikes, and to acknowledge that they're precisely the things causing you to suffer. At the same time, the truths also ask you to become noble in taking responsibility for ending your sufferings in a way that harms no one. In so doing, they put power in your hands and show you how to use that power responsibly. They open the possibility of finding happiness with true dignity.

When the Buddha explained the four noble truths in his first talk, he noted that each truth carried a duty: Suffering was to be comprehended, its origination abandoned, its cessation realized, and the path to its cessation developed. Once he had fully completed these four duties, he stated, he knew that he was fully awakened. He was now released from suffering of every sort ([SN 56:11](#)).

What this means is that the truths are not just interesting facts. They're a call to action.

Because the four noble truths form the context for all the Buddha's other teachings, they're like sorting boxes to determine what that call to action means in any given instance. Once you know which box a particular teaching is in, then you know what to do with it: Is it a teaching that helps you comprehend suffering? Or is it one that helps to abandon its cause? Only when you know what to do with a teaching can you reap its full benefits.

But even though the four noble truths form the context for understanding and applying all of the Buddha's other teachings, the truths themselves fall into the larger context of his teachings on truth and the normal human response to pain ([MN 95](#); [AN 6:63](#)). Once we understand these larger contexts, we can better make use of the four noble truths. In particular, to grasp why the Buddha formulated the truths in the way he did, it's good to know how he understood the mind's normal reaction to pain—both what was normally wrong with that

reaction and what was potentially useful toward providing an opening for going beyond pain and suffering altogether. To grasp the role he had in mind for the truths, it also helps to know how he saw the social dimension of telling the truth and learning the truth in the context of the search to find a reality that truly ended the reality of pain.

This is the main purpose of this book: to explain the four noble truths (1) in and of themselves, (2) as the context for understanding the Buddha's other teachings, and (3) in the light of the larger context provided by the Buddha's understanding of the mind's natural response to pain and how that response shapes the desire for truth.

I hope that understanding the words of the four noble truths in this way will provoke insights leading to the deathless reality to which they point.

The Desire for Truth

The search for truths about pain starts with a truth in the form of a reality: the experience of pain itself. As the Buddha explains it, there are two natural responses to this reality, bewilderment and a search ([AN 6:63](#)). The bewilderment comes from not knowing why the pain is happening. This is especially true for infants experiencing pain, but because the causes for pain can be so complex, unpredictable, and seemingly beyond our control, this bewilderment can last throughout life.

The search comes both because we're bewildered and because we desire another reality: We want the pain to stop.

It's in the psychological and social space defined by these responses that the Buddha formulates his teachings on truths in general, and on the four noble truths in particular.

The social space is defined by relationships: your relationships with other people, your relationship to the words you use to communicate with those people, the relationship between those words and reality, and the relationships among the realities you want your social interactions to influence.

These relations start within the context of a duality: the difference between pain and the cessation of pain. Because this is a duality of realities, the truths that take you to the second reality will have to acknowledge this difference: the cessation of pain differs from pain, and is preferable to the pain. Any teaching that denies this duality and the way we evaluate it won't satisfy your desires or needs.

Within this duality, the Buddha articulates the search for the cessation of pain in these terms: "*Who knows a way or two to the cessation of this pain?*" ([AN 6:63](#))

The way this question is articulated carries many implications. Three in particular stand out:

1. The fact that we're looking for knowledge from other people brings in the personal dimension of our desire for the truth about pain: We interact with others because we're looking for someone who has (a) true knowledge about the reality of ways to end the pain, and (b) the compassion to convey that knowledge to us. This is the context in which we begin to look for truth in the form of words: words that convey genuine knowledge, spoken by a person who truly knows the relevant realities and wants us to know them, too.

It's important to note that our desire for personal relationships is strongly shaped by the fact of our suffering. The role of pain and suffering in shaping this desire is so basic and strong that it sometimes makes you wonder: If there were no such thing as pain and suffering, if our experience were already totally blissful, would we be interested in personal relationships at all?

For these reasons, truth in this social dimension is a matter of true relationships within two further dualities. First, assuming a duality between reality and words, we're looking for a true relationship between the reality of the ending of pain on the one hand, and the words pointing to that reality on the other. The statements about that reality have to correspond to what that reality actually is. It's because of this duality that the Buddha used the word *truth* with a dual meaning: the truth of the reality, and the truth of the words describing that reality.

Second, assuming a duality between ourselves and the people we hope will teach us the way to the reality of the ending of suffering, we want a true personal relationship, in which the person teaching us not only knows true words about the ending of suffering, but also has enough genuine compassion to teach us those words in a way that we can understand them and put them to use. We, in turn, will have to do our best to give the teachings contained in those words a genuine try. Only when a relationship is genuine on both sides like this can it be called true.

2. The fact that we desire the end of the pain is what shapes our attitude toward the words we're taught about pain. We're not interested in true words for their own sake. We want true words that help guide us to the reality we want. In this way, the words have to serve our desires.

They prove their truth by genuinely leading us to a reality where those desires are satisfied.

3. The question behind this search divides reality into four parts, based on two dualities, one of which we've already noted: the difference between the reality of pain and the reality of the cessation of pain. One side of this duality, pain, is not desired, while the other side, the cessation of pain, is. The other duality relates to the fact when you think of a way that accomplishes an aim, you're assuming two types of real events: causes and effects. The way you're looking for is the cause; the end of suffering is the effect.

These two dualities, taken together, divide reality with regard to the problem of pain into four parts: the undesired effect (pain), the unskillful cause leading to the undesired effect, the desired effect (the cessation of pain), and the skillful cause leading to the desired effect.

In teaching the four noble truths, the Buddha takes all these considerations into account. To begin with, it's because of the double duality in the last point that the noble truths are four, rather than three or five. The Buddha offers to teach us these four truths in words that correspond to the reality of how pain can be understood and brought to an end, and he promises to be truthful in conveying his knowledge of that reality. He teaches these words, not as ends in themselves, but as means to an end: the reality of the ending of suffering. As we will see, he identified true Dhamma as what passes the test in actually bringing that end about.

The fact that he devoted his entire teaching to these issues is what makes the Dhamma unique and radical in its focus.

But even though the question, "*Who knows a way or two to the cessation of this pain?*" sketches out the basic framework for how the Buddha's teaching on the four noble truths is supposed to function, still it leaves many issues unclear. The way the Buddha clarified these issues is what makes the Dhamma unique and radical in its particulars.

If we separate the question into three parts, we can see where it's unclear.

“Who knows a way or two...”: What kind of way are you looking for? Do you want the other person to take the pain away for you? Or are you willing to do the work yourself?

“to the cessation...”: Are you looking for a total ending of all pain? Or will you be content to settle just for the ending of this particular pain?

“of this pain?”: What kind of pain are you talking about? Physical? Mental? Both?

In presenting the four noble truths, the Buddha sharpens these three parts of the question, at the same time answering the question as a whole.

Let’s look at these three points in reverse order.

- We start with the nature of pain and suffering. In the first noble truth, the Buddha lists many events that count as suffering. The list starts with a combination of physically and mentally painful events—birth, aging, and death; sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, distress, and despair; association with the unbeloved, separation from the loved, not getting what is wanted. These are all forms of suffering familiar to everyone.

But when the Buddha summarizes what all these events have in common and makes them stressful, his analysis doesn’t sound familiar at all. The common thread in all these forms of suffering, he says, is the act of clinging to the five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness. We’ll discuss the meaning of this summary in Chapter 5, but here it’s enough to note that the suffering of clinging is primarily mental. Without clinging, none of the other events in the list, even though they might be physically painful, can cause suffering to the mind.

So mental suffering is the Buddha’s primary focus when he talks about the ending of suffering.

However, he states in the second noble truth that the cause of clinging is any craving that leads to further becoming: a self-identity in a world of experience. We’ll discuss this point in detail in Chapter 6, but here we can simply note that the craving leading to becoming not only leads to mental suffering in the present moment, but can also cause you to act in

ways that will lead to both mental suffering and physical suffering in the future. When the mind is freed from craving, it opens to an unconditioned dimension in which there is no birth, aging, or death at all. This means that a fully awakened person, after the death of his or her last body, is freed not only from mental suffering but also from any and all physical pain. Because this deathless dimension lies outside of space and time, this freedom is total, once and for all.

- This connects with the second point. People, if asked for their most heartfelt desire around pain, would most likely respond that they'd want total freedom from all pain. That's our most primal desire about pain: We'd never like to experience it ever again. But day-to-day life has led us to believe that that's an unrealistic goal, as we go from one pain to the next and then the next. So we tend to lower our sights, abandoning our primal desire and trying to content ourselves with efforts to end individual pains as they occur.

The Buddha, however, felt that life would be worthwhile only if he could hold to the heart's primal desire for a total cessation of pain and do his best to find it. The main message of his first talk was that he had succeeded in his search. This is the point of his third noble truth: The craving that causes suffering can be ended without leaving a trace, which is why the total end of suffering is possible.

- As for the way to the end of pain and suffering, even though we might prefer that someone else do the work for us, the Buddha found that that was impossible. We suffer because we haven't completed the duties with regard to the four noble truths, which means that we suffer from our own lack of skill. No one else can make us skillful. Other people, like the Buddha, can point out the way to develop our skill, but we ourselves have to follow that way if we want to stop suffering ([Dhp 276](#)).

This way is described by the fourth noble truth. It consists of three basic mental skills—virtue, concentration, and discernment—divided into a total of eight factors. Discernment is divided into the factors of right view and right resolve; virtue, into the factors of right speech, right action, and right livelihood; concentration, into the factors of right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

These factors will be discussed in detail in Chapter 8, but here we can point out three important features of this path:

(a) The factors of the path are all fabricated or assembled from the same five aggregates that, when clung to, constitute suffering. Right view, for instance, is composed of perceptions and thought fabrications: the labels the mind applies to things and the thoughts it assembles from those labels. Right concentration makes use of all five aggregates. Also, an important part of right effort is the desire to master skillful action. This means that the path must be used strategically: The factors are developed until they have served their purpose, then they're abandoned along with the cause of suffering. The Buddha's image, which we'll have reason to cite frequently in the course of this book, is that the path is like a raft: You're currently standing on the unsafe shore of a river, while safety lies on the far shore. There's no bridge to the other side, and no boat—no nibbāna yacht—to ferry you across. So you build a raft from the branches and twigs you find on this shore, hold on to it as you swim across the river, and then, when you reach the safety of the far shore, you put it aside to go on your way ([MN 22](#); [SN 35:197](#)).

A more modern image would be of a load of bricks you're carrying on your shoulders. To suffer is to refuse to put the bricks down. To follow the path is to take the bricks off your shoulders and use them to build a runway. When the runway is done, you can take off and fly.

(b) Right view is one of two factors that the Buddha highlights in his discussions of the path. To have right view is to see things in terms of the four noble truths. Because these truths are part of the path, this means that we will have to put them aside when we reach the reality on the other side. This connects to the point we made above: that the four noble truths are true because they work. The technical term is that they're *instrumental*: They're meant to be used for a certain task aimed at a certain goal, like a carpenter's tools for building furniture, and then put aside when the task is done. Because they act directly or indirectly as guides to action, they contain inherent value judgments as to what's worth knowing for the sake of actions worth doing.

(c) The other factor that the Buddha often highlights is right concentration. This factor he compares to food in that it gives you the

strength to follow the path ([AN 7:63](#)). The levels of right concentration are defined by their feeling tone: levels of rapture or refreshment, pleasure, and equanimity. The fact that these feeling tones can be consciously fostered means that they can provide temporary relief from suffering as you follow the path. The path doesn't save all its rewards for the end.

Still, it requires work. Even though the four noble truths respond to your desire for a total end to suffering, they don't pander to your desire that the way there be easy or that it will follow your preconceived notions. This means that you need to be convinced that the path is at least worth a try. As the Buddha notes, the repeated reality of suffering and stress forces you to place conviction in at least some way to end suffering. For you to place that conviction in the Buddha's analysis of suffering and the way to its end, you need to develop conviction in

- the person teaching the way and
- in the words explaining the way itself,
- to the point where you're willing to give the way a genuine try.

These three issues define the social dimension of the four noble truths.

In the next nine chapters, we'll discuss how the Dhamma analyses these three issues with the aim of arriving at the reality beyond the social dimension, where the desire for the end of suffering is fully met.

A True Teacher

Before the Buddha gave his first talk, he had to establish the right relationship with his audience, a group of five monks ([Mv I.6.10–31](#)). He needed to convince them of the possibility that he knew what he was talking about, that he would tell them the truth, and that they would benefit from hearing it. In other words, he had to convince them that he was knowledgeable, truthful, and compassionate: the qualities anyone would look for in a teacher offering to give instruction on the way to end suffering.

Now, the Buddha already had some history with the five monks. They had been his attendants during a six-year period when he subjected himself to extreme austerities, almost starving himself to death in his search for the deathless. When he realized that if he continued with those austerities he would die without having achieved his goal, he began eating again in moderation. The five monks, seeing this, decided that he had given up on his search. Disgusted, they left ([MN 36](#)).

As it so happened, the Buddha hadn't given up at all. He had actually gained his first insight into one of the factors of the actual path to the deathless, the practice of right concentration. But with his body so emaciated, he couldn't attain that concentration. That was why he had started eating again.

Still, in their eyes, he had slacked off. So, when after gaining awakening he sought them out to teach them, he had to convince them that it would be worth their while to listen to him and follow his instructions. At first, they resisted. When he told them that he was now awakened, that he had attained the deathless, and that he could teach them how they, too, could follow the way to the deathless, they rejected his claims. How could he have found the way to the deathless after slacking off? Three times he asserted his claims—which, in the culture then, was a sign of his earnestness—but three times they rejected them.

He then reminded them of what they knew of his truthfulness: Had he ever made a claim like this before? No.

So the group of five were willing to listen. The Buddha taught them the four noble truths along with the duties appropriate to each, and at the end of the talk, one of the five gained his first glimpse of the deathless. The Buddha now had a witness to confirm his claims. Shortly thereafter, he was able to help all five to fully attain the goal.

This was the first instance of a pattern that was repeated again and again in the first years of the Buddha's teaching career: He had to convince his listeners of his knowledge, his truthfulness, and his compassion. When they could see that he was the kind of teacher they were looking for in their search to end suffering, they were willing to put his teachings into practice and gained the desired results: either fully awakening to the end of suffering, or gaining a glimpse of the goal and knowing that eventually they would arrive there.

In taking on the role of teacher, the Buddha presented himself as what he called an admirable friend. To listen to him and follow his instructions was to enter into an admirable friendship with him. He later defined this sort of friendship in a way that could apply to other reliable teachers as well ([AN 8:54](#)).

Simply put, you enter into an admirable friendship first by looking for a person whose behavior embodies four qualities—conviction, virtue, generosity, and discernment—and who encourages other people to develop those qualities as well. Then you establish a relationship where you try to emulate those qualities in your own behavior, too. This relationship, the Buddha said, was the most important external factor in awakening to the end of suffering ([Iti 17](#)).

Conviction, here, means conviction in the Buddha's awakening, and particularly in the principle of kamma (*karma*) that the Buddha discovered in the course of his awakening: that your experience of pleasure and pain comes from your own actions, either present or past.

Virtue means abstaining from five forms of harm: killing living beings, stealing, engaging in illicit sex, telling lies, and taking intoxicants.

Generosity refers to being generous not only with your material possessions, but also with your time, energy, and knowledge.

Discernment means understanding the principles of cause and effect as they can be mastered to put an end to suffering and stress.

Of these four qualities, conviction and discernment relate to the teacher's knowledge, virtue to the teacher's truthfulness and compassion, and generosity to the teacher's compassion as well.

In addition to defining admirable friendship, the Buddha set up a monastic order to train his disciples to be admirable friends to themselves and to others. Around this order, he established a culture of training and apprenticeship that would encourage the practice of admirable friendships to last for many generations. Several aspects of that training were particularly aimed at ensuring that the values of knowledge, truthfulness, and compassion would be fostered in the culture he left behind—a culture that has lasted to the present day.

In terms of knowledge, he trained his students in cross-questioning. If there was anything in the teaching they didn't understand, they were encouraged to ask for clarification—and to keep asking until they understood well enough to put the teachings into practice. The Buddha contrasted this style of teaching with what he called “training in bombast,” in which the teacher teaches using flowery and lofty words with no clear meaning, and the students are discouraged from asking what, precisely, those words might mean ([AN 2:46](#)).

Because training in cross-questioning is aimed at the students' understanding, it's also training in compassion. The act of teaching should serve, not the glory or popularity of the teacher, but the students' ability to benefit from it.

In terms of truthfulness, the rules by which the Buddhist monks and nuns live encourage them to be truthful in three areas:

(a) To begin with, they should be truthful in observing their own actions. The rules were designed so that if a monk broke a rule, the severity of the offense often depended on the intention behind the act, and on the perceptions that informed it. For instance, taking something you perceive to be yours carries no penalty, whereas taking—with the

intent to steal—something you correctly perceive as belonging to someone else can get you permanently evicted from the order. The importance of these mental factors in determining an offense forces the monks to be observant not only of their physical actions, but also of the intentions and perceptions behind their actions. It also sensitizes them to the fact that their perceptions can often be wrong. If they take their training seriously, they have to check their perceptions again and again, to make sure they're accurate. This aspect of truthfulness can be called *truth in observation*.

(b) When a monk is accused of an offense, he should truthfully report his actions to the monks judging the case. They're instructed not to settle the case until they're convinced that the accused is telling the truth about what he did. This aspect of truthfulness can be called *truth in reporting*.

(c) When a monk is accusing another monk of an offense, he should be truthful in citing the basis of the accusation: Is it based on what he saw? What he heard? Or only what he suspected? Those judging the case have to make sure that the accuser is not exaggerating the strength of his evidence. This aspect of truthfulness can be called *truth in citation*.

As we'll see in Chapters 9, 10, and 11, these three forms of truthfulness play a role, not only socially, within the monastic community, but also internally, in the way you approach the practice. Just as you look for a teacher who's truthful in these three ways, you should be truthful in the same three ways as you examine the views you bring to the practice and as you engage in training your mind.

In terms of compassion, the monks and nuns are enjoined to teach the Dhamma freely, and not to accept payment for a Dhamma teaching ([AN 5:159](#)). The Buddha himself rejected, in very strong terms, any payment for what he taught ([Sn 1:4](#)). This is because the Dhamma is best learned when it is treated as a gift. After all, the Dhamma emphasizes the virtue of generosity as a feature of admirable friendship and as a foundation for the practice, and the best way to teach generosity is to be generous with your teaching.

It's for this reason that the monks and nuns are required to live off the gifts of others, for two main purposes: One, they're under no pressure to teach, as their needs are met, so there is no reason for them to use the

Dhamma as a means of livelihood. Two, living off the generosity of others, they're encouraged to feel gratitude and to express that gratitude by practicing well and offering the Dhamma with a generous heart ([Iti 107](#)).

Of course, even in the context of a culture designed to foster the values of knowledge, truthfulness, and compassion, it's possible that not all the monks and nuns have fully absorbed the training. In the Buddha's image, there are those who are like the tongue that immediately knows the taste of the soup, and those who are like the spoon that can sit in the soup forever and never know its taste ([Dhp 64](#)). This was true in the Buddha's time, and is still true now. Just because a person can claim to be a product of this culture doesn't mean that he/she is qualified to teach.

For this reason, the Buddha also laid down standards for potential students to use in judging how well a potential teacher embodies qualities of knowledge, truthfulness, and compassion. This is to help protect you against studying with a spoon.

These lessons appear in the larger context of the Buddha's analysis of the steps to be followed in awakening to the truth ([MN 95](#)). Finding a true teacher is the very first step, and the first requirement in that step is to develop the quality of truthfulness in yourself. As the Buddha noted, you can't judge another person's integrity unless you have some integrity of your own ([MN 110](#)). At the same time, you have to be observant, willing to spend time with a teacher, watching his/her behavior, until you're convinced that the teacher is worthy of your trust ([AN 4:192](#)).

