

THE TRUTH
OF REBIRTH

The Truth of Rebirth

And Why It Matters
for Buddhist Practice

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o : Introduction

Each time you choose one course of action over another, you're making a wager as to the consequences of your choice. This is especially true if the choice is between something easy that promises pleasant short-term rewards, and something hard that promises great rewards but only after a long time. Will the harder choice be worth the effort? Will the easier one be irresponsible in the long run? As a person embedded in time, there's no way you can know for sure.

To begin with, there are the particulars of your own personal future: Will you or those you love live long enough to experience the results of your choices? Will disaster interfere to wipe out everything you've done?

Then there are the larger uncertainties of life in general: Do we even have choices in our actions, or are all our choices predetermined by some past or outside power beyond our control? If we do have choices, is it worthwhile to struggle over difficult ones? Do they really matter? And even if our choices do matter, how far into the future should we calculate the consequences? Do they shape only this life, or can they shape lives after death?

Arguments based on logic or reason have never been able to settle these issues conclusively, the world's great religions don't agree on their answers, and the empirical sciences have no way of answering these questions at all. Yet we all keep having to grapple with these questions. We don't leave it at, "I don't know," to and refuse to entertain them, for even the refusal to think about these things is a wager: that ultimately they won't matter.

The Buddha taught, however, that they *do* matter a great deal, and that awakening—in going beyond the dimensions of space and time—

gives perspective on how choices operate within those dimensions. You see that choices are real, that they do make a difference, and that the consequences of your choices can shape not only this life but also many lifetimes in the future—as long as the mind still has the craving that leads to rebirth after death. Prior to awakening, you can't know these things for sure, but as the Buddha states, if you want to gain awakening and to minimize suffering in the meantime, it's wisest to assume these principles as working hypotheses.

Of course, that's taking the Buddha at his word—which as long as you haven't gained awakening, is a wager, too. The purpose of this small book on the Buddha's teachings about rebirth is to show why, as you engage repeatedly in the wagers of action, the wisest course is to place your bets with him.

1 : Questioning Assumptions

Rebirth has always been a central teaching in the Buddhist tradition. The earliest records in the Pāli Canon ([MN 26](#); [MN 36](#)) indicate that the Buddha, prior to his awakening, searched for a happiness not subject to the vagaries of repeated birth, aging, illness, and death. One of the reasons he left his early teachers was because he recognized that their teachings led, not to the goal he sought, but to rebirth on a refined level. On the night of his awakening, two of the three knowledges leading to his release from suffering focused on the topic of rebirth. The first showed his own many previous lives; the second, depicting the general pattern of beings dying and being reborn throughout the cosmos, showed the connection between rebirth and karma, or action.

When he did finally attain release from suffering, he recognized that he had achieved his goal because he had touched a dimension that not only was free from birth, but also had freed him from ever being reborn again. After he had attained release, his new-found freedom from rebirth was the first realization that occurred spontaneously to his mind.

When teaching the path to awakening to others, he defined the four stages of awakening achieved by the path in terms of how many rebirths remained for those who reached them: up to seven for those reaching the first stage; one return to the human world for those reaching the second; rebirth followed by total liberation in the Pure Abodes for those reaching the third; and no rebirth for those reaching the fourth ([AN 3:87](#)). On occasion, when one of his disciples who had not reached full awakening passed away, he would comment on the disciple's rebirth—as when Anathapindika the householder, after his passing, appeared to the Buddha as a heavenly being ([MN 143](#)). When any of the Buddha's fully awakened disciples passed away, he would state that one of the amazing features of their passing was that their consciousness could no longer be found in the cosmos. Rebirth, he said, happened to those who still had clinging, but not to those who didn't ([SN 44:9](#)). And one of his

own amazing attainments as Buddha, he said, was that after the end of this life, the world would see him no more ([DN 1](#)).

When discussing more mundane topics, such as the rewards of generosity and virtue, he would cite the rewards they brought not only in this life but also in future ones. Even in cases where he was asked specifically to confine his discussion to the present life, he would end the discussion by referring to the rewards of these skillful actions after death ([AN 5:34](#); [AN 7:54](#)).

So the theme of rebirth is woven inextricably throughout the Buddha's teachings. And freedom from rebirth has been a central feature of the Buddhist goal from the very beginning of the tradition. All of the various Buddhist religions that later developed in Asia, despite their other differences, were unanimous in teaching rebirth. Even those that didn't aim at putting an end to rebirth still taught rebirth as a fact.