This is why the Buddha looked for two qualities in a student: that the student be observant and not deceptive ([MN 80](#)). To be observant means that you watch carefully your own behavior and that of others. You're quick and objective in seeing your own good points and faults, as well as theirs. To be not deceptive means that you report your behavior truthfully to others, without hiding any lapses in terms of your morality.

In addition to looking for truthfulness in a teacher, you're also looking for someone who knows what's best for you, and who really has your best interests at heart. The Buddha has no use for the idea that all teachings are just a power play, an effort to bring others under the teacher's control. Admittedly, such teachings do exist in the world, but if

a teacher is showing you the correct way to totally end your suffering, how compassionate can you get? It's entirely for your benefit when the teacher, in the Buddha's words, has this attitude toward teaching:

"That's the purpose of discussion, that's the purpose of counsel, that's the purpose of drawing near, that's the purpose of lending ear: i.e., the liberation of the mind through no clinging." — [AN 3:68](#)

To find the sort of person who would want to see you liberate your mind, the Buddha suggests three ways to test a teacher's knowledge, truthfulness, and compassion. Spend time with the teacher who seems knowledgeable, and try to measure the teacher against these three questions:

1. For knowledge: Does this person teach truths that would be hard for a person of greed, aversion, and delusion to know?
2. For truthfulness: Does this person have the greed, aversion, or delusion that would inspire him/her to claim knowledge that he/she didn't have?
3. For compassion: Does this person have the greed, aversion, or delusion that would inspire him/her to get another person to do things that would lead to that person's long-term harm or suffering?

If the answer to the first of these questions is No, or the answer to either of the other two is Yes, look for another teacher. If the answer to the first is Yes and to the other two No, then you can go on to the next steps in awakening to the truth: develop conviction in the teacher, draw near, and listen to the Dhamma that he/she has to teach. As you listen to the Dhamma, remember that you will be hearing truths expressed in words, and that those words are meant to be put into practice.

The Truth of Words

As we have noted, the Buddha saw that every truth expressed in words is instrumental, a means to an end. This is in line with the fact that all words are fabricated by the mind, and—as he himself observed—all fabrications are put together for the sake of something. They're meant to serve an aim.

The Buddha chose his words so that they would serve the most beneficial aim of all: leading the listener to the reality of the end of suffering.

He was once asked if he would ever say anything displeasing to others, and in the course of his answer he explained the framework he used in deciding what was worth saying and what wasn't ([MN 58](#)). The framework boils down to three questions:

- Are these words true?
- Are they beneficial?
- Is this the right time to say something pleasing, or is it the time to say something displeasing?

If something wasn't true, he wouldn't say it. If it was true but not beneficial, he wouldn't say it. Only if it was true and beneficial would he go on to the third question: Given his audience and their state of mind, would it be more beneficial to express that truth in a pleasing or a displeasing way?

It's easy to see how pleasing words would be beneficial. Listeners tend to be open to hearing them. As for the case of displeasing words that were beneficial, the Buddha gave an analogy: If a baby boy had put a sharp object in his mouth, then if you had compassion for the boy, you'd do everything you could to get the object out, even if it meant drawing blood. Your aim would be that he not swallow the object and do even more harm. In the same way, if the Buddha saw people behaving in ways that were harmful to themselves or to others, he would sometimes warn

them sharply, both to get them to stop those harmful ways and, if there was an audience, to let the audience know that that kind of behavior definitely shouldn't be taken as an example to follow.

The way the Buddha sets out his framework makes two important points. The first is that, as he goes through the various possible combinations of true/false, beneficial/unbeneficial, pleasing/unpleasing, there is one combination that he doesn't even consider as a possibility: that a statement could be false but beneficial. For him, only true words could be beneficial in the long term. He had no use for the idea of useful fictions. Some fictions might be beneficial in the short term, but over the long term they would end up doing harm: either in misleading the listener or in destroying the listener's trust.

The second point is that the Buddha also had no use for the idea that displeasing words were necessarily harmful. People are not damaged by hearing words they don't like, especially if those words are meant to benefit them. The skill, here, of course, lies in knowing the right time and place for words of that sort so that they'll actually have the desired beneficial result.

What this means is that the Buddha was interested in truths—as words—not for their own sake, but for how well they worked. This is why, when the Canon describes the Buddha's style of teaching, it uses four verbs: He would not only *instruct* his listeners, but he would also *urge*, *rouse*, and *encourage* them. In other words, he wouldn't just give them information about the path to the end of suffering. He would also try to get them to follow it. In terms of the factors of the path to the end of suffering, the information was to give them right views about how to solve the problem of suffering; the urging, rousing, and encouraging was to get them to generate the desire to follow the path—the desire that lies at the heart of right resolve and right effort.

After all, the point of his teaching was to get his listeners to the reality of suffering's end. Simply listening to the words wouldn't get them there. They would have to understand the words and act on them. In some cases, they did this while he was speaking. They took his lessons and used them to observe their own minds, performing the duties appropriate to the four noble truths and achieving one or another of the

levels of awakening right then and there. This, for example, was what happened during his first talk. In other cases, the listeners would take his words and practice in line with them later, reaching the goal when they were off on their own.

The four verbs fall into two categories: His words of instruction were *descriptive*: true to the extent that they gave an accurate picture of what should be known as to what suffering is, how it's caused, and how it can be ended. The words with which he urged, roused, and encouraged his listeners were *performative*: true to the extent that they inspired actions that were actually possible, based on accurate descriptions of reality, and would give the right result—the reality of the end of suffering.

The Buddha's descriptive words and performative words both count as instrumental. They differ simply in that they function in different ways. The descriptive words give you a map to the end of suffering, including information useful for that purpose and omitting irrelevant details. An example would be the Buddha's detailed analyses of the four noble truths. The performative words encourage you to follow the map. Examples would be his teachings that prepare your mind to accept his analysis of how to end suffering, and those that energize you to practice in line with that analysis once you've accepted it as a working hypothesis. When you arrive at the goal, you no longer have to follow the map and—aside from showing it to others for their benefit—you can put it aside.

The Buddha's desire for words that work not only shaped his teaching style. It also shaped the criteria he recommended that his listeners use in determining what was true Dhamma and what wasn't. Just because words could be found in the texts claiming to come from the Buddha didn't mean that they were necessarily true Dhamma. After all, as he noted, people might remember his words wrongly. The only way his listeners could be sure that a teaching was true Dhamma would be if *they* were true enough to put the words to the test to see if they actually worked.

This is one of the most interesting features of the early Buddhist texts. The Buddha knew that the tradition had to be handed down by teachers and texts, but when those texts list various true and false

criteria for determining the truth, among the false criteria are the claims that something is true either because it's taught by your teacher or because it's found in a text. The true criterion is that the teaching has to be tested to see what kinds of actions it leads to and what the results of those actions are.

However, this doesn't mean that people can validly test the Dhamma any way they like. The texts prescribe a method for testing the truth of a teaching—any teaching—and this method is central to the Dhamma in the same way that the scientific method is central to science. Just as a discovery counts as scientific knowledge only if the researcher correctly follows the scientific method, Dhamma can be known as true Dhamma only if you test it in line with the Dhamma method.

Like the scientific method, the Dhamma method has very clear standards for what does and doesn't count as a sufficient proof of a statement's truth.

The Canon lists the following reasons as insufficient proofs ([AN 3:66](#); [MN 95](#)): A teaching isn't true

just because you're convinced it has to be true,
just because you like it,
just because it's logical,
just because it's probable,
just because it's consistent—either through inference or through analogies—with other views you hold,
just because it's been passed down by an unbroken tradition,
just because it's found in scripture, or
just because it's said by a person you've taken as your teacher.

A statement meeting these criteria could be true but could also be false.

The basic standard for what *does* count as a sufficient proof is very simple in principle: A teaching is true if, when put into practice, you can see that it yields the promised results.

Of course, the very idea that you can test the truth of statements by putting them into practice and judging the results makes some basic assumptions about the nature of reality. This is true both with the

scientific method and with the Dhamma method. Both methods make the following assumptions:

Causal relations follow a pattern that holds true over time. In other words, causal relations are not totally chaotic, and the pattern they follow doesn't change arbitrarily from one moment to the next. If it did, a hypothesis that tested true today wouldn't necessarily hold true tomorrow.

The causal pattern is not totally deterministic. You have at least some freedom to make choices in the present moment that will change situations in the present moment. In other words, your actions are not totally determined by the past. If they were, you couldn't manipulate a situation to see which manipulations had an effect on other events, and which ones didn't. You couldn't conduct scientific experiments, and you couldn't try out different beliefs to see what impact they had on your actions.

The mind has the power to influence events. It's not totally determined by material causes. If it were, you wouldn't be able to design an experiment to test a hypothesis, and the act of adopting a view as a hypothesis wouldn't have an effect on your physical or verbal actions.

These assumptions are so basic to the Dhamma method that the Buddha, who normally wouldn't go looking for debates, actually sought out and argued with teachers whose doctrines denied them. His purpose was to show how their views were causing harm to anyone who believed in them. In his words, doctrines that denied causality or taught deterministic causality left students helpless and bewildered in the face of pain and suffering ([AN 3:62](#)).

The Dhamma method makes one extra assumption that's not necessary to the scientific method:

Actions leading to long-term welfare and happiness are better than those leading to long-term harm and suffering.

The Buddha saw no need to prove this assumption. He wasn't interested in teaching people who were unwilling to accept it.

In the context of Dhamma practice, your ability to test a truth in practice is complicated by the fact that many of the teachings require

dedicated effort over time before yielding their results. As the Buddha pointed out, you don't really know the truth of his teachings until you've had at least your first glimpse of the deathless, and that glimpse can take a while to attain. In the case of the five monks, this wasn't long. But for many people it takes years of practice. In cases like that, you need good reasons to believe that your efforts to test the teachings make sense, and that they're not a waste of time. Otherwise, you'll give up before completing the test.

This is why the Buddha, to encourage his listeners, would use methods of persuasion that, strictly speaking, fall in the list of insufficient proofs. For example, he would frequently use logic and analogy to show how his teachings were reasonable. Still, he was careful to note that he didn't mean these statements as out-and-out proofs. And he advised his listeners to "safeguard the truth," in his terms, by being very clear about why they were convinced that a particular teaching was worth testing in practice. In other words, if you believed the value of a teaching because it seemed reasonable, you should acknowledge that fact, admitting that you still didn't *know* that it was true. You simply have valid reasons for taking it on as a working hypothesis.

As for the standards to use in measuring what counts as genuine Dhamma, the Buddha set out two lists. The first list gives a series of mental qualities that are synonymous with the goal: You know that a teaching is genuine Dhamma if, when put into practice, it leads to utter disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to stilling, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding ([AN 7:80](#)). This list underlines the fact that you don't really know the truth of the Dhamma until your first taste of awakening. At the same time, though, the list gives an idea of some of the mental qualities that accompany awakening. Disenchantment, for example, means that you're no longer enchanted with the causes of suffering, and so you no longer want to feed on them. Dispassion means that you no longer feel any thirst to continue creating the causes of suffering.

The second list starts with two qualities that are synonymous with the goal—dispassion and being unfettered—but then goes on to include other qualities that are useful in taking you there: You know that a

practice is in line with the Dhamma if, when you follow it, it leads to shedding conceit, to modesty, to contentment with the material requisites of life, to non-entanglement with other people, to aroused persistence (as opposed to laziness), and to being unburdensome to others in your material needs ([AN 8:53](#)). These last six qualities provide you with some realities against which to measure your practice along the way: not only in terms of the qualities you develop within yourself, but also in terms of the impact that your practice has on others.

Some people have argued that there are many Dhamma teachings that can't be tested in this way. Examples would include the teachings on the fact of rebirth and the role of kamma in influencing rebirth, in that they don't involve actions or develop mental qualities that can be gauged in the present moment. But that argument is simply not true. Views on issues of this sort involve actions in the act of choosing to adopt them, and the results of that choice can be measured by the behavior they inspire within you here and now when you do. As the Buddha pointed out, if you adopt the view that rebirth happens and is influenced by the quality of your actions, you'll be more inclined to be consistently skillful and harmless in your actions than you would if you didn't ([MN 60](#)).

Because the test for the truth of the Dhamma involves qualities you develop within yourself, it's also a test of your own truth. To be a valid judge of the Dhamma requires that you train yourself in the qualities of a reliable and truthful observer. This is why the Buddha looked for students who were honest and observant to begin with. It's also why the path of practice involves developing qualities that train your honesty and powers of observation even further. This is clear in a list of three qualities that are central to the practice of right mindfulness and right concentration ([MN 10](#)):

- Be *mindful* (a) to keep in mind what you've done, so that you can measure the results of your actions over time, and (b) to remember how to recognize skillful and unskillful qualities arising in the mind so that you know what to do with them.
- Be *alert* to know clearly what you're doing and the results you're getting from your actions.

- And be *ardent* in putting in the effort to do the practice as best you can.

The Buddha notes that if you really do the practice, you'll get results whether you wish for them or not, but he also notes that right effort has to involve desire: You have to want to do it, often in the face of desires that pull in other directions.

What this means in practice—as you prepare to put the Dhamma and yourself to the test—is that you need to be so sincere in your desire to put an end to suffering that you're willing to give the Dhamma a fair test. If it doesn't work, you really want to know, so that—like the Buddha in his quest for the deathless—you can then look elsewhere for a better, more efficacious path. If the Dhamma *does* work, you also really want to know, so that you can enjoy the results that come from putting it into practice.

If you focus your desire for genuine happiness in this way, you'll be in the ideal position to test how far the words of the Dhamma are actually true.

Step by Step to the Truth

For many people at present, the four noble truths are among the first things they learn about Buddhism. This is ironic, because the Buddha himself often found that he first had to prepare his listeners to develop the right frame of mind for properly receiving the four noble truths. After all, he wasn't concerned with teaching people about Buddhism. He was more focused on speaking to their needs—to overcome suffering—and to put them in the best frame of mind to receive and accept his teachings on the topic so that they would be willing to act on them and to reap their benefits. He did that by teaching them other topics beforehand. Only when they accepted his preliminary teachings and allowed their hearts and minds to be moved by them would they be willing to accept the four truths and to act on them.

This is because the four truths point out a duality about desire that many people find hard to accept: Their common desires—the ones they tend to follow willingly and happily—are actually the causes of suffering, whereas the desires that lead to the end of suffering require training.

The central role of desire in shaping the four noble truths can be seen in the similes the Buddha uses to illustrate his teachings as a whole. They're all images of people acting on desire in a skillful way. We've already noted the image of the raft: Desiring safety, you want to escape from the dangers on this shore of the river, so you put together a raft that you can hold on to as you paddle across the river to the safety of the far shore. The words of the Dhamma are instructions on how to build the raft; the practice of the Dhamma is the raft itself.

Another image is that of a search: People search for objects—such as a strong bull elephant to do work, or the heartwood of a tree to build something solid—and the Dhamma shows them how to find the objects they desire.

Another image is that the Dhamma is your guide for how to act in battle so that you can attain a desired victory.

However, the image most relevant to the four noble truths is one in which the Buddha compares himself to a doctor desiring the health of his patient, and the Dhamma to medicine ([Iti 100](#); [AN 10:108](#)). Many people over the centuries have noted how the four noble truths are like a doctor's approach to a disease: The truth of suffering describes the disease's symptoms, the truth of the origination of suffering diagnoses its cause, the truth of cessation gives the prognosis that the disease can be totally cured, and the truth of the path charts out the course of treatment to bring about that cure.

Given that the four noble truths are so focused on the issue of desire, the Buddha saw the need to urge his listeners to understand the value of abandoning the desires he criticized as ignoble and to develop noble desires in their place. As we'll see, the first ignoble desire in his list of the causes of suffering is the craving for sensuality. Most of his listeners, though, saw this craving as their dearest friend and companion. As far as they could see, sensuality was their only avenue to escape pain. So he couldn't simply instruct his listeners about the dangers of that friend. He first had to encourage them to change their feelings of allegiance. To induce this change of heart, he had to use performative truths that would expand their imagination to see that it was both possible and advisable to develop new and more reliable inner friends.

In short: He had to rouse within them the desire to adopt a nobler attitude in their search for happiness.

His means for doing this was called the step-by-step discourse (*anupubbī-kathā*). Interestingly enough, even though he gave this discourse many times in the course of his teaching career, the Canon never gives a full script of the discourse itself. All we have is a list of the main topics it covered ([MN 156](#)):

giving,
virtue,
heaven,
the drawbacks of sensuality, and
the rewards of renunciation.

One of the reasons for not recording the script may have been that the Buddha changed it on a case-by-case basis, treating these topics differently in line with his audience. And the Canon tells us that that audience varied widely: Once the Buddha taught this discourse to a king and a large crowd of his subjects; at other times he taught it to a wealthy moneylender, a rich housewife and her daughter, a poor leper, and even an archer hired to assassinate him. Given that this discourse was both descriptive and performative, it only stands to reason that a talk, say, on giving that would be persuasive to a king might not work with a poor leper. So the Buddha had to choose his words to fit his audience.

Yet even though we don't have the script for this discourse, we do have detailed accounts of how he covered these individual topics on other occasions. These other accounts can give us at least a general sense of what the step-by-step discourse might have said.

One of the most important points that the Buddha made about **giving** is that you should give where you feel inspired. When discussing the topic of giving, he focused on occasions when the gift is voluntary, and not simply a matter of custom. The fact that a gift should be freely given was so important that, when designing the culture of his monastic orders, he made sure that the donor's freedom to choose where to give was always protected. For example, if people approach a monk and ask where they should give a gift, he's supposed to say, "Give wherever your gift would be well-used, or would be well-cared for, or would last long, or wherever your mind feels inspired." ([NP 30](#))

Still, the Buddha noted that the happiness that results from giving can be greatly multiplied by approaching the act of giving as a skill.

This skill has four dimensions:
your motivation in giving,
your attitude while giving,
your choice of the recipients for your gift, and
your choice of what gift to give.

With regard to motivation: The lowest motivation is to give a gift because you expect to get a similar item back after death, through the

results of kamma. A higher motivation, the Buddha said, is the idea that it's simply good to give. An even higher motivation is, "I'm well off. These people are not well off. It wouldn't be right for me... not to give a gift to those who are not well off." A motivation higher than that is when you realize that giving a gift makes your mind happy and serene. The highest motivation is when you give not because you're expecting any return from the gift at all. Your generosity is simply an expression of the goodness of the heart and mind. ([AN 7:49](#))

So, to get the most out of the gift, you try to develop increasingly higher motivations, although it's important to note that the highest motivation applies only to those who have reached the penultimate level of awakening. Prior to that point in the practice, it's good to focus on how the act of giving makes the mind happy and serene. That gives energy and further motivation to your practice.

The second dimension in giving as a skill is your attitude while you give. You give attentively, you give with conviction that something good will come of it, you give with empathy for the person receiving the gift, and you don't have the attitude that you're simply throwing the gift away ([AN 5:148](#)). When you give with the proper attitude, the recipient is glad to receive your gift and more inclined to use it well.

As for the third dimension—the best people to whom to give—the Buddha said that it's best to give to those who are free of passion, aversion, and delusion, or to those who are practicing to overcome passion, aversion, and delusion ([AN 3:24](#)). These are the people most likely to make best use of the gift. When you see that, you'll be happy you gave.

Finally, as to the gift that's good to give, the Buddha said that you give in season. In other words, you give a gift appropriate for the time and place, and you focus on times when the recipients are especially in need. Also, you give without adversely affecting yourself or others ([AN 5:148](#)). In other words, you don't give so much that you don't have enough to use yourself, and you don't steal the gift to give it to somebody else.

It's worth noting that the Buddha never mentions the material value of a gift as a measure of the goodness it creates. He simply observes that,

when giving a gift, it's best to give things that are at least on a par in value with the things you yourself use. That way, you'll feel more happiness when reflecting on the gift.

When you've developed giving as a skill, the act of giving makes your mind glad before you do it, bright and clear while you're doing it, and gratified after you're done ([AN 6:37](#)).

In this way, the act of giving in and of itself is a source of happiness. But it also provides further long-term results: People will find you charming, they'll admire you, you'll have a good reputation, and you'll approach assemblies of people without being ashamed. These are benefits in the present life. As for future lives, the fact that you've been generous will tend to lead to a heavenly rebirth, where you'll outshine those who weren't so generous. If you return to the human level, you'll tend to be wealthy and inclined to enjoy your wealth ([AN 5:34](#)).

Virtue, the second topic, refers to not intentionally breaking any of the five precepts:

- against killing,
- against stealing,
- against illicit sex,
- against telling lies, and
- against taking intoxicants.

The Buddha notes that when you intentionally hold to these precepts in all situations, you're giving universal safety to all. In other words, no one anywhere has to fear harm from your behavior. When you give universal safety in this way, you'll have a share in that safety as well ([AN 8:39](#)).

The Buddha does note that there are times when observing the precepts may cause you to suffer loss in terms of your wealth, your health, or your relatives. For example, you may be put at a disadvantage in business dealings when you don't lie, and you may meet with situations where you and your relatives will go hungry when you don't steal. But in terms of your long-term well-being, that kind of loss is

trifling compared to the loss that comes when you intentionally break these precepts ([AN 5:130](#)).

These precepts embody the principle of harmlessness. As with the act of giving, the act of holding to this principle, even when difficult, is a source of happiness in and of itself. This can be seen immediately in that it gives you a solid basis for healthy self-esteem. It also gives long-term benefits: If you conduct your life in a virtuous way, your wealth tends to be solid and lasting; you have a good reputation for being reliable; if you go to a meeting of people, you can expect that no one will have valid grounds for accusing you of misbehavior; and you die unconfused—in other words, you approach death with a clear conscience ([DN 16](#)).

As for the benefits after death, being virtuous tends to lead to a heavenly rebirth. If you return to the human world, you'll be fortunate in line with each of the precepts you've followed: You'll tend to have a long life, you won't lose your wealth, you won't face rivalry and revenge, you won't be falsely accused, and you won't suffer mental derangement ([AN 8:40](#)).

Strangely, even though the Buddha frequently mentioned the possibility of a heavenly rebirth, the Canon records very few descriptions of the pleasures of **heaven**. This may have been because the compilers of the Canon were more interested in emphasizing the fact that there's a higher happiness than heaven: total liberation. All they have to say about heaven is that there are heavens of unalloyed sensual pleasure, where sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations are all exclusively pleasant. The happiness felt by the ideal king—wealthy, powerful, handsome, loving his subjects and loved by them—is only a small sliver of the happiness felt by heavenly beings ([MN 129](#)).

In contrast, the Canon has a lot to say about **the drawbacks of sensuality**. On the human plane, these drawbacks are easy to see. It's because of sensuality that people have to work, often in difficult circumstances, even though there's no guarantee that their work will yield the wealth they desire. Even if it does, they have to protect their wealth from being stolen or falling into the hands of hateful heirs, thieves, jealous rivals, or rapacious governments. It's because of

sensuality that family members fight with one another, that countries wage war with one another, that people commit crimes and suffer punishments when they're caught, and that people act in ways that lead to a bad destination after death ([MN 13](#)).

However, given that, in the step-by-step discourse, this topic follows on the topic of heaven, the Buddha probably focused on the drawbacks even of sensual pleasures on the heavenly plane. On this level, the primary drawbacks are three:

One, sensual desires can never be fully satisfied. As the Buddha said, even if it rained gold coins, or you could possess two mountains of gold the size of the entire Himalayan range, it still wouldn't be enough to satisfy your sensual thirsts ([SN 4:20](#); [Dhp186](#)).

Two, life in heaven doesn't last forever. When the good kamma that sent you there runs out, you have to leave.

Three, heavenly beings enjoying the fruits of their past kamma tend to get careless and complacent. Rare are those who give thought to developing the goodness of their minds and actions any further. As a result, the vast majority of heavenly beings, on passing away from their heavenly realms, fall to planes lower than the human ([SN 56:102–113](#)).

It's as if the round of rebirth were a sick joke: You practice the goodness of generosity and virtue for the sake of sensual happiness, but then that happiness corrodes your goodness and lands you back worse than you were before. Then you have to struggle to get to the human realm where you can practice goodness again.

Again and again and again.

Meanwhile, the tears you've shed through your many rounds of rebirth over the death of a mother, a father, a brother, a sister, a son, a daughter, are more than the waters in all the oceans of the Earth ([SN 15:3](#)).

When you think in this way, you're ready to look for a way out.

This would be when the Buddha would talk of **the rewards of renunciation**. Renunciation here does not mean renouncing happiness. Instead, it means finding happiness in ways that don't involve sensuality.

These would include the bliss and rapture that can be found by centering the mind in right concentration, leading to the even higher bliss of total liberation.

When finding happiness in these ways, you can live simply, without fear that others will be jealous of you or try to take your happiness away from you. These forms of happiness hold none of the dangers of sensuality. In particular, they never destroy your goodness. The happiness of right concentration may come and go, but the happiness of liberation never ends.

When you can accept the idea that this kind of happiness would be better than sensual happiness, you're ready for the four noble truths that will show you how to get there.

Through the way he explains these topics, and the order in which he explains them, the Buddha is accomplishing two things.

- *First, he touches on some basic principles of the Dhamma, at the same time putting them in their proper context.*

The two main principles are kamma and rebirth, which are the two basic teachings of mundane right view: the view that leads to actions that produce happiness within the round of rebirth.

With his teaching on **kamma**, or action, the Buddha makes the point that your actions are real and have real consequences, and that those consequences follow a pattern: Skillful actions—based on a lack of greed, aversion, and delusion—lead to pleasant results; unskillful actions, to painful results.

At the same time, though, the pattern of consequences is not entirely deterministic. What you experience in the present moment is not totally shaped by what you've done in the past. Regardless of your past actions, you're always free in the present moment to choose a skillful course of action. Without this freedom, you wouldn't be free to choose the path to the end of suffering, and the whole idea of the Buddha's teaching a path of practice would make no sense.

This is why he emphasizes the role of motivation and attitude in his discussion of generosity, and the role of intention in his discussion of

virtue. It's in your choice of motivation, attitude, and intentions that the freedom available to everyone in the present moment can be found.

As for **rebirth**, the Buddha's discussion here is limited simply to asserting that it really happens, that there are many levels on which it can happen, that life in none of the levels can be permanent, that you go up or down through these levels based on your actions, and that these facts should be taken into account when you calculate what actions to do and what actions to avoid if you want long-term happiness.

This connects with the context for these teachings. The Buddha isn't interested in teaching kamma and rebirth for their own sake. His emphasis is on the role they play in the search to find a reliable happiness and to put an end to pain. In other words, he's showing how these teachings relate to the search that everyone has been engaging in ever since their first experience of pain: Who knows a way to its cessation?

Also, by starting with generosity and virtue he's giving a preliminary answer to the questions that he says lie at the beginning of discernment: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm and suffering? And what, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" ([MN 135](#))

Here again, by defining discernment in the context of the desire for long-term happiness, the Buddha affirms the value of the search to avoid pain. And he's also making discernment an issue of value judgment: What's worth doing, and what's not?

As for his answer to these questions: Acts of generosity lead to long-term welfare and benefit. By following the precepts, you avoid long-term harm and suffering. By touching on the principles of kamma and rebirth in answering these questions, the Buddha shows why these questions are wise—in assuming that long-term happiness and pain are possible and will depend on your actions—at the same time defining how long long-term really is.

So the Buddha, in his step-by-step discourse, is showing that his teachings are aimed at solving, in the largest possible context, the problem of pain. Whatever he teaches, if you want to understand it, you need to know where to place it in this context.

By establishing this as his context, he's not only helping you to understand his teachings. He's also helping you relate to them emotionally in the most fruitful way. In other words, he's helping you to get both your head and your heart around them. Some people, on learning about kamma and rebirth, immediately think of the bad things they've done in the past, and see the teachings as negative: threatening—and justifying—punishment and retribution. That's why they reject them.

But by introducing these teachings in the context of the search for happiness, the Buddha's showing how they make that search possible and meaningful. If you didn't have freedom of choice in the present moment, acts of generosity and virtue wouldn't reflect any especially good qualities in the heart and mind. You'd do these acts simply because you had to. If you and those around you were annihilated at death, then in the larger picture, nothing would be accomplished by being generous or virtuous. All efforts to look for happiness in noble ways would ultimately lead to nothing.

So when the Buddha asserts that you do have freedom of choice, and that your good actions will have long-term benefits, he's affirming that your noble intentions are meaningful, and that when you act on them, they yield long-lasting results. These thoughts lift the heart.

- This connects with the second thing that the Buddha's accomplishing in his step-by-step discourse. *He's establishing a relationship of admirable friendship with his listeners, at the same time fostering their inner growth.* He uses performative truths in hopes of having an influence on his listeners' attitudes, both in heart and mind. But by placing that influence in the context of admirable friendship, he's showing that he's not doing it simply for the sake of power or control. He actually has his listeners' best interests at heart. He wants them to be truly happy.

By starting the discourse with common, everyday activities, rather than abstract principles about the nature of reality, he's connecting with his listeners' direct experience. They've done actions in the past, and he's affirming the power of their actions to make a difference in the amount of pleasure or pain they experience. Unlike many other teachers of his

time, he doesn't advocate a picture of reality that negates the power of human action. Instead, he tells his listeners that what they have seen from their own actions is true: You can make a difference by what you do.

And not only a difference, a good difference: By focusing on generosity and virtue in particular, he's connecting with his listeners' experience of looking for happiness in ways that are socially mature. When you find happiness in generosity and virtue, you make the people around you happy as well. In focusing on this point, he's appealing to his listeners' nobler side, affirming that it has meaning and serves a genuine purpose.

At the same time, by describing the sensual rewards of generosity and virtue, the Buddha is showing his listeners that he's no prude. He does appreciate the pleasure they've already tasted in sensuality, and he understands their desire for even more. This makes them more willing to trust him when he eventually points out the drawbacks of even the highest sensual pleasures, and on how they would benefit by raising their sights and looking for happiness in ways that put sensuality aside. When the Buddha has accomplished this task, his performative truths have performed their duty.

In his own analogy, it's as if he has washed his listeners' minds in the same way that he would wash a piece of white cloth before dyeing it. They would now be ready to accept the dye of the four noble truths.

The First Noble Truth

The Buddha began his explanation of the first noble truth—the truth of suffering—not with a definition but with a list of common examples: the suffering of birth, aging, and death; of sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, distress, and despair; of association with the unbeloved, of separation from the loved, and of not getting what you want.

Except for the last, none of these examples needs any explanation. The Canon explains “not getting what you want” as referring to cases where you’re subject to any of the other examples of suffering—such as aging, illness, and death—and want to be freed from them simply through the power of wishing or prayer ([MN 141](#)). The frustration of not being able to wish these forms of suffering away does nothing but add more suffering on top of the suffering already there. Instead, as we’ve noted, you have to focus your desires on following a course of actions that will actually bring all these forms of suffering to an end.

Up to this point, the Buddha’s explanation of suffering deals in things that are perfectly familiar. We’ve all suffered in these ways ourselves, or seen other people suffer from them.

Then, however, he summarizes the suffering common to all these examples, and this is where he enters unfamiliar territory. In short, he says, the five clinging-aggregates are suffering. This, too, he says, is something we’ve all experienced, simply that we don’t understand it in these terms. Only when we understand what he’s referring to by this summary can we begin to comprehend the first noble truth.

First, the words *aggregate* and *clinging*:

“Aggregate” is a translation of the Pali word *khandha*, which means, “heap,” “group,” or “mass.” It also means the trunk of a tree—a meaning that, we’ll see, is actually relevant to this context. The use of the English term “aggregate” to translate *khandha* comes from a distinction, popular in 18th and 19th century European philosophy, between conglomerates

of things that work together in an organic unity—called “systems”—and other conglomerates that are mere random collections of things, called “aggregates.” Translating *khandha* as “aggregate” conveys the useful point that even though the physical and mental processes that are classed as *khandhas* can seem to have an organic unity, they’re actually shaped by discrete choices. Still, it’s important to bear in mind that the mind does shape the aggregates toward purposes, and that although those purposes can often be random or conflicting, they can also be more or less consistent—a fact that makes a path of practice possible.

The five aggregates are:

- *form*: any physical phenomenon—although the Buddha’s focus here is less on the physical object in itself, and more on the *experience* of the object; in terms of your own body, the primary focus is on how the body is experienced from within;
- *feeling*: feeling-tones of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain;
- *perception*: the act of recognizing, mentally labeling, and identifying experiences;
- *fabrication*: the intentional shaping of experience; and
- *consciousness*: awareness at the six senses (the five physical senses plus the mind as the sixth).

There’s something of an anomaly in that the term “fabrication” in some contexts covers all five aggregates and yet in others is listed as one of the five. That’s because the mental act of fabrication shapes your actual experience of all physical and mental phenomena in the dimensions of space and time. It chooses among the potentials for any of the aggregates made available by past actions, and turns those potentials into the actual experience of those aggregates in the present. “Fabrication” as a name for one of the aggregates refers specifically to this mental process. As a term for all five aggregates, “fabrication” covers both the processes of fabrication and the fabricated phenomena—physical and mental—that result.

It's important to note that the Canon defines the aggregates in terms of verbs—feelings feel, perceptions perceive, even form “deforms”—making the point that these aggregates are processes and activities, rather than solid things.

As for “clinging-aggregates,” this expression doesn't mean that the aggregates cling. Instead, it refers to the act of clinging to the aggregates. In fact, the suffering lies in the clinging. The experience of the aggregates on their own, without clinging, may involve some stress, in that the aggregates continually change in dependence on conditions, but if there's no clinging, that stress doesn't weigh down the mind. This means that the suffering referred to in the first noble truth is the suffering of clinging. The aggregates aren't the problem. The clinging is.

Still, to understand clinging, you need to get a sense of what it clings to. The question often arises: Why did the Buddha choose to divide physical and mental experience into the categories of these five aggregates? Couldn't he have divided it up in other ways?

The Canon doesn't give an answer to this question, but it's worth noting that each of the aggregates is associated with the act of feeding. In the Buddha's analysis, the act of feeding is something that all beings have in common. In fact, that's how we define ourselves as beings: by latching on to these five activities as we feed. When you feed—either physically or emotionally—all five of these aggregates are involved:

- A sense of *form*: When you eat physical food, “form” refers both to the form of the body that needs to be nourished—and that will be used to look for food—as well as to the physical objects that will be used as food. When you feed on your imagination, “form” applies to whatever form you assume for yourself in the imagination, and to the imaginary forms from which you take pleasure.
- *Feeling*: You start with the painful feeling of physical or mental hunger that drives you to look for food; then there comes the pleasant feeling of satisfaction when you've found something to eat; followed by the added pleasure that comes when you actually eat it and assuage your hunger.

- *Perception*: You use perceptions to identify the type of hunger you feel, and to identify which of the things in your world of experience will satisfy that hunger. Perception also plays a role in identifying what is and isn't food. This, in fact, is one of our most basic perceptions: When children crawling across the floor encounter something new, they put it in their mouths to determine whether to perceive it as food or not.
- *Fabrication*: In the context of feeding, this covers the ways you contemplate and evaluate strategies for finding food, for taking possession of it when you find it, and for fixing it if it's not edible in its raw state.
- *Consciousness* is the act of being aware of all these activities.

This shows that even though the term “aggregate” may not be familiar, it refers to activities that are not only very familiar to all beings, but also intimately connected to your sense of who you are. We are how we eat.

When we use these activities to feed, they acquire positive associations in our minds. But in the first noble truth, the Buddha tells us that the act of clinging to them is suffering. This is the first point where his analysis of suffering goes against the grain.

As for the Pali word for clinging, *upādāna*, that means (a) sustenance and (b) the act of taking sustenance—as when a tree takes sustenance from soil, or a fire from its fuel. The same meaning applies to the mind. This is where the interpretation of *khandha* as the trunk of a tree is relevant: We feed off the aggregates in the same way that a fire feeds off the trunk of a tree as it burns.

The implication here is that suffering comes from a double level of feeding: feeding emotionally off the activities that go into the act of feeding to ease our physical and emotional hunger. This is a second point that goes against the grain. Ordinarily, we enjoy clinging not only to our food, but also to the act of clinging itself.

To accept the Buddha's analysis of suffering in the first noble truth, we have to develop some dispassion for the things to which we cling and for the act of clinging itself. This makes the first noble truth difficult to

accept, but it's also what makes it noble. It teaches us to step back and raise ourselves above our hungers.

We work toward this dispassion by following the duty that corresponds to this truth. Instead of running away from suffering or trying to push it away, we patiently observe it with the purpose of *comprehending* it. We need to see for ourselves how the suffering is not the mere fact of physical pain or stress. It's actually identical with the act of clinging. Full comprehension comes when we understand clinging to the point where we have no more passion, aversion, or delusion around it.

A first step in comprehending clinging is to identify its various types. The Buddha lists four ([MN 11](#)):

- *Sensuality-clinging*: passion and desire to find pleasure in fantasizing about and planning sensual pleasures.
- *View-clinging*: passion and desire for views about how the world is structured and how it works.
- *Habit-and-practice-clinging*: passion and desire for ideas that tell you how you should act in the world.
- *Doctrine-of-self-clinging*: passion and desire for ways of defining who or what you are.

This list may sound arbitrary and abstract until you realize that the Buddha, again, is talking about some very basic functions of the mind. Sensuality-clinging deals with what you *want* in terms of sensuality. View-clinging is concerned with your ideas about *what the world is* and *how it works*. Habit-and-practice clinging covers your ideas of how you have to act in the world to get what you want. It's focused on your ideas of what you *should do*. And doctrine-of-self-clinging relates to your sense of yourself as (1) an *agent*, capable of controlling events in an attempt to negotiate between what should be done, based on the way the world works, and the wants of (2) the *consumer* who will find happiness when those wants are satisfied. Both of these senses of self are overseen by the self as (3) a *commentator*, who judges the actions of the agent to see if they satisfy the consumer, and to decide if the consumer should

raise or lower its standards for satisfaction. These three functions of the self are your basic set of strategies for finding happiness.

The first three types of clinging define the arena in which your self acts and searches for happiness. The balance of power among the three types will vary from person to person, and—even within a particular person—from moment to moment. On the occasions when you want to reject all constraints on trying to fulfill your sensual fantasies, you might be inclined to accept a materialist deterministic worldview where sensual pursuits are not subject to moral judgments, and where the *shoulds* of the world counsel the pursuit of pleasure wherever you find it. This would be a case of sensuality-clinging dictating your view of the world. At moments when you want to believe that your dignity as a human being lies in your ability to choose your actions, you'll be inclined to adopt a non-deterministic worldview where choice is real. This would be a case where habit-and-practice-clinging dictates your view of the world and what your attitude toward sensuality should be.

There are not a few cases where people change their worldview to fit in with their desires of the moment. There are also cases where their wants run up against the *shoulds* and *what is* of a worldview to which they're committed for other reasons. Modern psychology has detailed the suffering that comes from precisely this sort of internal conflict, one that's not limited only to those suffering from severe mental illness. Freud, for instance, described it as the ego's constant need to negotiate among the *shoulds* of the super-ego, the wants of the id, and the "what is" of the reality principle. Jung saw the issue as a clash between the *shoulds* and wants of the individual ego and the *shoulds* and wants of the unconscious. However you analyze it, this conflict is a common feature of the human condition.