Yet as these Buddhist religions have come to the West, they have run into a barrier from modern Western culture: Of all the Buddha's teachings, rebirth has been one of the hardest for modern Westerners to accept. Part of this resistance comes from the fact that none of the dominant world-views of Western culture, religious or materialistic, contain anything corresponding to the idea of repeated rebirth. Plato taught it, but—aside from an esoteric fringe—few in the modern West have treated this side of his teaching as anything more than a myth.

For people who have felt burned or repelled by the faith demands of Western religion, there is the added barrier that the teaching on rebirth is something that—for the unawakened—has to be taken on faith. They would prefer a Buddhism that makes no faith demands, focusing its attention solely on the benefits it can bring in this life.

So for many Westerners who have profited from the Buddha's psychological insights and meditational tools, the question arises: Can we strip the Buddha's teachings of any mention of rebirth and still get the full benefits of what he had to teach? In other words, can we drop the Buddha's worldview while keeping his psychology and still realize everything it has to offer?

We in the West have done this sort of thing before. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, many European Romantics and American Transcendentalists found that they couldn't accept the

worldview of the Bible because they were born in an era of new scientific discoveries—of geological deep time and astronomical deep space—that called the biblical worldview into question. Nevertheless, they valued many of the psychological teachings the Bible contained. So they developed an historical approach to the Bible, stating that its worldview may have fit in with the cultural presuppositions of the time when it was written, but that that worldview had to be discarded as science advanced. Only then could the Bible’s psychological insights survive in the modern world. And not only survive: actually develop to a higher level. By dropping its out-of-date worldview and leaving cosmology to the scientists, the Judeo-Christian tradition could focus more precisely and effectively on the proper sphere of all religions: the development of the human psyche. This approach formed the basis of liberal Christianity and Reform Judaism.

Inspired by this approach, many modern Buddhist teachers have argued that the teaching on rebirth should be treated in the same way. In their eyes, rebirth was simply a cultural presupposition of the Buddha’s time and—because it no longer fits in with our cultural presuppositions and scientific beliefs—the time has come to discard it so as to help the Buddhist tradition advance.

To support their argument, these teachers cite the works of historical scholars who state that everyone in India in the Buddha’s time believed in the idea of rebirth and in the metaphysical assumptions about karma and personal identity on which the idea is based: that there’s something within each of us that survives the death of the body, and that our actions shape where that “something” will be reborn. Thus, they argue, the Buddha, in teaching karma and rebirth, was simply going along with the crowd.

A stronger version of this argument holds that the teaching on rebirth was not merely irrelevant to the Buddha’s essential message; it was actually antithetical. Just as all great thinkers have their lapses, he—or whoever, in compiling the Pāli Canon, put the teaching on rebirth into his mouth—didn’t realize that his culture’s assumptions about karma, rebirth, and personal identity were at odds with his central teachings on not-self and the four noble truths. Now that we no longer hold to those assumptions—and have replaced them with more reliable, scientific

notions of human action and the metaphysics of personal identity—we're in a better position to drop the idea of rebirth and reshape the Buddhist tradition so that it focuses more clearly on the Buddha's central insight and the main purpose of his teaching: the ending of suffering in the here-and-now.

The irony of this argument is that, when we check it against the actual historical evidence, we find that it has everything backwards. The actual facts are these:

1) The idea of rebirth was far from universally accepted in India during the Buddha's time. Some schools of thought actively rejected it; others affirmed it. And thinkers on both sides offered widely differing metaphysical ideas about personal identity in support of their positions. In other words, even those who agreed that rebirth did or didn't happen disagreed as to what was or wasn't reborn. At the same time, those who did agree in teaching rebirth disagreed on the role played by karma, or action, in the process of rebirth. Some maintained that action influenced the course of one's lives after death; others, that it played no role at all.

2) Thus the Buddha, in teaching rebirth and its relation to karma, was actually addressing one of the hot topics of the time. Because he didn't always take up controversial topics, he must have seen that the issue passed the criterion he set for which topics he would address: that it be conducive to putting an end to suffering. And, in fact, he made rebirth an integral part of his explanation of mundane right view—the level of right view that provides an understanding of the powers and consequences of human action that allows for the possibility that human action can put an end to suffering.

3) He also made rebirth an integral part of his explanation of the four noble truths and the understanding of causality—dependent co-arising—on which those truths are based. Because dependent co-arising contains many feedback loops—in which one factor reproduces the factors that feed it—it's a self-sustaining process with the potential to maintain itself indefinitely. This is why birth has the potential to keep repeating as rebirth until something is actively done to cut the feedback loops that keep the process going. At the same time, because dependent co-arising operates on many scales—from the micro level of events in the mind, to

the macro level of lifetimes across time in the cosmos—it shows how micro events can lead to rebirth on the macro scale, and, conversely, how the practice of training the mind can put an end to all forms of suffering—including rebirth—on every level.