However, even though the first three types of clinging define the arena in which the self functions, the Buddha identified doctrine-of-self-clinging as the most basic type of clinging of all. In fact, only in a teaching where this type of clinging is comprehended, he said, can people reach awakening. That's because your sense of who you are explains why you're invested in seeing the world a certain way and in believing that certain things should be done in order to attain what you want. Without

your desire to gain pleasure for yourself, views of the world or of how you should act wouldn't have much hold on the mind.

This may be why, of all the different forms of clinging, doctrine-of-self-clinging is the one on which the Buddha focused the most attention when explaining how clinging gets fixated on the five aggregates. According to him, you can identify the self either as identical with any of the aggregates, as possessing any of the aggregates, as containing any of the aggregates, or as existing within any of the aggregates ([SN 22:1](#)). For example, you might identify yourself as your body, or as the owner of your thoughts, or as an infinite consciousness containing all five aggregates, or a little person inside the body, making use of its senses.

These four possibilities multiplied by five aggregates give twenty possible self-identity views to which you might cling.

So it follows that doctrine-of-self-clinging is the most important type of clinging to comprehend. And if we look carefully at the three roles of the self, we can see most clearly why clinging is suffering. The self-as-consumer, even though it enjoys feeding, is constantly hungry. As the Buddha said, even if it rained gold coins, that wouldn't be enough to satisfy one person's sensual desires. This means that the self-as-agent has to be constantly at work—negotiating among wants and shoulds, trying to gain a measure of control over the way things are—all in order to assuage the hunger of the consumer, with the self-as-commentator never giving it a moment's rest.

However, you can't uproot your sense of self without also uprooting the other types of clinging as well. Given that the self is what negotiates the world and tries to figure out how to act to gain pleasure, its identity is strongly linked to its range of strategies and skills for finding what it wants. These, in turn, rely on how it sees *what is* and *what should be done*.

You see this connection most clearly when you move into a different culture or when your own society undergoes radical change. The world is no longer what it used to be, the skills that used to get results come up empty-handed, and your very identity gets called into question. To survive, you need to construct a new self around new skills for negotiating the new arena in which you act.

So—given that the roots of the self are entangled in its desires, its worldviews, and its ideas of what should be done—if you want to put an end to suffering, you not only have to uproot your sense (or senses) of self. You also have to uproot the other three types of clinging: your attachment to sensuality and to your sense of how you should act, given your views on how the world works.

These facts about suffering define the strategy of the remaining three noble truths. Suffering can't be ended until you abandon the desires that lead to clinging: This is the message of the second truth on the origination of suffering. But those desires won't go away simply by wishing for them to go. A first step in abandoning them requires developing an alternative set of desires, with a new sense of who you are, of how the world works, and of how you should act in response to these new views. In other words, you need to use desire and clinging in the quest to end desire and clinging. That's the strategy of the fourth noble truth, the path to the end of suffering. Once the path has done its work, you can abandon it, too. When the mind is totally free of desire and clinging, it can realize the third noble truth: suffering's end.

The Second Noble Truth

The second noble truth is called the truth of the origination of suffering. The term, “origination,” *samudaya*, means “cause”—and a particular kind of cause at that: a cause coming from events in the mind. This is the main message of this truth: The cause of suffering lies inside. You suffer, not from what comes into the mind, but from what comes out of it. Things outside—society, the climate—might be atrocious, but they’re not the real cause of your suffering. If they were, then in the quest to put an end to suffering, you’d have to make the world a perfect place. But the world resists being made perfect. As we noted in Chapter 4, even the highest heavens are impermanent and imperfect. Suffering could never cease.

But because the cause of suffering lies within the mind, and because the mind can be trained to be perfect in completing the duties of the four noble truths, the end of suffering is possible. When you can train the mind to abandon the causes of suffering coming from inside, nothing in any world of experience can make you suffer in any way.

The Buddha identifies the origination of suffering as any craving that leads to further becoming, accompanied by passion and delight, delighting now here, now there.

Let’s look at what these words mean.

The Pali word for craving, *taṇhā*, also means “thirst.” Just as suffering is a form of mental feeding, the cause of suffering is a form of mental thirst.

Further becoming is best understood by first getting an idea of the types of craving that lead there. All in all, there are three: craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, and craving for non-becoming.

Craving for sensuality: As we noted in Chapter 5, “sensuality” refers not to sensual pleasures themselves, but more to the mind’s fascination with thinking about and planning them. In fact, a large part of sensual

pleasure lies in the fantasies we use to embroider it: playing up pleasures we've had in the past as a way of inciting desire for more pleasures in the future.

Craving for becoming: Becoming (*bhava*) is the act of taking on a self-identity in a particular world of experience. The word "self" here can mean any sense of who you are: finite or infinite, material or formless. "World" can be either an interior thought-world or any of the outside worlds into which beings are born to pursue their desires.

These becomings can exist on any of three levels: the level of sensuality, the level of form, and the level of formlessness. A becoming on the level of sensuality would include the experience of pleasures or pains of the five physical senses. A becoming on the level of form would include the experience of the form of the body as felt from within. A becoming on the formless level would include the experience of such formless dimensions as infinite space or infinite consciousness.

In the Buddha's analysis, becomings involving outside worlds come from becomings of inside worlds within the mind. In every case, they begin with desire—for a certain pleasure, for example, or to take on a particular role in a world. A sense of the world then coalesces around the object of that desire. This world will include everything relevant to attaining the desire, plus anything that might stand in its way. At the same time, a threefold sense of self develops around the desire as well—the self in the same three roles that we mentioned in Chapter 5: the self as agent, the self as consumer, and the self as commentator.

For instance, if you have a desire for some ice cream, the relevant world would include the nearest place where ice cream can be found, plus anything that would allow you to get there and obtain the ice cream, as well as anything that would get in the way. Other aspects of the outside world irrelevant to your desire for ice cream—political events, the weather 500 miles away—wouldn't play a role in that particular becoming.

Your sense of self as the agent in that becoming would include your body, as either capable or incapable of getting the ice cream. If you can make ice cream, that skill would be relevant to that particular sense of self, too. If you have to buy the ice cream, the amount of money in your

pocket or your bank account would be more relevant. Your sense of self as the consumer, of course, is the “you” who hopes to enjoy the ice cream once it’s obtained, while your sense of self as commentator judges whether the desire is worth pursuing and, if so, whether the other two selves do their job to your satisfaction.

Here, too, things you might identify as self in other contexts but irrelevant to your desire for ice cream—your religious views, your status in your community—wouldn’t be a part of your identity as a producer or consumer of ice cream.

As we noted in Chapter 5, your sense of the world and your identity within that world shape each other. If you know how to make ice cream, you’ll see the potential for ice cream in areas where you wouldn’t think to look if you lacked that skill. If you live in a world where ice cream is believed to be unhealthy, your sense of self as consumer or commentator will have to choose whether to identify yourself as one who follows the prevailing view or as one who defies it.

The mind goes through many of these becomings in the course of a day, often with a different sense of the world and sense of self in each case. This is why your sense of who you are and where you are can change so quickly.

Craving for non-becoming is the desire to see a particular becoming come to an end. This type of craving can be motivated by any number of reasons. For example, in some cases, you might want to see a becoming end because the root desire that generated it has been thwarted (as when you fall in love with someone who then calls off the relationship). In other cases, it’s because your sense of the world or of your self in that becoming has involved some unanticipated suffering (as when you marry the person you love, but the marriage turns out to be a disaster). Or it may be because another becoming has arisen in the mind around a desire that conflicts with the first becoming (as when you’re stuck in a bad marriage and fall in love with someone else). In all cases, the craving for non-becoming finds delight in its desire to escape from the becoming in which you find yourself.

These three forms of craving lead to the four forms of clinging in the following way: Craving for sensuality, of course, leads to sensuality-

clinging. Craving for becoming and non-becoming lead to views about the self in the world and how it should behave in negotiating the world: the remaining three objects of clinging.

All of these three forms of craving have one feature in common: They all lead to further becoming, “further” in the sense that they lead to more states of becoming either on a purely mental level or on the physical level, creating the conditions for rebirth after the death of this body. Central in all cases is the fact of location: These forms of craving generate further becoming by delighting in an object of desire in a particular location, physical or mental. This is the meaning of the phrase, “delighting now here, now there,” in the definition of this noble truth. This focal location acts as the kernel around which a sense of self and a world of becoming can form.

Acts of craving not only focus on pre-existing locations. They also create new locations, in new states of becoming. This is how the process of further becoming keeps finding or conjuring up new worlds to inhabit. Old worlds of becoming may fall away, but craving can keep creating the possibility for new ones, potentially without end.

It’s easy to imagine how any of these three forms of craving would have a strong grip on the mind at the moment of death. For example, when your identity in this world is threatened, along with all the pleasures you’ve been able to find here, there will be a fierce craving to continue becoming—to be somebody somewhere, anywhere—and to focus on the sensual pleasures you miss most dearly. If your mind hasn’t been trained, and you’ve been undergoing great pain leading up to death, you’ll see the prospect of new sensual pleasures as your only escape. Alternatively, the pain of dying could easily make you crave annihilation, in which case you would see total non-existence, devoid of any feeling or consciousness, as the only escape from the sufferings of life. However, none of these forms of craving actually lead to escape from suffering. Instead, they’re precisely the causes of suffering, which is why they should be abandoned. That’s the duty appropriate to this noble truth.

What the Buddha doesn’t mention in his first talk—but what he does indicate elsewhere in the Canon—is that each of the three forms of

craving presents strategic challenges if you want to abandon it.

The challenge posed by craving for sensuality lies in the fact that we ordinarily see sensual pleasure as our only alternative to pain ([SN 36:6](#)). This means that any effort to abandon sensuality will require a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, we need to learn how to see the drawbacks of sensuality; on the other, we need to provide the mind with an alternative, non-sensual pleasure with which to nourish itself along the way. Otherwise, as the Buddha notes, even when you see the drawbacks of sensuality, if you don't have access to a higher form of pleasure, the mind will revert to its original craving for sensuality—or for forms of sensuality that are even worse ([MN 14](#)).

Also, because craving for sensuality leads to becoming, it actually entails craving for becoming. This means that you can't abandon it without attacking craving for becoming at the same time.

The challenge posed by craving for becoming lies in the fact that we use our various senses of self and of the world as tools for finding happiness, so we have difficulty imagining how we could achieve anything desirable without them. To pursue a path of practice that will end this type of becoming, you have to see that you'll benefit from taking it on. This point may seem paradoxical—after all, when there's no more becoming, there will be no sense of “you”—but strategically it's necessary. People accustomed to thinking in the terms that constitute becoming need reasons that make sense within those terms before they'll adopt any path of practice. As long as you're still attached to your sense of self, you want to know that you'll benefit from following the path.

To satisfy this desire, the Buddha provides repeated reassurances that even without a sense of “you” or a “world,” there can still be the experience of the highest form of happiness. In fact, it's only when your usual tools for finding happiness—your sense of your self operating in the world—are abandoned that this higher happiness can be attained ([MN 22](#)).

However, the fact that craving for non-becoming also leads to becoming presents a further strategic challenge, one that's particularly tricky. Even though the Buddha encourages you to end craving for becoming, you can't simply replace it with craving for non-becoming. If

you do, you'll cling to the desire to end becoming, and that act of clinging—it counts as view-clinging—will involve notions of “self” and “world,” leading to more becoming.

The way out of this dilemma is to look at the processes leading up to becoming—such as sensory contact, feeling, craving, and clinging—as events in and of themselves, and to develop dispassion for them before any sense of “self” or “world” can coalesce around them. The Buddha calls this approach “seeing what has come to be (*bhūta*) as what has come to be.” ([Iti 49](#)) In other words, you see the processes that come to be as having resulted from a series of events acting as causes. If you develop dispassion for the events, the causes will cease, and whatever has come into being based on those causes will cease as well.

In practice, this means that you can't focus directly on becoming, and you can't even think in terms of “self” or “world” at that stage of the meditation. Instead, you have to focus on the process of events that would lead up to those concepts, simply as events in a causal chain, with no thought of where they're happening or who they're happening to. They're just events as events. This may sound fairly abstract, but the Buddha is actually asking you to look directly at events immediately present to your awareness, on a level of intimacy that lies closer to your awareness than even your sense of self in the world.

As these causes for new becomings disband through dispassion, no new becomings can form. At the same time, any becomings already existing will be allowed to cease as their causes run out. This is the only way in which becoming, and its attendant suffering, can be totally brought to an end.

So just as the first noble truth presents some strategic challenges for the path to the end of suffering, so does the second: Any path that will lead to the end of suffering has to lead also to the end of becoming. This means it has to focus on discerning chains of events in the mind before those events can coalesce into becomings, and, at the same time that you discern them, inducing dispassion for them.

The act of developing this dispassion is what abandons craving, but it starts by focusing not on craving itself, but on the locations where

craving arises and settles in. In other words, you learn to see that the things in which craving delights are not really worth craving after all.

The Canon describes these locations as “whatever seems endearing and alluring in terms of the world.” You develop dispassion for them by analyzing them into discrete events related to the processes of experience at the six senses. For instance, suppose that you crave a certain person. When you see that the craving is causing suffering and you want to be free of it, you start by analyzing the allure of the craving as to where it might be focused in the internal sense media—the senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and ideation—or their external objects: sights, sounds, aromas, flavors, tactile sensations, and ideas.

You then further break the sensory process down into the events that surround experience at these senses ([DN 22](#)):

contact between the senses and their objects,
consciousness at that contact,
feeling born of the contact,
perceptions of the sensory objects,
intentions for the sensory objects,
craving for the sensory objects,
thoughts directed at sensory objects, and
evaluation of sensory objects. (Directed thought and evaluation are the Buddha’s analysis of how you use perceptions and feelings to talk to yourself.)

Here again, this analysis may seem abstract, but as we noted above, you’re actually moving from a mental construct—your sense of the other person—to the events directly experienced in your own awareness out of which you assemble that construct. You find that what seemed so obvious to begin with—your sense that the craving was focused on the other person—is not so obvious after all. Maybe you were attracted more to your perceptions about that person, or to the way you talked to yourself about yourself in relation to that person. That’s where the craving was really focused: on the perceptions or the thoughts and evaluations about the relationship. Your craving wasn’t really focused on the other person at all.

This is why personal relations can be so precarious. You're not really in love with the other person. You might be in love with your intentions around that person—you might even crave your cravings—which often have very little to do with who that person really is. And because you're not fully aware of where your cravings are actually focused, they can move around quite quickly—"now here, now there," from perceptions to intentions to other cravings, playing hide and seek—without your even knowing it. No wonder your cravings can find it so easy to lie to you.

You can expand this realization to see that *all* cravings can be deceptive in this way, which makes you stop and think: This would apply to the cravings you might experience at the moment of death and which would determine your future state of becoming. At the same time, you see that the events on which your cravings are focused are ephemeral and dependent on conditions, so they're undependable sources for genuine happiness as well.

Seeing how craving and the objects on which it focuses are so inconstant and unreliable, you move closer to wanting to develop dispassion for any craving that would lead to further becoming. This is how you begin to fulfill the duty with regard to this noble truth. And this is where you see why this truth is noble, in that it induces you to develop a noble sense of dispassion toward your cravings.

Here it's important to note that the desire to develop dispassion in this way is not classed as part of the second noble truth as a cause of suffering. Instead, it's classed under the fourth noble truth, as part of right effort in the path leading to the cessation of suffering. This is the desire you develop to end desire.

Now, this, too, presents a strategic challenge, in that a healthy sense of self is necessary to cultivate this desire, and this sense of self will involve a level of becoming. This means that a certain measure of becoming will have to play a role in following the path. This path-becoming, though, can eventually be abandoned through right view after it has done its work of abandoning the causes leading to other states of becoming.

This is why the Buddha used the image of the raft to illustrate how the path works: You hold on to the raft until it has taken you to the far

shore. Then you can let it go.

Another image from the Canon is of going to a park. To make the effort to arrive at the park, you need desire to get there. Once you're there, you don't need the desire anymore ([SN 51:15](#)).

The Third Noble Truth

The third noble truth is the truth of the cessation of suffering. The term “cessation” here doesn’t refer to the fact that suffering, once it arises, ordinarily has to pass away. Instead, it denotes the absolute ending of any and all stress and suffering that arises from craving.

The way the Buddha defines this truth points out the basic strategy for how this cessation is brought about. You attack the problem at the cause. It’s like going into a house and seeing that it’s full of smoke. Instead of trying to put out the smoke, you try to find the fire causing the smoke, and you put *that* out. The smoke will then dissipate on its own.

In fact, this third noble truth is defined in a way that shows that it’s identical with the act of fulfilling the duty with regard to the second noble truth. It’s “the remainderless cessation through dispassion, giving away, giving back, release, and letting go of that very craving.”

In this sequence of terms, dispassion, *virāga*, can also mean “fading.” Suffering ceases when passion for the chain of events causing it fades from the mind.

The terms for “giving away,” “giving back,” and “release”—*cāga*, *paṭinissaga*, and *mutti*—refer to the fact that the mind, in acting on craving, lays possessive claim to it. To abandon craving, it has to abandon its claim and return it to nature. You see that even your cravings aren’t worth viewing as yours, so you give them their freedom.

The final term in the sequence—letting go (*anālaya*)—also carries the connotation that you let go with no sense of nostalgia for your cravings. You cut off the relationship entirely, with no lingering regret for what has ended.

Other passages in the Canon describe the dispassion and cessation of the third noble truth as the foremost phenomenon that can be experienced. There is no phenomenon higher than this ([Iti 90](#)).

Your duty with regard to this truth is to realize it. In other words, you not only abandon craving, but you're also fully aware of how you do it, and of the results that come when you do.

As we noted in the preceding chapter, to develop dispassion for craving, you also have to develop dispassion for the processes of sensory experience on which it focuses. Because these processes are fabricated through your intentions, and because acts of fabrication are rooted in desire ([AN 10:58](#)), when you develop full dispassion for that desire, these fabrications cease as well. This means that all the processes around the six senses cease—at least for the duration of the experience of gaining awakening. The mind discovers a dimension that is totally separate from the six senses. As the Canon says, this dimension is not mediated by the six senses at all, and yet it can still be known ([SN 35:117](#)). Even when, after you gain awakening, you return to your experience of the six senses, you experience them “disjoined” from them: Because you no longer try to feed on them, you allow them their separate existence ([MN 140](#)).

Now, because language is a fabricated phenomenon, this unfabricated dimension can't be properly described by words. Nevertheless, the Buddha needed to give some explanation for why it would be a good goal to aim for, and some indications of how to recognize it once attained. That's why he described it indirectly through metaphors—*nibbāna*, “unbinding” being his metaphor of choice.

In ordinary Pali usage, the term *nibbāna* was used to describe the extinguishing of a fire. To understand the implications of this image, though, we have to understand how the Buddha described the physics of how fire worked.

Individuals fires, he said, were caused by provoking the fire property, which existed, in a calm latent state, to a greater or lesser degree in all things. When you provoked it—say, by using a fire-starter—it would grab hold and cling to the fuel that would sustain it. (Here, for *fuel*, the Buddha used the word *upādāna*, the same word for clinging/feeding that he used in the definition of suffering in the first noble truth.) As long as the fire burned, it was trapped in a state of heat and agitation. When it went out, it let go of its fuel, grew calm, and was released.

The Buddha used the term “unbinding” for the goal both to indicate that it was a state of freedom and calm—“cool” was another metaphor he used for this state—and also to suggest how to get there. Just as fuel doesn’t cling to the fire, it’s not the case that the aggregates cling to you. You’re the one clinging to them. You gain freedom by letting them go.

The main difference between the nibbāna of the fire and the nibbāna experienced by the mind is that the fire property can be provoked again, and so give rise to other fires. The release of the mind, though, is said to be unprovoked. Nothing can provoke it into clinging to anything ever again.

The Buddha also uses the metaphor of an extinguished fire to make the point that the person who has gained release can’t be described. Just as a fire, when it goes out, can’t be described as going east, west, north, or south, in the same way, a person fully released can’t be described as existing, not existing, both, or neither ([MN 72](#)). That’s because people are measured and defined as beings in terms of their attachments ([SN 22:36](#)). When they have no more attachments, they can’t be defined, and so can’t be properly described.