What this means in practice is that no matter how much you observe the events of dependent co-arising in the present moment, if you don't appreciate their potential to sustain one another indefinitely, you don't fully comprehend them. And if you don't fully comprehend them, you can't gain full release from them.

4) In discussing rebirth, the Buddha differed from the other schools of the time in that he didn't base his position on a metaphysical view of personal identity—that is, on defining what it is that gets reborn. By placing rebirth in the context of dependent co-arising, he was presenting it in a phenomenological context—i.e., one that focused on phenomena as they can be directly experienced and that refused to take a stand on whether there is a reality of “things” underlying them. His purpose in taking this sort of position was pragmatic and strategic: By focusing on events and processes as they're directly experienced, you can redirect them—through the power of attention and intention—away from the suffering they normally cause and toward a deathless happiness. In this way, the Buddha's approach, instead of being metaphysical, bears similarities to modern schools of philosophy—phenomenology and pragmatism—that avoid getting involved in metaphysical assumptions about a reality behind direct experience.

5) The fact that the Buddha suggested that his contemporaries drop their metaphysical assumptions about personal identity if they wanted to practice the path suggests that he would make the same suggestion to people in the modern world. To get the most out of his teachings, it's necessary to recognize that we have metaphysical assumptions about personal identity and the world; and that—unless we put them aside—those assumptions will prevent us from looking deeply enough at immediate experience in the terms described in dependent co-arising.

To see experience in terms of dependent co-arising means identifying the mental events and choices that lead to rebirth and other forms of suffering, and developing the knowledge that can put them to an end. In

other words, part of the practice even today lies in confirming that the Buddha was right about the connection between karma and rebirth, and that his rightness was timeless: These teachings are integral to the four noble truths, and in particular to the path of practice leading to the end of suffering. To discard these teachings won't help Buddhism to advance. It will prevent the teachings from fulfilling their purpose.

Although it's possible to gain some benefit from the Buddha's teachings without accepting what he said about rebirth, if we want to get the most out of his teachings, we owe it to ourselves to give his statements on rebirth a fair hearing. Because rebirth is such an important working hypothesis in following the path all the way to the end of suffering, and because misinformation on these points is so widespread, it's necessary to discuss the Buddha's actual teachings, and their context, in some detail. In addition, because Buddhist thinkers in the centuries after the Buddha's passing often abandoned the Buddha's position on point number four—they let themselves get drawn into metaphysical discussions about what does or doesn't take birth—we have to focus on the early Pāli discourses to gain an accurate picture of the Buddha's own position on these issues.

2 : An Ancient Controversy

It's hard to understand why modern scholars keep repeating the idea that everyone in India during the Buddha's time believed in rebirth. Actually, the Pāli discourses provide clear evidence to the contrary, evidence that has been available in Western languages for more than a century.

The Buddha frequently referred to two extremes of wrong view that blocked progress on the path: eternalism and annihilationism. "Annihilationism" is the term he used to describe those who denied rebirth. Apparently he didn't invent the term himself, as [MN 22](#) reports that other teachers sometimes accused him of being an annihilationist as well.

Other passages in the Canon depict some of the more colorful ways in which annihilationism was taught in his time. In particular, they mention two people who were famous for their annihilationist views. One was Ajita Kesakambalin, the leader of a materialist sect. [DN 2](#) reports him saying this:

“There is nothing given, nothing offered, nothing sacrificed. There is no fruit or result of good or bad actions. There is no this world, no next world, no mother, no father, no spontaneously reborn beings [beings born without the need for parents in heaven or hell]; no contemplatives or brahmans who, faring rightly and practicing rightly, proclaim this world and the next after having directly known and realized it for themselves.

“A person is a composite of four primary elements. At death, the earth (in the body) returns to and merges with the (external) earth-substance. The fire returns to and merges with the external fire-substance. The liquid returns to and merges with the external liquid-substance. The wind returns to and merges with the external wind-substance. The sense-faculties scatter into space. Four men,

with the bier as the fifth, carry the corpse. Its eulogies are sounded only as far as the charnel ground. The bones turn pigeon-colored. The offerings end in ashes. Generosity is taught by idiots. The words of those who speak of existence after death are false, empty chatter. With the breakup of the body, the wise and the foolish alike are annihilated, destroyed. They do not exist after death.” — [DN 2](#)

Another famous annihilationist was a prince named Pāyāsi. DN 23 states that he held a materialist view similar to Ajita Kesakambalin, and that he used his power to execute criminals as an opportunity to conduct gruesome, quasi-scientific experiments to test whether any part of a human being survived death. He reported these experiments to one of the Buddha’s followers, a monk named Kumara Kassapa, and two of the experiments were these:

“There is the case, Master Kassapa, where my men—having caught a thief, a wrong-doer—present him to me, (saying,) ‘Here is a thief, a wrong-doer for you, lord. Decree for him whatever punishment you wish.’ And I say, ‘Very well, then, masters, having placed this man while still alive in a clay jar, having sealed the mouth, having covered it with a damp skin, having plastered it with a thick layer of damp clay, having set it in a furnace, light the fire.’

“They—responding, ‘Very well,’ to me—having placed the man while still alive in a clay jar, having sealed the mouth, having covered it with a damp skin, having plastered it with a thick layer of damp clay, having set it in a furnace, light the fire. When we know, ‘The man has died,’ then—removing the jar, breaking through the seal, opening the mouth—we look carefully, (thinking,) ‘Maybe we’ll see his soul escaping.’ But we don’t see his soul escaping....’

“There is the case, Master Kassapa, where my men—having caught a thief, a wrong-doer—present him to me, (saying,) ‘Here is a thief, a wrong-doer for you, lord. Decree for him whatever punishment you wish.’ And I say, ‘Very well, then, masters, having weighed this man with a scale while still alive, having strangled him to death with a bowstring, weigh him with the scale again.’

“They—responding, ‘Very well,’ to me—having weighed the man with a scale while still alive, having strangled him to death with a

bowstring, weigh him with the scale again. When he is alive, he is lighter, more flexible, and more malleable. But when he has died, he is heavier, stiffer, and less malleable.

“This is the reason, Master Kassapa, for which I believe, ‘There is no other world, there are no spontaneously reborn beings, there is no fruit or result of good or bad actions.’” — *DN 23*

[DN 1](#) gives a more comprehensive picture of annihilationist views current at the time, classifying them by how they define the self annihilated at death. There were seven types in all. Three of them defined the self as a body: either the physical body composed of the four material elements, a divine physical body, or an astral body. The view espoused by Ajita Kesakambalin and Prince Pāyāsi would fall under the first of the three. Four other annihilationist views, however, defined the self as formless: experiencing the dimension of infinite space, of infinite consciousness, of nothingness, or of neither perception nor non-perception. In each of the seven cases, these doctrines state that the self, however defined, perishes and is annihilated at death.

As for the non-Buddhist schools that affirmed the idea of rebirth, the Pāli Canon explicitly names at least four: Brahmans ([SN 42:6](#); AN 10:177), Jains ([MN 101](#)), and two contemplative (*samaṇa*) schools—one led by Makkhali Gosāla, and the other by Pakudha Kaccāyana. We know from other sources that the Jains and some Brahmans affirmed that action played a role in shaping rebirth; the Canon shows, however, that the other two teachers denied that action played any role in rebirth at all.

“[Makkhali Gosāla:] ‘Though one might think, “Through this morality, this practice, this austerity, or this holy life I will ripen unripened karma and eliminate ripened karma whenever touched by it”—that is impossible. Pleasure and pain are measured out; the wandering-on is fixed in its limits. There is no shortening or lengthening, no accelerating or decelerating. Just as a ball of string, when thrown, comes to its end simply by unwinding, in the same way, having transmigrated and wandered on, the wise and the foolish alike will put an end to pain.’” — [DN 2](#)

“[Pakudha Kaccāyana:] ‘There are these seven substances—unmade, irreducible, uncreated, without a creator, barren, stable

as a mountain-peak, standing firm like a pillar—that do not alter, do not change, do not interfere with one another, are incapable of causing one another pleasure, pain, or both pleasure and pain. Which seven? The earth-substance, the liquid-substance, the fire-substance, the wind-substance, pleasure, pain, and the soul as the seventh. These are the seven substances—unmade, irreducible, uncreated, without a creator, barren, stable as a mountain-peak, standing firm like a pillar—that do not alter, do not change, do not interfere with one another, and are incapable of causing one another pleasure, pain, or both pleasure and pain.” — [DN 2](#)

In addition to these named exponents of rebirth, [DN 1](#) provides an overview of the different types of views it attributes to “eternalists” and “partial eternalists.” Eternalists, like Pakudha Kaccāyana, maintained that the soul was not changed in the least as it went through the round of rebirth. Partial eternalists held that some souls changed their position in the cosmos—and thus their experience of pleasure and pain as they went through different lives—whereas others never changed their position in the cosmos at all.