The Buddha was very rigorous in never describing the state of the person fully awakened, although he did give an image to indicate that such a person lies beyond the limits of language: Such a person, he said, is immeasurable like the great ocean ([MN 72](#)).

As for nibbāna as a state, there’s a paradox in how the Buddha talks about it, although the paradox can be easily resolved. In the passage in which he describes dispassion as the highest unfabricated phenomenon, or object of the mind, he lists the realization of nibbāna as a synonym of dispassion ([Iti 90](#)). In other passages, though, he indicates that nibbāna isn’t a phenomenon at all—it’s the end of phenomena ([Sn 5:6](#); [AN 10:58](#)). We can resolve the paradox by noting that because the act of realizing nibbāna is an action, it would count as a phenomenon. But nibbāna as a state is beyond all actions, which is why it’s the ending of all phenomena, whether fabricated or not.

Still, the Buddha had to give his listeners some sense that nibbāna was a desirable goal. This is why he described it with many positive

metaphors ([SN 43](#)). These metaphors can be divided into five classes, to give an idea of why you would want to unbind.

1. Unbinding is experienced as a type of *consciousness*. This consciousness is said to be “unrestricted,” “without surface,” and “unestablished,” meaning that it makes contact with no object at all, not even consciousness itself ([AN 10:81](#), [MN 49](#), [Ud 8:1](#)). The Buddha illustrates these terms with a simile: a beam of light that lands on no surface anywhere, causing nothing to reflect it ([SN 12:64](#)).

Unlike the consciousness aggregate, consciousness without surface isn’t known through the six senses. This is why unbinding is said to be *subtle* and *hard-to-see*. Yet because this consciousness is a form of knowing, the Buddha states that it’s a mistake to say that fully awakened people do not know or see ([DN 15](#)). In other words, awakening is not a blanking out. Actually, awakened people know and see to such a heightened extent that they’re beyond even the need for conviction in what the Buddha taught.

Consciousness without surface is also unlike the consciousness aggregate in that it’s totally outside of space and time. This is why the Buddha states that it contains no coming nor going nor staying in place, as these activities would assume time; and that it has no here nor there nor between-the-two, as these concepts assume space. Existing outside of space and time, this consciousness is without end.

2. The second aspect of unbinding is its *truth*. Because it’s unfabricated, it doesn’t change into anything else. Ever. After all, it’s outside of time. This is why the Buddha calls it *undeceptive*, *unwavering*, *permanence*, *ageless*, *undecaying*, *deathless*, *unbent* (i.e., not tending in any direction), and *true*. Because unbinding is a state (*pada*) rather than a being (*satta*), it doesn’t have to be defined by attachment, so the Canon doesn’t hesitate to say that it unequivocally *exists*. There’s even one passage where the Buddha calls it the highest noble truth.

3. The third positive aspect of unbinding is that it’s the ultimate *sukha*—a term that can be translated as pleasure, happiness, ease, or bliss. Unbinding, as experienced in this lifetime, is invariably described as pleasurable: It’s *bliss*, *the exquisite*, and *the unafflicted*. Just as consciousness without surface is totally apart from the consciousness

aggregate, the bliss of unbinding is totally apart from the pleasure that comes under the feeling aggregate.

Given that unbinding is unfabricated, it has no need for nutriment, which means that its bliss has nothing lacking. So the fully awakened person is said to be *hunger-free*. And because this bliss is known independently of the six sense media, it's not affected even by that person's death ([Iti 44](#); [MN 49](#)), which is why the Buddha calls unbinding *peace, rest, the secure, security, island, shelter, harbor, and refuge*.

4. However, even though unbinding is pleasant, fully awakened people don't cling to this pleasure, so they're not limited by it. They're said to be beyond both pleasure and pain ([Ud 1:10](#)), and also free: free from the slightest disturbance or limitation, free from fabrication, free from the fires of passion, aversion, and delusion, free from passion for dispassion, and—as noted above—free even from the confines of space and time. Because locations come from craving, and because unbinding is free of craving, it doesn't count as a "place" at all. For this reason, those who fully attain it are said to be *everywhere released* and *everywhere independent* ([Dhp 348](#); [Sn 4:6](#)). Like the light beam that doesn't reflect off of anything, they can't even be located.

For these reasons, the fourth positive aspect of unbinding—and the one most emphasized in the Canon—is that it's *total freedom*.

This freedom is indicated in a general sense by the Buddha's two most common epithets for unbinding: the term *unbinding* itself, and *release*. Because, in line with the underlying metaphor of the extinguishing of fire, freedom comes from letting go, the remaining epithets for this freedom focus on the fact that unbinding is free from all the clinging defilements that cause suffering and stress: It's *attachment-free, free from longing, the ending of craving, dispassion*. It's *purity*. And as the Buddha indicates, the freedom of a person whose mind is released is no different from the freedom of the Buddha himself ([SN 22:58](#)).

5. In all the above aspects—consciousness, truth, bliss, and freedom—unbinding excels everything that there is, so its fifth aspect is its *excellence*. There's nothing to equal it, much less to exceed or surpass it.

The Buddha calls it *the amazing, the astounding, the ultimate, and the beyond*.

The Fourth Noble Truth

The fourth noble truth is the path of practice to the cessation of suffering. It's true in the sense that it's a genuine possibility—it can be done—and it really leads to suffering's end. Of the four noble truths, it's the one you deliberately *make* true through your actions. It's why the teachings on kamma and freedom of choice are so essential to the Dhamma. This truth is the one that shows their power to do the greatest possible good.

In his first talk, the Buddha introduced this path of practice as the Middle Way because it avoids two extremes: (1) indulgence in the pleasures of sensuality, and (2) devotion to the pain of self-torment. Yet this does not mean that the path pursues a course of middling pleasures and pains. Instead, it fosters the pleasures of concentration, along with insight into the pain of clinging, and treats these pleasures and pains not as ends in themselves but as tools to achieve a higher end: the deathless.

The path, however, doesn't *cause* the deathless. After all, if the deathless were caused by anything, it wouldn't be unconditioned. Instead, the path *leads to* the deathless—in the same way that a road to the Grand Canyon doesn't cause the Grand Canyon to be, but following the road can take you there.

The path is composed of eight factors. Because these factors work together to achieve the goal of the noble search, the path as a whole is called the noble eightfold path. The factors are all said to be “right” in that they're effective in reaching the goal of awakening. The Buddha illustrates this point with a simile: There's a right way and many wrong ways to try to get milk out of a cow. If you pull on the udder, that's the right way, because it accomplishes your aim—you get the milk. If you twist the cow's horn, that's a wrong way, because it doesn't get you the milk that you want, and it harasses the cow. In the same way, following the factors of the path is the right way to attain the deathless. Following

their opposites would be wrong, because they wouldn't get you there ([MN 126](#)).

Like suffering and its causes, the factors of the path are directly experienced, although you need some training in the Dhamma before you can bring them about.

The factors are these:

- *Right view*: knowledge with regard to the four noble truths. This means not only knowing the truths, but also knowing how to use them to classify experiences. On top of that, it also means knowing their duties and how to follow them.

- *Right resolve*: being resolved on abandoning thoughts of sensuality, thoughts of ill will, and thoughts of harm.

- *Right speech*: abstaining from telling lies (intentionally misrepresenting the truth), speaking divisively (to break up friendships between other people, or to prevent such friendships from forming), speaking harshly (with the purpose of hurting another person's feelings), and engaging in idle chatter (speaking with no clear intention in mind).

- *Right action*: abstaining from killing, stealing, and engaging in illicit sex.

- *Right livelihood*: abstaining from any ways of making a living that are dishonest or harmful, or that aim deliberately at giving rise to passion, aversion, or delusion within oneself or others.

- *Right effort*: generating the desire and carrying through with the effort to prevent unskillful states from arising in the mind; to abandon any unskillful states that have already arisen; to give rise to skillful states that are not yet there in the mind; and to develop fully any skillful states that already are.

- *Right mindfulness*: "Mindfulness" on its own means the ability to keep something in mind. Right mindfulness, in the most general terms, means keeping in mind the need to abandon unskillful qualities and to develop skillful qualities so as to get the mind into right concentration. This entails being able to recognize skillful and unskillful qualities for what they are when they arise—*recognizing* is another function of

mindfulness—and to keep in mind the most effective ways to complete the work of abandoning or developing, as is appropriate.

To keep these tasks in mind, mindfulness needs to be established in a frame of reference. These frames are four: the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, the mind in and of itself, and mental qualities in and of themselves. The “in and of itself” here means observing these things simply as they are without reference to their meaning in the context of the outside world. To be established on any of these frames, you have to do two things: (1) stay focused on the frame, and (2) put aside any thoughts of greed or distress with reference to the world. For instance, to stay focused on the breath while dropping any thoughts about issues related to the world outside is one way of staying focused on the body in and of itself. To notice the feelings that arise from staying focused on the breath, as they happen, would be a way of staying with feelings in and of themselves, and so forth.

To stay established in these frames of reference, mindfulness needs the help of two other qualities: alertness and ardency. Alertness keeps you aware of what you’re doing in the present moment and of the results of what you’re doing. Ardency is essentially the same thing as right effort: the whole-hearted effort to stay mindful and alert, and to do what is skillful in line with the directions given by mindfulness.

When mindfulness is well established in this way, it forms the theme of the last factor of the path—

- *Right concentration*: stages of mental absorption, called jhāna. There are four:

The first jhāna is composed of pleasure and rapture that come from temporarily abandoning sensuality and other unskillful qualities, and directing your thoughts to a single object—such as the breath. At the same time, you evaluate how to adjust the mind and the object so that they fit snugly and smoothly together. The resulting feelings of pleasure and rapture are then allowed to spread throughout the entire body.

The second jhāna is composed of a stronger sense of pleasure and rapture that comes when you no longer need to direct your thoughts to the object or to evaluate it—in other words, you stop talking to yourself about it—and you can simply enter into a concentrated sense of oneness

with the object. Again, the pleasure and rapture are allowed to permeate and to fill the entire body.

The third jhāna is composed of a sense of a more refined physical pleasure and mental equanimity that come when you no longer need to feed off the sense of rapture. This pleasure, again, is allowed to fill the entire body.

The fourth jhāna is composed of a sense of equanimity and purified mindfulness, coming from the ability to let go of pleasure and the subtle stress that even refined pleasure entails. The in-and-out breath grows still, as the body's oxygen needs are reduced, and the body is filled with a bright, clear awareness.

In Chapter 11 we will discuss how these eight factors of the noble path work together to attack the problem of suffering at its cause: the three forms of craving. Here we will simply note that these eight factors fall under three headings. The first two factors—right view and right resolve—comprise the *discernment* group; the next three—right speech, right action, and right livelihood—the *virtue* group; and the last three—right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration—the *concentration* group. For this reason, the path is sometimes called the Triple Training: in heightened virtue, heightened mind (concentration), and heightened discernment.

The duty with regard to this fourth noble truth is to develop it. The Canon suggests two ways in which to do this.

- The first is to develop the factors in sequence ([SN 45:1](#)). You start with a mundane level of right view ([MN 117](#)), which affirms the principles of kamma and rebirth: Your actions—bodily, verbal, and mental—come from your intentions, they have results that correspond to the quality of the intention, and those results can take widely varying lengths of time to be felt. Some are felt immediately; others may not be felt until future lifetimes. Based on this level of right view, you follow the first of the Buddha's two categorical teachings, i.e., the teachings that are true across the board in all situations: Unskillful actions—bodily, verbal, and mental—should be abandoned, and skillful actions should be developed in their place ([AN 2:18](#); [MN 41](#)).

As you follow this teaching, you become sensitive to how unskillful mental actions lead to suffering, whereas skillful actions relieve suffering. You then refine this insight into the nature of action by adopting the view that mental acts of craving lead to the clinging that constitutes suffering right here and now, while acts following the eight factors of the noble path lead to the end of suffering. These four noble truths are the Buddha's second categorical teaching, which is basically a refinement of the first ([DN 9](#)). You see further that the causes of suffering should be abandoned, and the path to the end of suffering should be developed. This view inspires you to resolve on using right view in the right way, not as a mere topic of discussion or argument, but as a *guide to action*. As a first step in that direction, you resolve on abandoning unskillful qualities in the mind. Then you try to carry out this resolve in all your activities as you make an effort to speak, act, and find your livelihood in ways that harm no one: not yourself, not others.

In trying to be skillful in your external actions, you also need to be skillful in how you engender the mental qualities motivating your actions. This entails right effort. At the same time, keeping in mind the need to be skillful in both external and internal actions requires that you develop the qualities of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency that will help in the practice of right mindfulness.

You come to see that the most skillful mind states—free of thoughts of sensuality, ill will, and harmfulness—are the stages of right concentration. So you work to establish mindfulness in a way that will give rise to those stages.

The close connection between right mindfulness and right concentration is shown in passages in the Canon that equate rightly established mindfulness with the first jhāna, and in other passages where mindfulness is said to be purified on reaching the fourth jhāna.

- The second way to develop the path is also sequential, but a bit more complex. As you develop each path factor, the three factors of right view, right mindfulness, and right effort circle around that factor: Of the three, right view comes first in seeing the distinction between the right and wrong versions of the factor; right mindfulness remembers to develop the right version and abandon the wrong version; right effort

makes the effort to carry through with the instructions of right view and right mindfulness ([MN 117](#)).

The fact that both of these methods for developing the path start with right view can be explained by the Buddha's insight into kamma on the night of his awakening: The skill or lack of skill in your intentional actions derives from the views that inform them. In this case, the noble eightfold path is the highest form of kamma—the kamma that leads to the end of kamma ([AN 4:237](#))—and right view is what leads the way in performing all the duties connected with the noble truths: comprehending suffering, abandoning its origination, realizing its cessation, and developing the path.

But as we've also noted, once right view and the other path factors have been fully developed and done their work, they too have to be abandoned. After all, the path is fabricated—the Buddha calls it the highest fabricated phenomenon—whereas the goal is not ([Iti 90](#)). This means that the path is not present in the goal. So the path actually entails two duties: developing the factors so that they can do their work, and then abandoning them when their work is done.

As we'll see in Chapter 11, right view is particularly well suited to provide the lead in performing this double duty. It teaches you to look at your views, less in terms of their contents, and more in terms of the kamma of clinging to them. In other words, it sensitizes you to views as actions: the motivations lying behind them, the suffering inherent in clinging to them, and the long-term consequences of holding to them and acting on them. After right view applies this analysis to other views, showing you how to abandon them, it's in an ideal position to apply the same analysis to itself.

Here it's important to note that even though awakened people abandon the factors of the path on gaining awakening, when they return to the realm of the six senses after awakening they still can make use of the qualities of mind developed in the course of following the path: Their virtue, concentration, and discernment are perfected. In fact, impeccable virtue in terms of the five precepts is one of the signs of a person who has achieved even just the first stage of awakening. Still, those who are fully awakened no longer have to develop the path factors for the sake of

doing any further work on their own minds. This is one of the ways in which the noble eightfold path counts as the kamma that puts an end to kamma.

However, even though right view leads the way in achieving these results, it can't do the work on its own. It needs to be trained by the act of developing the other path factors. Right concentration, for instance, is needed to give the mind a solid foundation of well-being that allows right view to be resilient in comprehending suffering. Right resolve and right effort make right view more perceptive in the strategies needed to undercut unskillful motivations in the mind.

This means that the path factors are not always developed strictly in sequence. And, in fact, the Canon lists a variety of ways in which the discernment of right view follows on the other path factors.

For example, when the Buddha sets out the Triple Training, he puts virtue first, followed by concentration, and then by discernment ([AN 3:87](#)). So even though right view may lead the way, as explained in the analysis of the path, it's also true that the act of developing the other path factors gives important practical lessons to right view, deepening its understanding of all the noble truths and of how to perform the duties appropriate to them. We'll explore some of these practical lessons in Chapters 10 and 11.

The fact that discernment is nurtured by the development of the other path factors is also reflected in the Buddha's list of three types of discernment: the discernment gained through listening to the Dhamma; the discernment gained through thinking it through; and the discernment gained through actually developing the qualities that the Dhamma recommends developing.

When you've learned the Buddha's step-by-step discourse and the four noble truths, you've gained some of the discernment that can come from listening, and you've taken your first foray into the second main step in awakening to the truth: Having found a truthful teacher, you've now heard the Dhamma that that teacher has to teach.

The next step is to gain the discernment that comes from thinking the Dhamma through.

Pondering the Truth

As the Buddha explains the steps to follow in awakening to the truth, once you've heard the Dhamma—such as the teachings of the step-by-step discourse or the four noble truths—you try to remember it. Then you try to penetrate the meaning of the words. Once you understand them, you ponder them until you find that they make sense: This is called “coming to an agreement through pondering the teachings.” The purpose of all this thinking is to give rise to the desire to put the teachings into practice.

The Buddha notes that it's possible to listen to the Dhamma with the purpose of finding fault with it, interpreting it in ways that make no sense, but that defeats the purpose of listening to it in the first place, as a step in putting an end to your suffering. Although he doesn't ask you to put your critical faculties aside as you listen, he does advise you to use them wisely: Instead of pouncing on what seems not to make sense as proof that the Dhamma is wrong, you think and then ask questions of the person teaching the Dhamma to gain clarification whenever you can't resolve your own doubts. As the Buddha said, he trained his students in cross-questioning—asking the meaning of whatever isn't clear—so that they could allay their doubts, and then that they be willing to *be* cross-questioned, too, so that they could help allay the doubts of others.

This means that part of the onus is on the teacher: to present the Dhamma in a clear and convincing manner, and to be patient in clearing up points you find unclear. But part of the onus is also on you, the student, to bring the right attitude to the process of trying to make sense of what the teacher has to say.

The right attitude is composed of the two qualities that the Buddha said he looked for in a student—that you be truthful and observant—but it also includes a third: that you bring an attitude of goodwill. (1) When you're truthful and observant, it helps you to understand clearly why you might be holding to any views that are getting in the way of accepting

the basic principles of the Dhamma. (2) When you bring an attitude of goodwill for yourself, it helps you to see that you would benefit from abandoning those views. At the same time, when you bring an attitude of goodwill for the Dhamma and for those who teach it, it motivates you to look for ways of resolving any conflicts you might perceive in the teachings.

Let's look at these points in more detail.

- The Canon shows that the Buddha had to deal with many people who rejected the Dhamma on the grounds that it didn't fit in with views they already held. Their major issues centered on the fact that the Buddha's two categorical teachings—on the need to abandon unskillful actions and develop skillful actions, and on the four noble truths—didn't fit in with their views about the world and the self. Some, for instance, believed that the self was powerless to act. Others believed that actions were unreal; others, that the world was totally chaotic, following no laws of cause and effect. For them, a path of action that would result in the end of suffering would be impossible.

Now, as we noted in Chapter 6, "world" and "self" are the basic concepts of becoming, and becoming is precisely what the four noble truths are designed to end. This means that, from the Buddha's perspective, those who had trouble accepting the Dhamma had the context backwards. They were trying to fit the four noble truths into the context of becoming—as they understood and clung to their ideas of "self" and "world"—whereas he had formulated the four noble truths as the context for showing how any type of becoming came about as a result of a process and how that process could and should be made to cease.