Although the Pāli Canon doesn’t discuss these rebirth theories in great detail, we know from other contemporary sources that the Jains and Brahmans took great pains to define what sort of self or essence was reborn—and it’s likely that Makkhali Gosāla and Pakudha Kaccāyana did as well, for their theories of rebirth require a soul or substance in a person that takes birth after death. The most detailed discussions of what a soul might be are the Brahmanical Upaniṣads, which advance many theories about what is reborn: The self becomes consciousness and leaves the body (BAU VI.4.2); the self is bodiless, immortal breath-energy, and is identical with Brahman, the underlying force of the cosmos (BAU IV.4.7); one’s supreme self is an astral body (ChU VIII.12) that can be detected by the faculty of the mind (KathU II.3.9).

The Upaniṣads also record many different descriptions of the soul’s progress after death, the most interesting being the account in ChU V.3-10, which divides living beings into three classes. Those in the most developed class gain union with Brahman after death. Those in the intermediate class go stage by stage to the moon, on which they feed. Then they return to earth as rain, becoming plants and then being reborn

as the sort of animal that eats the plants: Those with good karma get to be eaten by human beings; those with worse karma, by lower sorts of animals. The lowest class of beings—which includes tiny insects—suffers a fate that the Upaniṣad doesn't even describe.

So it's clear that when discussing rebirth, both sides of the issue felt called upon to take a stand on two issues. The first was the nature of what a person is, and, from there, an explanation of how that person is or is not annihilated at death. In other words, both sides assumed that they had to explain their positions by taking a stand on the metaphysics of personal identity.

The second issue—among those who accepted rebirth—was the relationship between human action and rebirth: whether the course of rebirth was affected by human action or not.

Given such a wide variety of views on both sides of these questions, it's obvious that the idea of rebirth was not an unexamined assumption in Indian culture. It was one of the most controversial issues of the Buddha's time.

And the controversy wasn't confined only to the philosophers. In one of his most famous discourses, the Buddha addresses the Kālāmas, a skeptical group of villagers, telling them that by avoiding unskillful actions and developing a mind free from ill will, a person gains four assurances in the here and now.

“If there is a world after death, if there is the fruit of actions rightly & wrongly done, then this is the basis by which, with the breakup of the body, after death, I will reappear in a good destination, the heavenly world.’ This is the first assurance one acquires.

“But if there is no world after death, if there is no fruit of actions rightly & wrongly done, then here in the present life I look after myself with ease—free from hostility, free from ill will, free from trouble.’ This is the second assurance one acquires.

“If evil is done through acting, still I have willed no evil for anyone. Having done no evil action, from where will suffering touch me?’ This is the third assurance one acquires.

“But if no evil is done through acting, then I can assume myself pure in both respects.’ This is the fourth assurance one acquires.”

— [AN 3:66](#)

If the idea of rebirth—and its connection with karma—had been universally accepted in ancient India, the Buddha wouldn't have had to offer these assurances to the Kālāma villagers.

This means that we can't write off the Buddha's teachings on karma and rebirth simply as an undigested remnant from his culture. In teaching rebirth, he was consciously addressing an issue that was hotly debated, in a culture that expected him to articulate clearly his explanation for how and why rebirth did or didn't happen.

3 : Rebirth & Action

There is still the question, though, of why the Buddha felt compelled to discuss the issue of karma and rebirth. We know that he refused to take a position on other issues that were hotly contested at the time—such as whether the cosmos was eternal or not ([MN 63](#))—so what led him to take a position here?

The first part of the answer is that knowledge of rebirth formed an integral part of his awakening experience, playing a role in all three knowledges that led to his attainment of total release. Knowledge about karma played a role in the second and third.

In the first knowledge, he recollected many eons of his own previous lives:

“When the mind was thus concentrated, purified, bright, unblemished, rid of defilement, pliant, malleable, steady, & attained to imperturbability, I directed it to the knowledge of recollecting my past lives. I recollected my manifold past lives, i.e., one birth, two... five, ten... fifty, a hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand, many eons of cosmic contraction, many eons of cosmic expansion, many eons of cosmic contraction & expansion: ‘There I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance. Such was my food, such my experience of pleasure & pain, such the end of my life. Passing away from that state, I reappeared there. There too I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance. Such was my food, such my experience of pleasure & pain, such the end of my life. Passing away from that state, I reappeared here.’ Thus I remembered my manifold past lives in their modes & details.