To show that he was operating in a different context—and that they should, too—the Buddha often refused to take a stand on the hot philosophical issues of his day that fell within the context of becoming. Some of these issues concerned the nature of the world: Did the world exist? Did it not exist? Was it eternal? Not eternal? Infinite? Finite? Was it all One? Was it a multiplicity? Will all the world gain awakening? Will a half? A third? ([SN 12:48](#); [AN 10:95](#))

Other issues that he put aside concerned the nature of the self: Is there a self? Is there no self? Do I exist? Do I not exist? What am I? How am I? Am I basically good? Basically bad? Is the self the same as the body? Is the self one thing and the body another? After death, does an awakened being exist? Not exist? Both? Neither? ([SN 44:10](#); [MN 2](#); [AN 4:199](#))

Some of these issues the Buddha put aside on the grounds that they were irrelevant to the practice: Trying to answer them would simply squander time better spent on putting an end to suffering. Other issues he put aside on the grounds that however you answered the issue, it would stand directly in the way of the practice. For instance, with the issue of the self: The Buddha noted that however you defined your self, you would be placing limitations on yourself, limitations that would get in the way of the practice for awakening ([SN 22:36](#)).

To begin with, if you assert that you have a self—no matter how you define it—you'll naturally cling to whatever you define as self, and that clinging will prevent you from putting an end to suffering.

On top of that, specific ways of defining your sense of self would place additional limitations on you as well.

For example, if you define your self around your physical body, there's the problem that the body doesn't exist in unbinding. That would mean that if you gained awakening, you would be annihilated—an idea that would discourage you from practicing.

Similarly, if you defined yourself as nothing more than a conditioned being, you wouldn't be able to know anything unconditioned, and that would mean that an unconditioned end of suffering would be beyond your ken.

If you defined yourself as interconnected with all other beings, that would mean that no one could gain awakening until everyone gained awakening. From that, it would follow that the Buddha was never awakened, and that you, on your own, could never put an end to suffering, either.

If you tried to get around that problem by defining all beings as already awakened, simply that they don't realize it, the problem is that

beings are still suffering, which means that awakening would not mean the end of suffering.

On the other hand, if you decided that you and all other beings have no self, that would place limitations on you, too. You wouldn't be responsible for your choices, which would make it impossible to embark on any path of practice at all. At the same time, there would be no one to benefit or be harmed by your actions. That idea would encourage irresponsible actions, and discourage you from making the effort to follow the path.

These are some of the reasons why the Buddha avoided taking a position on many of the controversial issues around self and world that excited his contemporaries, and that still excite many people today.

Now, it's not the case that the Buddha refused to take a position on all the philosophical issues of his time. He did take a stand on issues of kamma and rebirth, and the truths about suffering and its end, because these gave clear answers to what he saw was *the* primary issue: how to know which actions are skillful and which are not. It's just that he was radical in claiming that this particular issue should override all others.

So if you find yourself having trouble fitting the teachings on kamma or the four noble truths into your views about your self or the world, the problem is that you've got the context backward. Instead, you should see how your views about your self and the world fit under the four noble truths. However, to reverse the context with issues like these isn't easy. After all, your sense of self and world deals with your perception of what "really is." It's hard not to cling to what you see as real.

Fortunately, the Buddha gives guidance in how to loosen your grip. This is where the qualities of truthfulness, goodwill, and being observant come in.

In terms of truthfulness and goodwill, you may remember from Chapter 2 that a major aspect of your truthfulness as a person is expressed in how truthful you are in citing the basis for your opinions. In the case of the monastic discipline, this means truth in citation: being clear about the status of the evidence you bring when accusing a fellow monastic of misbehavior. Is it based on what you saw? What you heard? Or only on what you suspected?

In a similar way, the ability to loosen your grip on your opinions about the reality of the world and the self requires that you examine your basis for holding them. As the Buddha points out, they may be based on conviction in someone else's authority, such as the authority of a religious teacher, a text, or a scientist; or they might be based on what you like, on analogy, or on what you feel has been well reasoned.

When you examine these reasons, though, you realize that they don't count as direct knowledge. They're nothing more than hypotheses. They could be true or they could be false. When you realize how tenuous the evidence is for any view about the world or the self, it makes it easier to put that view aside. If you don't really know whether the end of suffering is possible, why choose a hypothesis that would close off the possibility that it could be true? If you had goodwill for yourself, you'd want to adopt any reasonable hypothesis that leaves that possibility open.

As for being observant: The Buddha suggests that if you hold to a view that conflicts with the four noble truths, you should examine your motivation for holding to it, and the actions that result when you act on it. Why hold to a view that denies the power of your actions to put an end to suffering? What allure does the view hold for you? Why do you like holding it? Does it lead you to do things that are skillful? Or does it discourage skillful behavior? For instance, as the Buddha points out, if you don't believe that you have the power to choose your actions—if you think that you live in a world totally pre-determined by physical laws—there's no motivation for exerting yourself to be skillful in what you do, say, or think. So what incentive would you have for holding to that view?

Being truthful with yourself in answering these questions corresponds to the two other types of truthfulness discussed in Chapter 2 in connection with monastic discipline: truth in observation and truth in reporting. You're true in accounting for your inner motivation for holding to a view, and you make an extra effort to accurately perceive the actual results of the actions inspired by the view. Again, when you can be truthful with yourself in these ways, it makes it easier to show goodwill for yourself and to put the view aside.

In all these cases—being truthful in citing the source for your view, and being observant about the motivation for and kammic results of

holding the view—you've also begun to reverse the context. You've learned how to take the issue of skillful and unskillful action and give it priority over concepts of "self" and "world."

- Adopting this context also makes it easier to resolve conflicts you might perceive in the Dhamma. That's because most of these conflicts come from getting the context wrong, trying to fit the Buddha's two categorical teachings into the context provided by his other teachings. But when you realize that the categorical teachings provide the context into which the other teachings should fit, the perceived conflicts go away.

A case in point concerns the Buddha's teachings on self and not-self. When he says that all phenomena should be seen as not-self, he seems to be making a metaphysical assertion: There is no self. But then there are passages where he states that the self is its own mainstay, and that you should take your self as a governing principle in order to stay on the path ([Dhp 160](#); [AN 3:40](#)). This sounds like he's being inconsistent: If there's no self, how can you rely on your self to be a mainstay or a governing principle in any way at all?

Some people have tried to resolve this apparent inconsistency by proposing that the Buddha spoke on two levels of language: ultimate and conventional. On the ultimate level, there really is no self. However, on the conventional level—the unreflective level of ordinary, everyday language—there is a self. But this explanation simply compounds the problem. If there really is no self, then when the Buddha talks of the self as its own mainstay, he's employing a useful fiction—in his terms, a "beneficial falsehood." But as he himself indicated, in his eyes there is no such thing ([MN 58](#)).

A better way of resolving the conflict is to see how the teachings on self and not-self fit into the context of the four noble truths.

We can begin by recalling that the Buddha's attitude toward truths expressed in words: They're instrumental. They're true to the extent that they really work in bringing about the aim for which they're formulated. They're consistent with one another to the extent that they act together in bringing about that aim. This means that, in the case of concepts of

“self” and “not-self,” we have to consider how they function on their own, and how they function together to arrive at the end of suffering.

It’s because of this emphasis on function that the Buddha put aside questions concerning whether the self does or doesn’t exist. Instead, he looked at your sense of self—and of not-self—as perceptions, i.e., actions.

In other words, his teachings on self and not-self weren’t intended to answer such questions as, “Does the self exist? Do I exist?” Rather, they were intended to answer the questions that the Buddha said lay at the beginning of discernment: “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm and suffering? And what, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?”

Applied to issues of self and not-self, these questions become: When do these action-perceptions lead to long-term harm and suffering, and when do they lead to long-term welfare and happiness?

As you’ll recall, the Buddha’s analysis of the perception of self comes in the context of becoming: You adopt a sense of self as agent, consumer, and commentator as a strategy for achieving happiness by attaining the object of the desire around which the becoming coalesced. The agent is what does the actions to get the desired result, the consumer enjoys the result, and the commentator judges how well the agent has acted and recommends future improvements. As it so happens, the concept of not-self is also implied in that strategy: Anything that’s irrelevant to these functions or stands in their way is regarded as not-self.

When we divorce the sense of self from metaphysical issues—in other words, when we don’t concern ourselves with pinning down exactly *what* the self is or *if* it is—we’re left with perceptions of self and not-self as negotiating strategies for happiness, centered on what they *do*.

And as the Buddha noted in his second recorded talk ([Mv I.6.38–47](#); [SN 22:59](#)), a primary aspect of what a self does is that it exerts control. You’ll label as self whatever you find to be worth trying to control to bring about happiness. This applies most directly to the self as agent—as it tries to control events in the mind and the world outside—but also to the self as consumer and commentator: The self as consumer tries to possess and hold on to whatever happiness the self as agent finds for it.

The self as commentator gets feedback from the self as consumer and then uses that to try to influence the self as agent.

Conversely, the perception of not-self is also related to the concept of control: You label as not-self whatever can't be controlled or you decide is not worth trying to control, so that you can focus your efforts for control on areas where they will give the best results.

So the choice to apply either of these perceptions comes down to a value judgment: what's worth trying to control and what's not. Because this value judgment will change according to circumstances, your sense of self will change over time, as will your sense of the line dividing self from not-self.

This is how these concepts function in ordinary states of becoming, and it's also how they function on the path to the cessation of suffering. As we've noted many times, the fourth noble truth is a path that's fabricated for the sake of achieving an unfabricated goal. For that reason, it carries two duties, performed in stages. First it has to be developed. Then, when it's been developed and completed its work, it has to be abandoned so that the unfabricated has nothing standing in its way.

As it turns out, one of the main factors of the path—right concentration—starts as a state of becoming on the level of form. This means that developing the path will require developing a state of becoming, which in turn entails a sense of self in all of its three roles: the self who's capable of following the path and giving rise to right concentration, the self who anticipates benefiting from following the path, and the self who comments on how well the path is progressing and how it might be further developed.

As for how true these perceptions of self might be: The Buddha notes that states of becoming don't lie under your total control, because they're composed of the five aggregates. If you could totally control them, they wouldn't entail suffering. However, even though you can't exert total control over the aggregates, you *can* control them to the extent of using them in fabricating right concentration and all the other factors of the noble eightfold path. So to whatever extent your perceptions of self help you to succeed in developing those factors, those perceptions are true.

As for perceptions of not-self: While you're developing the path, you apply these perceptions to anything that might pull you off the path. This would include any attachments that might tempt you to engage in wrong speech, wrong action, or wrong livelihood. It would also include any thoughts that might distract you from right mindfulness or right concentration.

However, when the path has been fully developed, and right view has succeeded in developing dispassion toward craving for all other things, that's when your duty with regard to the path is to abandon it. You see that your sense of self, which you adopted as a strategy for happiness, is now the only thing standing in the way of the highest happiness. It no longer serves the purpose for which you developed it. It's because of that insight that—for the sake of the even greater happiness promised by the third noble truth—you strategically apply the perception of not-self to all fabricated phenomena, the path included. Then, to make sure that you don't try to cling to the experience of the deathless that's revealed when all fabrications have disbanded, you apply the perception of not-self even to the unfabricated—and then you abandon *that* perception, too, to be free of any trace of the terms of becoming ([Dhp 279](#); [AN 9:36](#)). That's how the path leads beyond fabrication to the all-around ending of clinging and the total end of suffering.

So when we put the teachings on self and not-self in their proper context—as strategies for happiness in general, and as tools for completing the duties of the four noble truths in particular—we see that they contain no contradiction at all. There's no need to assume two levels of language in the Buddha's teachings, and no need to doubt that we can take him at his word: What he said was always true and beneficial. It's up to us to know how to use his words so that they're timely in our practice.

This, of course, is only one example of how you might resolve your doubts about specific teachings in the Dhamma, but it underlines an important point in how to go about resolving doubts about other Dhamma teachings as well: Always make sure you have the context right. When you keep the four noble truths foremost and can figure out how other teachings fit within those truths, you can see how the Dhamma makes strategic sense.

Pondering in these ways—adopting the four noble truths as the basic structure for your thinking about yourself, the world, and the path of practice—is the ideal way to develop the discernment that comes from thinking things through. It’s also the first stage in what the Buddha calls appropriate attention, which he cited as the foremost internal factor leading to awakening ([Iti 16](#)).

The next step in appropriate attention is to foster the discernment that comes from actually developing the qualities of your mind. You do that by following the duties appropriate to the four noble truths, taking them as the basic framework for deciding how to act in thought, word, and deed.

Performing the Duties

When the Buddha lists the steps in how to awaken to the truth, those that foster the third type of discernment—discernment gained by developing the qualities of your mind—are five: desire, willingness, judgment, exertion, and finally awakening to the truth.

The **desire**, here, is the desire to follow the duties appropriate to the four noble truths. This desire is wise because you realize that the truths were not meant just to think about or to discuss. They were meant to lead you to the reality of the end of suffering, and they can do that only if you act on them, performing the duties they entail.

The desire to perform these duties can be inspired by any number of reasons.

Most fundamental, according to the Canon, is *heedfulness*: You realize the dangers that come from not following the duties of the truths—you'd be subject to endless rounds of death and rebirth—but you also realize that you have it within your power to avoid those dangers and to find safety by taking those duties seriously and performing them as best you can ([AN 10:13](#)).

A related reason for the desire to practice would be *compassion*, both for yourself and for others: You realize that you can put an end to your own suffering, and in the course of following the path you lessen the sufferings of others, through the practice of generosity, virtue, and gaining some control over the unskillful qualities of your mind. You also provide other people with a good example for how they, too, can seek happiness in a responsible way.

Another reason for the desire to practice comes from a sense of *self-esteem*: “If other people can do this, why can't I?” ([AN 4:159](#))

Notice that these three motivations for desire use different aspects of your perception of self: Self-esteem focuses on the self as agent, capable of following the path; compassion focuses on the self as consumer,

benefitting from the path and finding enjoyment in helping others; and heedfulness focuses on all three aspects of self: the self as agent, capable of making a difference through its actions; the self as consumer to be protected by those actions; and the self as commentator looking for the best way to find long-term safety and happiness.

The next three steps—willingness, judgment, and exertion—derive from the desire to practice. **Willingness** means agreeing to submit to the standards set by the four noble truths for determining what's best to do, over and above your personal preferences. You accept the fact that many of your past standards for acting, speaking, and thinking—based on craving and clinging—have actually led to suffering, and you're willing to give the Buddha's recommendations for better ways of acting a try. This, as you remember, is one of the reasons why the four noble truths are called noble: They require you to stand apart from your cravings and clingings, and to relinquish them when you can see that they really are harmful.

Judgment—the Pali term, *tulanā*, literally means “weighing” or “comparing”—means comparing your thoughts, words, and deeds against the standards set by the four noble truths, to judge where they do and don't measure up. In particular, instead of judging whether to follow a particular course of action based on what you find pleasant to do, you judge it as to whether it counts as skillful or unskillful in the long term, and then—based on that judgment—you determine whether it should be followed or abandoned.

Exertion is when you actually carry through with whatever effort is needed to follow what's skillful or to abandon what's not. If the duties of the four noble truths go against your personal preferences—in other words, they tell you to abandon a course of action you'd find pleasant to do, or tell you to do something you find hard—you draw on your desire, willingness, and judgment to help induce you to do the right thing.

As you begin gaining good long-term results from your exertions, those results help to strengthen your desire and willingness to follow the path even further. You actually come to delight in the practice. The Buddha notes that this delight is an important element in nourishing the stamina needed to stick with the path all the way to the end ([AN 6:78](#)).

The fact that you're getting good long-term results from your exertions also helps to sharpen your judgment as to which actions are actually skillful or not.

This shows that these four qualities—desire, willingness, judgment, and exertion—don't follow one another in a single file. They work together to make one another strong.

The same reciprocal relationship can be seen in other ways in which the Buddha describes how qualities of the mind work together to help you to progress on the path and develop your discernment.

In his simplest description, he says that the Dhamma is nourished by two activities: commitment and reflection ([AN 10:73](#)). You commit to following the path, and then you reflect on the results coming from your efforts. If you see that the results aren't what you hoped for, you reflect on how you might change your actions, and then commit yourself to following the lessons you've learned. In this process, the commitment corresponds to desire, willingness, and exertion. The reflection corresponds directly to judgment, but indirectly to exertion, too. It takes effort to look at your own actions with a skillfully critical eye.

Another of the Buddha's descriptions for this stage of the practice is one we met in Chapter 8. You use right view, right mindfulness, and right effort to circle around every attempt to master each factor of the path. These three circling factors are all based on desire: the desire to reap the results of the practice. Right view corresponds to judgment in the role of maintaining standards. Right mindfulness corresponds to judgment in remembering how to apply those standards to particular situations. Right effort corresponds to exertion. Right mindfulness, in its role as alertness, then steps in again to judge the results of your efforts, teaches right view whatever lessons can be derived from those efforts, and remembers to apply those lessons to future events.

However, probably the best way to understand the way these skillful mental qualities function together as you start and progress on the path is to look at how the Buddha explained the steps in applying the basic principles of the practice to his son, Rāhula, when Rāhula was seven years old ([MN 61](#)). His explanations were essentially instructions in how best to develop the two qualities that the Buddha, as we have

noted, looked for in any student: truthfulness and good powers of observation.

He started with truthfulness. Rāhula had seen the Buddha approaching from afar, and so set out a pot of water and a dipper. When the Buddha arrived, he washed his feet with the water in the pot, leaving a little water in the dipper. Showing the dipper to Rāhula, he asked him: “Do you see how little water there is in this dipper?”

“Yes, sir.”

“That’s how little of the quality of a contemplative there is in anyone who tells a deliberate lie with no sense of shame.”

The Buddha then threw the water away, showed Rāhula the empty dipper, and then turned the dipper upside down, making the point each time that when you tell a deliberate lie with no sense of shame, your quality of a contemplative is thrown away, empty, and overturned.

Having stressed the importance of truthfulness, the Buddha went on to give instructions in how to be observant. Just as you’d use a mirror for repeated reflection, in the same way you should reflect on your actions again and again.

When planning to do an action in body, speech, or mind, you should reflect on it beforehand: “This action I want to do—would it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Would it be an unskillful action, with painful consequences, painful results?” If you anticipate that it would cause harm, you should refrain from it. If you anticipate no harm, you can go ahead and start doing it.

While doing the action, you should reflect on its immediate results: “This action I’m doing—is it leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both?” If you see that it’s causing harm, you should stop then and there. If you see no harm, you can continue with it.

After the action is done, you’re still not done. You should reflect on it again: “This action I’ve done—did it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Was it an unskillful action, with painful consequences, painful results?” If you see that it did cause harm—even though you didn’t anticipate it—then if it was a bodily or verbal action, you should confess it to a fellow practitioner more advanced on the path,

to see what advice you can gain on how not to repeat that mistake. Then you try to exercise restraint in the future. If it was a mental action, you should develop a healthy sense of shame around it—seeing that it was beneath you—and exercise future restraint.

But if you see that the action caused no harm at all, then you take joy in that fact and continue training in this way, day and night.

What the Buddha is teaching here is how to apply the practice of cross-questioning to your own actions. You focus your powers of observation on bringing the concept of skillful and unskillful actions to bear on what you're doing, saying, and thinking in real time.

This framework of skillful and unskillful actions, as you'll recall, develops eventually into the framework of the four noble truths: Craving counts as an unskillful action; the suffering of clinging is its result. The noble eightfold path counts as skillful action; the abandoning of craving is its result. In effect, the Buddha's showing how to use this framework to learn from your mistakes. You commit yourself to abandoning bad intentions and acting only on good ones. It's when you act on good intentions that you can most willingly admit your mistakes and learn from them. When you see in practice that even good intentions can sometimes lead to harm, you realize the need to learn from that harm so as not to repeat it, and to make sure that your intentions become even better than good: They have to be based on practical knowledge to be genuinely skillful.

These instructions embody the four steps in awakening to the truth that we noted above. You willingly submit to this training, and then judge your actions by it, both in terms of the motivation behind them and in terms of their actual results. Then, based on that judgment, you exert yourself to make your actions more and more skillful, at the same time taking joy whenever you succeed. This joy, as we've noted, is what maintains your desire to continue with the training.