“This was the first knowledge I attained in the first watch of the night. Ignorance was destroyed; knowledge arose; darkness was

destroyed; light arose—as happens in one who is heedful, ardent, & resolute.” — [*MN 19*](#)

In the second watch of the night, he gained his second knowledge, vision of how living beings at large are reborn after death:

“When the mind was thus concentrated, purified, bright, unblemished, rid of defilement, pliant, malleable, steady, & attained to imperturbability, I directed it to the knowledge of the passing away & reappearance of beings. I saw—by means of the divine eye, purified & surpassing the human—beings passing away & re-appearing, and I discerned how they are inferior & superior, beautiful & ugly, fortunate & unfortunate in accordance with their karma: ‘These beings—who were endowed with bad conduct of body, speech, & mind, who reviled the noble ones, held wrong views and undertook actions under the influence of wrong views—with the breakup of the body, after death, have re-appeared in the plane of deprivation, the bad destination, the lower realms, in hell. But these beings—who were endowed with good conduct of body, speech, & mind, who did not revile the noble ones, who held right views and undertook actions under the influence of right views—with the breakup of the body, after death, have re-appeared in the good destinations, in the heavenly world.’ Thus—by means of the divine eye, purified & surpassing the human—I saw beings passing away & re-appearing, and I discerned how they are inferior & superior, beautiful & ugly, fortunate & unfortunate in accordance with their karma.

“This was the second knowledge I attained in the second watch of the night. Ignorance was destroyed; knowledge arose; darkness was destroyed; light arose—as happens in one who is heedful, ardent, & resolute.” — [*MN 19*](#)

In the third knowledge of the night, the Buddha took the insights gained from the second knowledge on the macro level of experience—concerning the role of actions (intentions) and views in shaping events throughout the cosmos over time—and applied them to the micro level: events immediately present in his own mind. He found that the same causal pattern operated on both levels—one of the most important

insights leading to his awakening. He investigated the micro level even further to discover which intentions and views might lead to an end of intentions ([AN 4:237](#)) and an end of views ([AN 10:93](#)), and so to an end of rebirth. And he discovered his answer in views that were expressed in terms of the four noble truths about stress:

“When the mind was thus concentrated, purified, bright, unblemished, rid of defilement, pliant, malleable, steady, & attained to imperturbability, I directed it to the knowledge of the ending of the effluents. I discerned, as it had come to be, that ‘This is stress.... This is the origination of stress.... This is the cessation of stress.... This is the way leading to the cessation of stress.... These are effluents.... This is the origination of effluents.... This is the cessation of effluents.... This is the way leading to the cessation of effluents.’

“My heart, thus knowing, thus seeing, was released from the effluent of sensuality, released from the effluent of becoming, released from the effluent of ignorance. With release, there was the knowledge, ‘Released.’ I discerned that ‘Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.’

“This was the third knowledge I attained in the third watch of the night. Ignorance was destroyed; knowledge arose; darkness was destroyed; light arose—as happens in one who is heedful, ardent, & resolute.” — [MN 19](#)

In this way, the ending of birth realized through the third knowledge affirmed the truth of the first two knowledges. By employing the right view that leads to actions that put an end to birth, the third knowledge showed that the act of intention is what fuels the process of repeated birth to begin with. This means that knowledge about rebirth, and its connection with action, was an integral part of the knowledge that precipitated and followed his full release.

Still, the fact that his awakening included knowledge about rebirth doesn’t fully explain why, when he began teaching, he addressed the topic. After all, on his own testimony, there were many other things he learned in the course of his awakening that he didn’t see fit to include in his teaching because they weren’t conducive in leading his listeners to

their own release. He limited himself to teaching the four noble truths because “they are connected with the goal, relate to the rudiments of the holy life, and lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to Unbinding” ([SN 56:31](#)).

This suggests that he saw an intimate connection between the topic of rebirth and the four noble truths. And it turns out that, when we examine these truths, we find that rebirth does play a prominent role in the understanding of stress that forms the first noble truth; in the understanding of the causes of stress—craving and clinging—that form the second noble truth; and in the transcendent right view that guides the path of practice to the end of stress, the fourth noble truth. It also plays a prominent role in the mundane level of right view that provides the context for understanding the meaning and purpose of the four noble truths.

The relationship between the two levels of right view—mundane and transcendent—parallels the relationship between the first and second knowledges on the night of his awakening on the one hand, and the third knowledge on the other. Both serve a strategic purpose. Mundane right view, framed in terms of “beings” and “worlds,” asserts the efficacy of action: the principle that actions really do have results. This principle opens the possibility that transcendent right view, as a guide to action, can put an end to suffering. Transcendent right view then drops terms of “beings” and “worlds” to focus directly on the actions within the mind that cause suffering so that those actions can be abandoned. This brings suffering to an end—at which point all views are put aside as well.

To assert the efficacy of action, mundane right view makes the point (against Pakudha Kaccāyana) that there is such a thing as action, and (against Ajita Kesakambalin and Makkhali Gosāla) that it actually engenders results. Because the four noble truths teach that suffering and stress are the results of actions and can be brought to an end through actions, this understanding of action is necessary to explain why the four noble truths offer a realistic picture of what a human being can do to bring suffering to an end.

In a direct negation of the annihilationist view that Ajita Kesakambalin expounded, the standard definition of mundane right view states:

“There is what is given, what is offered, what is sacrificed. There are fruits & results of good & bad actions. There is this world & the next world. There is mother & father. There are spontaneously reborn beings; there are contemplatives & brahmans who, faring rightly & practicing rightly, proclaim this world & the next after having directly known & realized it for themselves.” — [MN 117](#)

The phrase “next world” in this passage refers to life after death. The reference to what is given, etc., asserts that these actions actually are the results of conscious choices and do bear fruit as well-being and happiness. The reference to contemplatives and brahmans who know both worlds is a statement of conviction: One may not know the next world on one’s own, but one is convinced that there are those who have trained their minds to the point where they know it directly. Because “contemplatives and brahmans”—in the context of this passage—are those who have successfully followed the path to awakening, and because anyone is potentially capable of doing the same, this statement of conviction functions as a working hypothesis. You take these matters on faith until you can confirm them for yourself.

One reason the Buddha recommended conviction in rebirth as a useful working hypothesis is that, as we have noted, he had to teach that skillful human action was powerful and reliable enough to put an end to suffering; and his teaching on the consequences of skillful and unskillful action would be incomplete—and therefore indefensible—without reference to rebirth.

This is because the distinction he draws between skillful and unskillful is *based* on the consequences of the actions: The working-out of karma may be complex, but skillful actions always lead in the direction of happiness and well-being; unskillful actions always lead in the direction of suffering and harm. This distinction provides not only the definition of these concepts, but also the motivation for abandoning unskillful actions and developing skillful ones in their place.

This motivation is necessary, for while people are not innately bad, they are also not innately good. When heedless of the consequences of their actions, they behave unskillfully. This is why, as the Buddha noted, heedfulness lies at the root of all skillfulness ([AN 10:15](#)). To develop skillful qualities, people need to see the dangers of unskillful behavior

and the advantages of skillful behavior. Because actions can sometimes take many lifetimes to yield their results, a complete and convincing case that unskillful actions should always be avoided, and skillful ones always developed, requires the perspective that comes only from seeing the results of actions over many lifetimes.

Of course, some of the results of actions often do appear in this lifetime:

As Ven. Ānanda was sitting there, the Blessed One said to him, “I say categorically, Ānanda, that bodily misconduct, verbal misconduct, & mental misconduct should not be done.”

“Given that the Blessed One has declared that bodily misconduct, verbal misconduct, & mental misconduct should not be done, what drawbacks can one expect when doing what should not be done?”

“... One can fault oneself; observant people, on close examination, criticize one; one’s bad reputation gets spread about; one dies confused; and—with the breakup of the body, after death—one reappears in the plane of deprivation, the bad destination, the lower realms, in hell....

“I say categorically, Ānanda, that good bodily conduct, good verbal conduct, & good mental conduct should be done.”

“Given that the Blessed One has declared, that good bodily conduct, good verbal conduct, & good mental conduct should be done, what rewards can one expect when doing what should be done?”

“... One doesn’t fault oneself; observant people, on close examination, praise one; one’s good reputation gets spread about; one dies unconfused; and—with the breakup of the body, after death—one reappears in the good destinations, in the heavenly world.” — [*AN 2:18*](#)

For people who have trouble assuming a life after death, the consequences of action that are visible in this lifetime might seem enough to engender heedfulness. However, the Buddha notes that misconduct often leads to rewards in the present life, and he heaps ridicule on those who insist that the results of good and bad actions always appear in the here-and-now.

“There are, headman, some contemplatives & brahmans who hold a doctrine & view like this: ‘All those who kill living beings experience pain & distress in the here & now. All those who take what is not given... who engage in illicit sex... who tell lies experience pain & distress in the here-&now.’