These instructions also embody the three types of truthfulness that we discussed in connection with monastic training: You try to be truthful in perceiving the actual motivation and results of your actions, and in reporting your mistakes. You do this so that you can move from beliefs of what's skillful based on the usual bases for truthfulness in citation—

conviction, reasoning, or respect for an outside authority—to actual knowledge of what’s skillful, based on direct, personal experience.

Of course, you’re engaged in actions all the time, which means that as you continue with this practice, you have to become skilled in applying these instructions with greater and greater speed. This may be why, when the Buddha compares the skills of a meditator to those of a trained archer, he says that the ability to see your thoughts, words, and deeds in terms of the four noble truths is like the archer’s ability to fire shots in rapid succession ([AN 4:181](#)).

When you follow the Buddha’s instructions to his son, you see that adopting the framework of the four noble truths as a guide to your actions develops good qualities both of the mind and of the heart. That’s why the training they offer is complete.

In terms of the heart, they teach:

heedfulness in that you take the results of your actions seriously;
compassion in that you don’t want to do harm;
determination to follow this ideal in all your actions;
a sense of *honor* in holding to this ideal;
a healthy sense of *shame* over the times when you do cause harm;
truthfulness in your willingness to admit your mistakes to yourself and to others; and
integrity in taking responsibility for any harm you’ve done.

These qualities of the heart are another area where we can see the nobility of the training provided by the four noble truths.

As for qualities of mind, the Buddha’s instructions develop the cluster of qualities needed for practical discernment. In his list of the factors for awakening, he notes that the discernment factor—which he calls “analysis of qualities”—is developed by applying appropriate attention to skillful and unskillful qualities as they arise in the mind ([SN 46:51](#)). This means stepping back from their content and looking at them as part of a causal process: seeing the internal causes that foster them, and the

consequences of acting on them. This is precisely what the Buddha taught to Rāhula. The Buddha also notes that when you apply appropriate attention in this way, you also starve the hindrance of doubt. You then use this approach to develop the other factors for awakening—mindfulness, persistence, rapture, calm, concentration, and equanimity—and to abandon the other hindrances to right concentration: sensual desire, ill will, sloth and lethargy, and restlessness and anxiety.

And it's not too hard to see how the Buddha's instructions to Rāhula help to develop the three factors of the path that circle around the development of all the path factors: *Right view* teaches you to avoid causing harm, *right mindfulness* keeps that lesson in mind each time you act, at the same time observing and reflecting to see how well you're following it; and *right effort* makes the effort to commit to the path of harmlessness in your thoughts, words, and deeds at all times. Right mindfulness, through its sub-function of alertness, observes and reflects to learn from the lessons of actually following through with right effort, and then teaches those lessons to right view, so that your views about right and wrong ways to follow the path are even better informed and more precise.

It's in this way that the practice of using appropriate attention as you commit to the path teaches you to become more and more discerning as to what the path actually is. You take the knowledge you gained from the words describing the path, and use it to give rise to a direct experience of the mental qualities that form the reality of the path in your own mind. This is how, in connection with the noble truths, you move from the truths of words to the truth of realities.

As you gain this discernment through developing, it teaches you lessons not only about the reality of the fourth noble truth. It also teaches you lessons about how that truth relates to the reality of the first two noble truths in order to arrive at the reality of the third. Those are the lessons we'll consider in the next chapter.

Clinging & Craving on the Path

As you commit to the path and reflect on your actions, you begin to appreciate the Buddha's strategy for attacking the problem of suffering. Before you abandon the cause of suffering, he has you develop something better to hold on to in the interim, both to make you more inclined to let go of your cravings and to insure, when you do let go, that you won't be set adrift.

In fact, his step-by-step discourse marked the beginning stage in providing you with that something better. As you'll recall, he gave that talk to wean his listeners away from their infatuation with sensuality. To do that, he provided them with a way of viewing the world in which a certain course of action—the renunciation of sensuality—is an obvious and attractive *should* because it leads to your long-term welfare and happiness, with "you" defined in terms of multiple lifetimes. In other words, as you recall the four types of clinging that constitute the first noble truth, you'll see that he's recommending a view-clinging and doctrine-of-self-clinging that will help get you started on the habits and practices of the path. This means that, as you get started on the path, the Buddha proposes three new versions of clinging to replace the unskillful ways of clinging in which you've engaged in the past.

As for sensuality-clinging, that has no role on the path at all, but the path itself proposes an interim pleasure—the pleasure, rapture, and equanimity of right concentration—that will form an alternative object of desire to replace your desires for sensuality. This non-sensual pleasure will be your food along the way, so that you're not tempted to revert to sensuality as the path gets difficult. In effect, with the practice of right concentration, the Buddha's offering a skillful type of habit-and-practice clinging to replace sensuality-clinging as your source of inner food.

In fact, of all three forms of clinging to be used in the path, habit-and-practice-clinging is the most pivotal. After all, the path to the end of clinging is a path of action—we've noted that it's the kamma that puts an

end to kamma—which is why the Buddha’s teachings go into great detail on the habits and practices of virtue, concentration, and discernment that should be developed to form the path. However, to believe that such a path could actually work, you need a view about the world in which actions can be freely chosen and have the power to transcend the round of death and rebirth. This is why right views about action—kamma and rebirth—also form part of the path.

At the same time, you need to have a sense that you, as an agent, are capable of following the path, and that you, as a consumer, will benefit from doing so. This is why, as part of his strategy for motivating you to engage in the path factor of right effort, the Buddha provided many teachings to encourage a healthy sense of self, saying that the self is its own mainstay, that it’s responsible for its actions, that it’s capable of mastering the path, and that it will benefit from doing so.

But it’s worth noting that even though the early teachings are very detailed in their instructions as to what should and shouldn’t be done, the worldviews and self-views they provide to support these instructions are nothing more than sketches. Because they’re not the focus, the Buddha addressed views of the world and the self only when absolutely necessary to support the basic premises of kamma. The truths of action and rebirth, for instance, were hotly debated by his contemporaries, so he had to take a position on those issues to justify the path of practice he taught. The size and age of the cosmos were also hot topics, but because they had no bearing on the power of action, the Buddha consistently put those topics aside.

Similarly with issues of the self: Other philosophical schools debated the question of how best to define the self, but—as we’ve seen—the Buddha noted that to define yourself was to limit yourself, so he refused to answer questions about what the self was—or even whether it existed. As he said, questions of that sort weren’t worthy of attention. All he was concerned about was your *perception* of self—responsible for your actions, competent to follow the path, and able to benefit from doing so—and the reality of *control*: You can manipulate the aggregates at least enough to construct a path that can take you to awakening. The raft may

be made of twigs and branches, but if you tie them together well enough, they can do the job.

In fact, the question of action was so central to the path that one of its crucial steps was to learn how to see that your sense of the world and yourself were nothing more than actions themselves. They come about from things you *do*, and the act of holding to them is a kind of kamma that, like all actions, carries consequences.

As you follow the Buddha's instructions to provide yourself with skillful clingings to fall back on, you develop the factors of the noble eightfold path; and as you develop those factors, you come to appreciate how well they target the three kinds of craving that cause suffering: craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, and craving for non-becoming. In other words, you see for yourself how the fourth noble truth helps put an end to suffering by attacking it right at the cause.

The factors most directly involved in this approach are the ones that comprise the discernment group—right view and right resolve—and the concentration group: right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The remaining factors, in the virtue group, play more of a supporting role in that they develop the clear conscience and mental sensitivity that right mindfulness and right concentration need in order to be honest and strong.

The factors of the concentration group, in turn, provide an important foundation for making the discernment group sharper and more effective. They do this in three ways.

- As you'll recall from Chapter 6, one of the main reasons why people crave sensuality is because they can imagine no other alternative to pain. As the Buddha said, even when you can see the drawbacks of sensuality, if you have no access to a higher form of pleasure, you'll stay stuck in sensual craving. So one of the prime functions of right concentration is to provide that skillful alternative.

- Second, the fact that right concentration is composed of the five aggregates means that, as you work to develop it, you get hands-on experience in what the aggregates actually are and how they function. Because you play with them to create a state of concentration, they're now your playmates. You're on familiar terms with them as activities in

which you engage, and this takes them from the realms of abstraction into the realm of direct, active experience.

- Finally, the fact that right mindfulness and right concentration increase the steadiness of the mind means that right view can see the subtle motions of the mind, along with their interactions, much more clearly in real time.

This connects with another point we made in Chapter 6: To go beyond craving for becoming and craving for non-becoming, you have to see the events of the mind that ordinarily lead up to becoming and develop dispassion for them *as events* before they have a chance to develop into a sense of “self” or “world.” The fact that right view looks at experience in terms of skillful and unskillful actions, and right resolve aims at avoiding unskillful mental attitudes, means that these discernment factors are equipped with the right framework to make this analysis. When supported by the factors of the concentration group, they can apply this framework to actual events.

The Canon says that craving for sensuality is the first form of craving to be overcome, followed by craving for becoming and non-becoming. This gives the impression that you focus exclusively first on sensuality and then on the other two forms of craving, but in actual practice you need to attack all three at once. That’s because sensuality—fantasies and plans for sensual pleasures—entails a sense of the self who will find and enjoy the pleasures, along with the world in which those pleasures will be found. This means that the grosser forms of becoming that surround sensuality will be the first to go, followed by the subtler ones that surround the practice of the path itself.

To detect the events leading up to craving, and through craving and clinging to becoming, and then to develop dispassion for them, the Buddha recommends a five-step program ([SN 22:57](#)).

- (1) See their *origination*, i.e., what other events cause them.
- (2) Observe their *passing away* as those causes pass away.
These two steps allow you to discern the fabricated nature of these events as steps in a process.
- (3) Look for their *allure*—why the mind is attracted to them.

- (4) Look for the *drawbacks* of clinging to them. When you see that the drawbacks far outweigh the allure,
(5) dispassion arises, providing the *escape* from them.

The crucial steps in this approach are (3) and (4). As we noted in Chapter 6, one of the difficult aspects of truly understanding craving is to see precisely where it's located. That's the duty here of step (3). If you don't detect the exact location of the allure, then no matter how much insight you have into the drawbacks, that insight won't lead to true dispassion because it won't be on target.

As for step (4), the Buddha prescribes many perceptions to apply to these fabricated events to help you see that they're not worth the effort of fabricating states of becoming around them. These perceptions fall into three main groups:

- focusing on the inconstancy of fabrications,
- focusing on the stress of whatever is inconstant, and
- focusing on the fact that if something is inconstant and stressful, it's not-self.

These perceptions are aimed at helping you to see that any state of becoming that you construct out of such raw materials won't lie totally under your control and so inevitably will lead to disappointment. The effort required to construct a sense of self around such things is simply not worth it. It would be like building a house out of flimsy materials in an area prone to earthquakes. It could fall down at any time.

When this value judgment hits home, that's how right view develops the dispassion that can put an end to that particular instance of craving for sensuality.

In the beginning stages of the practice, as you're developing discernment aimed at dispassion, there's a natural tendency to hold on to the insights that work. After all, this is how discernment develops: You use your powers of alertness to see what gives good results in getting past a particular craving, and you use your powers of mindfulness to remember that lesson for future use. Your command of the path encourages you to hold on to it with more and more confidence.

However, over time, as you get more skilled in reflecting on what you're doing as you develop this discernment, you begin to see that you're simply replacing gross forms of craving with subtler ones: the craving that leads you to cling to the factors of the path. After all, given that the factors of the path can be objects of clinging, and clinging is based on craving, those factors arise in dependence on the same sorts of mental events that underlie the cravings you've been abandoning. If you really want to be free from the stress of fabrications, you'll have to start letting go of the craving to hold on to the path, without, of course, reverting to craving in its more blatantly unskillful forms.

This sort of reflective insight—backed up by heightened powers of concentration and discernment—is what enables you to begin developing the dispassion that leads to the noble attainments. Your act of letting go becomes more all-encompassing: You begin to let go, not only of the cravings you've been observing, but also of the factors of the path that underlie the act of observing.

In fact, this is the stage of the practice where the separate duties of the four noble truths begin to converge: Dispassion, which is the duty with regard to the second noble truth, now becomes the duty for all four. Comprehending suffering leads to having dispassion for clinging; developing the path—and especially the factor of right view—leads to having dispassion for the factors of the path; even when realizing cessation, you have to have dispassion for it if you want your freedom to be all-around.

The main turning point is when you start developing dispassion for the path. The Canon describes a variety of ways in which this can happen. This means that the exact insight that will lead to a breakthrough to the noble attainments will vary from person to person.

In the most general terms, the Canon says that you take the same five-step program that you applied to acts of craving and clinging, and you apply it to the five faculties of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. Because the faculty of conviction includes the virtue group of the noble eightfold path, and the faculty of persistence is the same thing as right effort, this means that, in effect,

you apply this framework to all the factors of the noble eightfold path ([SN 48:3–4](#)).

You see how the path originates from causes and how it passes away. You see its allure in freeing you from stress and suffering, and in providing you with the peace and pleasures of jhāna, but you also see its drawbacks in that it's fabricated, and so has to be constantly maintained.

In some cases, the Canon says that you focus this analysis on the practice of concentration, seeing how it's composed of the five aggregates, and applying the same perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self to those aggregates until the mind inclines toward the deathless ([AN 9:36](#)). In other cases, it says that you apply the insights of right view to right view itself: Just as right view has taught you to regard views as actions—and to see the stress that comes from clinging to those views—it now teaches you to look for the stress in clinging to right view. When you see this stress clearly as a drawback, that insight inclines the mind in the direction of the deathless ([DN 1](#); [AN 10:92](#)).

In either case, you realize that you can't stay where you are, nor can you go to any other mental location, for that would involve craving and stress as well. If, while the mind is faced with this dilemma, an opening occurs that is neither "here" nor "there," that's the opening to the deathless ([Ud 1:10](#)).

The Canon illustrates this point with a paradox: A heavenly being once asked the Buddha how he crossed over the flood, and he replied that he neither pushed forward nor stayed in place. That was how he was freed from locations and everywhere released ([SN 1:1](#)).

Now, the Canon warns that, on gaining an experience of the deathless, it is possible to feel passion and delight for it, and so to cling to it ([AN 9:36](#)). When that happens, your awakening is only partial, as the mind still has a location: the perception of the deathless to which it clings. This is because your powers of reflection are still not strong enough. You didn't catch these new acts of craving and clinging in time. And while even a partial experience of the deathless is life-changing—it confirms your conviction in what the Buddha taught, that the ending of suffering is possible—it also teaches you that there's more work to be done. You'll have to pick up the path again in order to strengthen your

powers of concentration and discernment so that the next time the opening to the deathless occurs, you'll be better prepared.

It's because the experience of the deathless is so overwhelming that the Canon forewarns you: You need to apply the perception of not-self not only to fabricated phenomena but also to the deathless itself. And as we've noted, you'll then have to let go of that perception, too, so that your release will be complete.

All of which goes to show the importance of the basic training in truthfulness that the Buddha recommended for his followers from the very beginning: As you learn to be more honest and observant toward your actions—to be accurate in the perceptions you apply to your experiences, and to be truthful in reporting your actions and in citing the source of your views—you begin to develop the reflective skills that will carry you all the way to the reality of suffering's end.

True Beyond True

The Buddha concluded his first talk by detailing the knowledge that led to his full awakening. This knowledge revolved around the four noble truths. In the case of each truth, he had direct knowledge of the truth itself, knowledge of the duty appropriate to the truth, and knowledge that he had completed the duty: four truths, three levels of knowledge for each truth, twelve permutations of knowledge in all. He set out all twelve permutations in what we would call a table, but what the legal and philosophical traditions of his time called a “wheel.” The heavenly beings overhearing the first talk called this table the Dhamma wheel. This is why the wheel has been the symbol of the Buddha’s teachings ever since.

But the Buddha’s knowledge on the night of his awakening didn’t stop with this twelve-fold knowledge. It was followed by release—the total freedom of the deathless, outside of the confines of space and time—and then the knowledge that this release was unprovoked.

The Buddha’s use of the word “unprovoked” here relates to another tradition from his time: the theory of *dhātu*, or elemental properties. Physical and mental events were seen as resulting from basic, elemental properties that existed in a latent, potential form, either in physical nature or in the mind. When a property was provoked, it would react and display itself, in line with the force of the provocation, until that force ran out. Individual fires, for instance, were understood as the provocation of the fire property; floods, the provocation of the water property; sensual desires, the provocation of the property of sensuality. One of the implications of this theory was that anything provoked was inherently unstable. Events depending on provocations that would come and go would themselves have to come and go. Nothing provoked could last forever.

Even unbinding was described as a property, but as one with a difference: It’s a property that’s never provoked. It’s simply attained.

Because true release is not caused by the provocation of anything, the implication is that it's not subject to change.

Following on this knowledge, the Buddha said, he knew two things more: This was his last birth, and there was now, for him, no further becoming. That, of course, was because the craving leading to further becoming was now fully abandoned.

The Canon calls this attainment the full attainment of the truth. And as we noted in Chapter 7, "true" is one of the epithets of unbinding. It's also called the highest noble truth.

However, the Canon contains a paradox around the relationship between fully awakened people on the one hand, and truth on the other. Even though they have attained the truth, those who are awakened are said to be beyond being swayed by claims of "true" and "false," having sloughed off all views (AM 4:24; [Sn 4:3](#); [Sn 4:8](#); [Sn 4:9](#)).

We can begin to resolve this paradox when we remember that "truth," in the Canon, has two meanings: the truth of realities in and of themselves, and the social truth of words about those realities. Awakened people have attained the reality of unbinding once and for all. That's the sense in which they've attained the truth. Because the reality of their release is total, they have no more need to cling to the truths of words or claims, which—as we've noted many times—are true *instrumentally*. Like hammers and saws that have served their purpose, these truths can be put aside.

Also, the Canon notes that awakened people have directly seen the limits of description, along with what lies beyond description ([DN 15](#)). So there's no reason for them to cling to any of the social truths of words or descriptions at all.

What does this mean in practice? Two things:

1) Issues framed in the terms of becoming hold no interest for awakened people because they've developed dispassion for the events that would lead to becoming, and as a result they've gone beyond becoming. So they see no reason to take sides on those issues.

2) As for issues of right view, awakened people continue to appreciate right views about skillful and unskillful actions in general, and the four

noble truths in particular, but with no sense of being attached to those views.

In the first case, the Canon states as an example that the following questions hold no interest even for a person who has had a first glimpse of the deathless ([SN 12:20](#)): *“Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what was I in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I be in the future? Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where is it bound?”*

In short, questions of what the self is and whether it existed in the past, will exist in the future, or exists right now, no longer hold any interest for those who are awakened. They detect how these questions come from unskillful mind states, immersed in the terms of becoming, so they see no reason to ask them or to be attached to any answers offered in response ([SN 44:5](#)).

As for the relationship of fully awakened people to right view, two similes from the Canon give an idea of what that might be like.

The first simile is the image of a skinned cow—not a pretty image, but one that makes an important point in a graphic way. A butcher, having killed a cow, carves it up with a sharp carving knife so that—without damaging the substance of the inner flesh, without damaging the substance of the outer hide—he would cut, sever, and detach only the skin muscles, connective tissues, and attachments in between. Then he covers the cow again with the skin. Even though the skin is touching the inner flesh again, it’s not connected in the way it was before.

In this simile, the inner flesh stands for the six senses, the outer hide stands for the objects of the senses, and the attachments in between stand for passion and delight. In the same way, awakened people—after going beyond the six senses in their experience of release—then return to experience the six senses again, but they’re no longer joined to the senses as they were before. Because their minds have no passion or delight for the senses, they feel no need to cling—in other words, no need to take the senses as nutriment. So they relate to the senses in the

same way that a person totally free of hunger would relate to food ([MN 146](#)).

The Canon states repeatedly that fully awakened people can fully function in the world, but, as we've noted, they do so with a sense of being disjoined from it. They're disjoined from feelings of pleasure, pain, and neither pleasure nor pain, and even from the objects of right mindfulness and right concentration as they continue using their meditative powers to help others ([MN 140](#); [SN 47:4](#)). This sense of being disjoined is not the painful dissociation of alienation. It's simply the result of the fact that their happiness is now so complete that they have no hunger for anything—views of true and false included. The fact that they no longer delight in the senses doesn't mean that their minds are dulled. They simply see no need to amplify the pleasures of the senses by exclaiming about them to themselves. They've found, in the deathless, a pleasure that needs no amplification at all.

As they relate to the world, they can still make use of ideas of true and false, right and wrong, in the desire that their actions based on those views will lead to good results for beings of the world. But because they no longer cling to their desires, none of these activities make inroads on the mind.

The fact that they still act for the good of the world relates to the second simile, the image of the raft we've cited several times in the course of this book. You find yourself on the unsafe shore of a river, so you construct a raft of twigs and branches. Then—holding tight to the raft and making an effort with your hands and feet—you swim to the safety of the far shore. Once you've arrived, though, you don't continue to carry the raft on your head. Instead, you leave it there on the shore and continue on your way.

Before you leave it, though, you reflect on it with appreciation: "How useful this raft has been to me! For it was in dependence on this raft that, making an effort with my hands and feet, I've crossed over to safety on the far shore." ([MN 22](#)) In other words, even in letting go of the truths of right view, you don't treat them with indifference. You realize that, to gain freedom from clinging, you needed to have right view about how clinging constituted suffering, how clinging came about, and how it

could be put to an end. You can't simply let go of views of true and false without this understanding. If you had tried letting go of views by claiming to be agnostic, that would simply have been another view to cling to ([SN 22:81](#)). If you had tried claiming to have no fixed views, you would have become a serial clinger, letting go of one view to hold on to another.

So you appreciate the usefulness of the truths of right view: Without its special perspective, focusing on the benefits and drawbacks of the act of forming and holding to views, you wouldn't have gained total freedom from views. For this reason, when you have a chance to teach others, you'll recommend that they adopt right view as well.

After all, this is what the Buddha did. After gaining awakening to the Dhamma, he honored and revered the Dhamma for the rest of his life ([SN 6:2](#)). Having developed full knowledge of the truths of the Dhamma wheel, he then set that wheel rolling in his first talk, making these truths available to others throughout the world so that they, too, could use them to arrive at the reality of total release.

Because of his compassionate efforts, people can still take the question that animated their search for an end to pain, and put it truly to rest.

To the Far Shore

As we've noted frequently throughout this book, the four noble truths were the Buddha's preeminent teaching. If you want to understand how his teachings fit together, you have to take the four noble truths as the context, and then see how other teachings fit into that context. This is what appropriate attention—the most useful internal quality leading to awakening—means.

Take, for example, the three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. The Buddha taught that these perceptions should be applied to suffering and its cause as a way of fostering dispassion for the objects of clinging and craving, and for the acts of clinging and craving themselves. In this way, these perceptions are aids in carrying out the duties appropriate to the four noble truths: to comprehend suffering, to abandon its cause, to realize its cessation by developing the path. That's how, in the Buddha's original teachings, the four noble truths and their duties supply the context for the three perceptions and determine their role in the practice.

However, in the centuries following the Buddha's total nibbāna, Buddhist scholars began to reinterpret the three perceptions, renaming them the three characteristics. Once these perceptions were renamed, they morphed in two other ways as well. First, they turned into a metaphysical teaching, as the characteristics of what things *are*: All are devoid of essence because they're impermanent and, because nothing has any essence, then—assuming that something has to be permanent to qualify as a self—there is no self. Second, because these three characteristics were now metaphysical truths, they became the context within which the four noble truths functioned and were true.

This switch in roles has led to many changes in the way the Buddha's teachings have been taught and practiced in the centuries ever since. All too often, though, these changes have not been recognized as changes, and have been retroactively attributed to the Buddha himself. Because

many of these changes are still influential, it's good to know what they are, so that whenever you encounter them you can recognize them as distortions of what the Buddha actually taught.

The first change to note is that once the four noble truths were placed within the context of the three characteristics, they morphed, as well. Whereas the Buddha had identified suffering with all types of clinging—even the act of clinging to the phenomenon of the deathless, the unchanging dimension touched at the first taste of awakening—the relationship between clinging and suffering was now explained by the metaphysical “fact” that all possible objects of clinging were impermanent. To cling to them as if they were permanent would therefore bring sorrow and disappointment.

As for the ignorance that underlies craving: Whereas the Buddha had defined it as ignorance of the four noble truths, it was now defined as ignorance of the three characteristics. From this new definition, it was argued that people cling and crave because they don't realize that nothing has any essence and that there is no self. If they were to realize the truth of these teachings through direct experience—this became the purpose of mindfulness practice—they wouldn't cling anymore, and so they wouldn't suffer.

This switch in context, giving priority to the three characteristics over the four noble truths, has come to dominate modern Buddhism. The common pattern is that when modern authors explain right view, which the Buddha equated with seeing things in terms of the four noble truths, the discussion quickly switches from the four noble truths to the three characteristics to explain why clinging leads to suffering. Clinging is no longer directly equated with suffering; instead, it *causes* suffering because it assumes permanence and essence in impermanent things.

Even those teachers who deny the truth of the four noble truths—on the grounds that the principle of impermanence means that no statement can be true everywhere for everyone—still accept the principle of impermanence as a metaphysical truth accurately describing the way things everywhere are.

As these explanations have percolated through modern culture, both among people who identify themselves as Buddhist and among those

who don't, they've given rise to four widespread misunderstandings of the Buddha's teachings on clinging and how it's best avoided so as to stop suffering:

1. *Because there is no self, there is no agent. People are essentially on the receiving end of experience, and they suffer because they cling to the idea that they can resist or control change.*

2. *To cling means to hold on to something with the misunderstanding that it's permanent. For this reason, as long as you understand that you yourself and the things around you are impermanent, you can embrace things briefly as they arise in the present moment, and it doesn't count as clinging. If you embrace experiences in full realization that you'll have to let them go so as to embrace whatever comes next, you won't suffer. As long as you're fully in the moment with no expectations about the future, you're fine.*

3. *Clinging comes from the mistaken view that there can be such a thing as long-term happiness. But because all things are fleeting, there is no such thing. Pleasures, like pains, simply come and go. When you can resign yourself to this fact, you can open to the spacious wisdom of non-clinging, equanimous and accepting, as you place no vain expectations on the fleeting show of life.*

These three misunderstandings are often illustrated with the image of a perfectly fluid dancer, happily responsive to changes in the music decided by the musicians, switching partners with ease.

Another popular image is that you're sitting on the ocean shore, watching the waves come in. If you're stupid enough to want to cling to "good" waves to make them permanent and to push "bad" waves away, you'll suffer. But if you accept the fact that waves are just waves, fleeting and incessant, and that there's no way you can either stop them or keep them, you can be at peace as you simply watch, with full acceptance, as they keep doing their thing.

4. The fourth widespread misunderstanding about the Buddhist stance on clinging is closely related to the other three: *Clinging means holding on to fixed views. If you have set ideas about what's right or wrong, or about how things should be—even about how the*

Buddha's teachings should be interpreted—you'll suffer. But if you can let go of your fixed views and simply accept the fact that right and wrong keep changing along with everything else, you'll be fine.

It's been argued that these four understandings of the Buddha's teachings on clinging don't promote an attitude of unhealthy passivity, on the grounds that if you're fully attuned to the present moment without clinging, you can be more agile and creative in responding to change. But still, there's something inherently defeatist in the picture they offer of life and of the possibilities of happiness that we as human beings can find. They allow for no long-term happiness—much less an unchanging happiness—no dimension where we can be free from the unpredictability of waves or sudden changes in the music. It's only within this narrow range of possibilities that our non-clinging creativity can eke out a little peace.

And when we compare these misunderstandings with the Buddha's actual teachings on clinging and the end of clinging—returning the three characteristics to their original role as three perceptions, and using those perceptions in the context of the four noble truths—we can see not only how far the popular misunderstandings of his teachings deviate from what he actually taught, but also what an impoverished view of the potentials for happiness those popular misunderstandings provide.

To begin the comparison: As we noted in Chapter 5, the Pali word for clinging, *upādāna*, also means sustenance and the act of taking sustenance: in other words, food and the act of feeding. The connection between feeding and suffering was one of the Buddha's most radical and valuable insights, because it's so counter-intuitive and at the same time so useful. Ordinarily, we find so much pleasure in the act of feeding, emotionally as well as physically, that we define ourselves by the way we feed off the world and the people around us. It took someone of the Buddha's genius to see the suffering inherent in feeding, and that *all* suffering is a type of feeding. The fact that we feed off things that change simply adds an extra layer of stress on top of the stress intrinsic in the felt need always to feed.

And just as we feed off physical food without assuming that it's going to be permanent, clinging to things doesn't necessarily mean that we

assume them to be permanent. We cling whenever we sense that the effort of clinging is repaid by some sort of satisfaction, permanent or not. We cling because there's some pleasure in the things to which we cling. When we can't find what we'd like to cling to, our hunger forces us to take what we can get. For this reason, the act of embracing things in the present moment still counts as clinging. Even if we're adept at moving from one changing thing to another, or one changing sense of ourselves to another, it simply means that we're serial clingers, taking little bites out of every passing thing. We still suffer in the incessant drive to keep finding the next bite to eat.

This is why being constantly mindful of the truth of impermanence isn't enough to solve the problem of suffering. To really solve it, we need to change our feeding habits—radically—so that we can strengthen the mind to the point where it no longer needs to feed. This requires the two-pronged strategy mentioned in Chapter 6: (a) seeing the drawbacks of our ordinary ways of feeding, and (b) providing the mind with better food in the meantime until it has outgrown the need to feed on anything at all.

The first prong of the strategy is where the three perceptions come in as part of the Buddha's five-step program for inducing dispassion for the first and second noble truths, which we discussed in Chapter 11. First you apply these three perceptions to things to which you might cling or crave, to see that the benefits of holding on to those things are far outweighed by the drawbacks. You focus on the extent to which the happiness they provide is inconstant, and that because it's inconstant, the effort to rest in it involves stress. When you see that the happiness isn't worth the effort of the clinging, you realize that it's not worthy to claim as you or yours. It's not-self: in other words, not worth claiming as self. In this way, the perception of not-self isn't a metaphysical assertion, saying that there is no permanent self. It's a value judgment, saying that the effort to define yourself—either as permanent or not—around the act of feeding on those things simply isn't worth it.

This analysis works, however, only if you have something better to feed on in the interim. Otherwise, you'll just go back to your old feeding

habits. Nobody ever stopped eating simply through the realization that foods and stomachs are impermanent.

This is where the second prong of the Buddha's strategy comes in. You develop the path as your interim nourishment, focusing in particular on the pleasure and rapture of right concentration as your alternative source of food. When the path is fully developed, it opens to another dimension entirely: the deathless, a happiness beyond the reach of time, space, and all phenomena of the six senses.

But because the mind is such a habitual feeder, on its first encounter with the deathless it tries to feed on it—which turns the experience into a phenomenon, an object of the mind. Of course, that act of feeding stands in the way of full awakening. As we noted in Chapter 11, this is where the perception of not-self gets put to use once more, to counteract this last form of clinging: to the deathless. Even though the deathless in itself is neither stressful nor inconstant, any act of clinging to it has to involve stress. So the perception of not-self has to be applied here as well, to peel away this last obstacle to full awakening beyond all phenomena. When this perception has done its work, it, too, gets put aside—just as everything else is let go—and the mind, free from hunger, gains full release.

The Canon gives an image for this release that we've cited frequently throughout this book: a person standing on firm ground after taking the raft of the noble eightfold path over a river in flood. Safe from the waves and currents of the river, the person is totally free—even freer than the image can convey. There's nothing intrinsically hunger-free about standing on a riverbank after crossing a river in flood—it's more a symbol of relief—but everyone who has experienced what the image is pointing to guarantees that, to the extent that you can call it a place, it's a place of no hunger and so no need for desire.

If we compare this image with that of the person on the shore of the ocean watching the waves, we can get a sense of how limited the happiness that's offered by understanding the four noble truths in the context of the three characteristics is, as opposed to the happiness offered by understanding the three perceptions in the context of the four noble truths.

To begin with, the Buddha's image of crossing the river doesn't put quotation marks around concepts of good and bad waves in the water. The flood is genuinely bad, and the ultimate goodness in life is when you can totally get beyond it.

Second, unlike the image of sitting on the shore, watching an ocean beyond your control, the Buddha's image conveys the point that there's something you can *do* to get to safety: You have within you the power to follow the duties of the four noble truths and, in particular, to develop the path that will take you to the other side. As we noted in Chapter 4, discernment begins with the question, "What, when I do it, will lead to long-term welfare and happiness?" The discernment here lies in seeing that there is such a thing as long-term happiness, that it's preferable to short-term, and that it depends, not on conditions beyond your control, but on actions you can train yourself to do. This discernment is a far cry from the "wisdom" that ends in resigned equanimity and reduced expectations. It honors your desire for long-term happiness and shows how it can actually be found.

Third, to sit watching the ocean waves come ashore is peaceful and desirable only as long as you're wealthy enough to be at a resort, with someone to bring you food, drink, and shelter on a regular basis. Otherwise, you need to keep searching for these things on your own. And even at the resort, you're not safe from being swept away by tsunamis or storms.

The image of crossing the river to safety on the far shore also offers an enlightening perspective on the view that all fixed views should be abandoned. In the Canon's own interpretation of the image, the river stands for the fourfold flood of sensuality, becoming, views, and ignorance, while the raft of the noble eightfold path includes right view. Although it's true that the raft is abandoned on reaching the far shore, you still have to hold on to it while you're crossing the river. Otherwise, you'll be swept downstream.

What's rarely noticed is the paradox contained in the image. Right view, seeing things in terms of the four noble truths, is part of the raft needed to cross over the flood of views. As the Buddha saw, it's the only

view that can perform this function, taking you safely all the way across the river and delivering you to safety.

It can take you across because it's always true and always relevant. Cultural changes may affect what we choose to feed on, but the fact of feeding is a constant, as is the connection between suffering and the need to feed. In that sense, right view counts as fixed. It can never be replaced by a more effective understanding of suffering. At the same time, it's always relevant, in that the framework of the four noble truths can be brought to bear on every choice you make at every stage of the practice. Here it differs from the three perceptions, for while the Buddha noted that they're always true, they're *not* always relevant. If, for instance, you perceive the results of all actions, skillful or not, as impermanent, stressful, and not-self, it can dissuade you from making the effort to be skillful in what you do, say, or think.

In addition to being always true and relevant, right view is responsible. It gives reliable guidance on what should and shouldn't be taken as food for the mind. As the Buddha said, any teaching that can't give trustworthy guidelines for determining what actions are skillful and unskillful abdicates a teacher's primary responsibility to his or her students.

After taking you responsibly all the way across the river, right view can deliver you to the far shore because it contains the seeds for its own transcendence, which—as you develop them—deliver you to a transcendent dimension. As we noted in Chapter 11, right view does this by focusing on the processes by which the mind creates stress for itself, at the same time encouraging you to abandon those processes when you sense that they're causing stress.

In the beginning, this involves clinging to right view as a tool to pry loose your attachments to gross causes of stress. Over time, as your taste for mental food becomes more refined through your diet of right concentration, you become sensitive to causes of stress that are more and more subtle. These you abandon as you come to detect them, until eventually there's nothing else to abandon aside from the path. That's when right view encourages you to turn the analysis on the act of

holding on to and feeding on right view itself. When you can abandon that, there's nothing left for the mind to cling to, so it's freed.

The view that all fixed views should be abandoned, however, doesn't contain this dynamic. It provides no grounds for deciding what should and shouldn't be done. In itself, it can act as an object of craving and clinging, becoming as fixed as any other view. If you decide to drop it, for whatever reason, it delivers you nowhere. It offers no guidance on how to choose anything better, and as a result, you end up clinging to whatever passing view seems attractive. You're still stuck in the river, grasping at pieces of flotsam and jetsam as the flood carries you away.

This is why it's always important to remember that, in the practice to gain freedom from suffering, the four noble truths must always come first. They give guidance to the rest of the path, determining the role and function of all the Buddha's other teachings—including the three perceptions—so that, instead of lulling you into being satisfied with an exposed spot on the beach, they can take you all the way to the safety of full release, beyond the reach of any possible wave.

Abbreviations

<i>AN</i>	<i>Aṅguttara Nikāya</i>
<i>Dhp</i>	<i>Dhammapada</i>
<i>DN</i>	<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>
<i>Iti</i>	<i>Itivuttaka</i>
<i>Khp</i>	<i>Khuddakapāṭha</i>
<i>MN</i>	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>
<i>Mv</i>	<i>Mahāvagga</i>
<i>NP</i>	<i>Nissaggiya Pācittiya</i>
<i>SN</i>	<i>Saṃyutta Nikāya</i>
<i>Sn</i>	<i>Sutta Nipāta</i>
<i>Thag</i>	<i>Theragāthā</i>
<i>Thig</i>	<i>Therīgāthā</i>
<i>Ud</i>	<i>Udāna</i>

References to DN, Iti, Khp, and MN are to discourse (sutta). Those to Dhp are to verse. The references to Mv are to chapter, section, and sub-section. The reference to NP is to rule number. References to other texts are to section (saṃyutta, nipāta, or vagga) and discourse.

All translations are based on the Royal Thai Edition of the Pali Canon (Bangkok: Mahāmakut Rājavidyālaya, 1982).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank those who read earlier drafts of this book and made many valuable suggestions for its improvement. In addition to the monks here at the monastery, these people include Andrea Kessler, Addie Onsanit, Lee Robbins, Dale Schultz, and Ravi Smith.

Any mistakes that remain, of course, are my own responsibility.

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu
(Geoffrey DeGraff)

METTA FOREST MONASTERY
DECEMBER, 2022

Further Readings

The following books and essays can be found online at dhammatalks.org:

DHAMMA IN GENERAL

["Purity of Heart"](#); ["Opening the Door to the Dhamma"](#); ["Honest to Goodness"](#); ["No Strings Attached"](#); ["Dhamma Is What Dhamma Does"](#); ["Lost in Quotation"](#); ["All About Change"](#); ["The Essence of the Dhamma"](#); ["Perennial Issues"](#); ["When You Know for Yourself"](#)

APPROPRIATE ATTENTION

["Untangling the Present"](#); ["Food for Awakening"](#)

The following books and essays provide additional perspectives on one or more of the four noble truths. Keep in mind that any discussion of one of the noble truths can't help but make reference to the others.

THE FIRST NOBLE TRUTH

[The Truth of Rebirth](#); [Undaunted](#); [The Paradox of Becoming](#); ["Life Isn't Just Suffering"](#); [Samsāra](#); [The Weight of Mountains](#); [The Arrows of Thinking](#); [Five Piles of Bricks](#); [Educating Compassion](#); [An Arrow in the Heart](#)

THE SECOND NOBLE TRUTH

[The Shape of Suffering](#); [Ignorance](#); [Unhindered at Death](#)

THE THIRD NOBLE TRUTH

The Mind Like Fire Unbound; “A Verb for Nirvana”; “Talking about Nirvana”; “The Dhamma Eye”; “The Karma of Now”; “Freedom from Buddha Nature”; “We Are Not One”

THE FOURTH NOBLE TRUTH

The Noble Eightfold Path; On the Path; The Wings to Awakening; Factors for Awakening; The Five Faculties; Bases for Success; The Karma of Mindfulness; Right Mindfulness; Good Heart, Good Mind; The Mirror of Insight; Selves & Not-self; “Faith in Awakening”; “The Healing Power of the Precepts”; “Getting the Message”; “The Joy of Effort”; “Pushing the Limits”; “Meditators at Work”; “Jhana Not by the Numbers”; “Silence Isn’t Mandatory”; “The Integrity of Emptiness”; “The Not-self Strategy”; “The Limits of Description”; “The Wisdom of the Ego”

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