“Now there is the case where a certain person is seen garlanded & adorned, freshly bathed & groomed, with hair & beard trimmed, enjoying the sensualities of women as if he were a king. They ask about him: ‘My good man, what has this man done that he has been garlanded & adorned... as if he were a king?’ They answer: ‘My good man, this man attacked the king’s enemy and took his life. The king, gratified with him, rewarded him. That is why he is garlanded & adorned... as if he were a king.’

“Then there is the case where a certain person is seen bound with a stout rope with his arms pinned tightly against his back, his head shaved bald, marched to a harsh-sounding drum from street to street, crossroads to crossroads, evicted through the south gate, and beheaded to the south of the city. They ask about him: ‘My good man, what has this man done that he is bound with a stout rope... and beheaded to the south of the city?’ They answer: ‘My good man, this man, an enemy of the king, has taken the life of a man or a woman. That is why the rulers, having had him seized, inflicted such a punishment upon him.’

[The Buddha then cites similar cases where some people are rewarded for stealing, engaging in illicit sex, and lying, whereas other people are punished.]

“Now, what do you think, headman: Have you ever seen or heard of such a case?”

“I have seen this, lord, have heard of it, and will hear of it [again in the future].”

“So, headman, when those contemplatives & brahmans who hold a doctrine and view like this say: ‘All those who kill living beings [etc.] experience pain & distress in the here-&now,’ do they speak truthfully or falsely?”

”Falsely, lord.”

“And those who babble empty falsehood: Are they moral or immoral?”

“Immoral, lord.”

“And those who are immoral and of evil character: Are they practicing wrongly or rightly?”

”Wrongly, lord.”

“And those who are practicing wrongly: Do they hold wrong view or right view?”

”Wrong view, lord.”

“And is it proper to place confidence in those who hold wrong view?”

“No, lord.” — *SN 42:13*

To avoid wrong view—and the ridicule it deserves—the Buddha found it necessary to disclose his knowledge that there are lives after death. And he had to include the perspective not just of one lifetime after death, but of many. This is because there are cases where a person behaves unskillfully in this lifetime but gains a pleasant rebirth immediately after death, and others where a person behaves skillfully in this lifetime but, immediately after death, gains a painful rebirth ([MN 136](#)). A meditator capable of seeing only one lifetime after death, seeing cases like these, would misunderstand the consequences of action. Only when we take into account the overall picture of the complexity of karma—and the length of time sometimes needed for actions to bear fruit—can we accept that the Buddha’s categorical assertions about skillful and unskillful actions might possibly be accurate.

So, from the perspective of his awakening, the Buddha saw that the only true understanding of the consequences of actions had to include a full perspective of lives after death. This is why he used this perspective when trying to induce a sense of heedfulness in others, so that they would be motivated to adopt the skillful path. In some cases, this involved describing how skillful and unskillful actions bring comforts and discomforts in future human lives ([MN 41](#); [AN 8:40](#)). In other cases, it involved describing the pleasures of heaven (which are discussed in only a cursory way) and the horrors of hell (which are discussed in grisly detail—see *MN 129* and [130](#)). Sometimes he would add the observation

that rebirth in the lower realms is much more common than rebirth in the higher realms ([SN 20:2](#)). In all cases, he would state that his descriptions and observations came, not from hearsay, but his own direct experience.

He knew, however, that—until they had gained experience for themselves through the practice—his listeners could take his statements on the efficacy of action and the truth of rebirth only on faith. But faith, for him, was not an insistence that you knew what you couldn't really know, or that you accepted unreasonable ideas. It was an admission of ignorance about issues for which you don't have empirical proof, combined with a willingness to adopt the assumptions needed to follow a path to happiness that seems reasonably likely to offer results ([MN 27](#)).

This is why the Buddha never claimed to offer proof for either the efficacy of action or for rebirth, for he knew that the evidence for these teachings lay beyond the ken of most of his listeners. Concerning the efficacy of action, the best he could do was to point out that those who denied that present action had a role in shaping present experience—because they attributed all experience to past action, to the act of a creator god, or to total randomness ([AN 3:62](#))—were undercutting any rationale they might claim for teaching others or for following a path of practice. In other words, if present experience is not at least partly due to present actions, there is no way that a path of practice could have any effect. Teaching a path of practice would be a futile activity. The Buddha's argument here was no proof that skillful and unskillful actions actually have consequences both in the present and on into the future. It simply pointed out the contradiction in teaching otherwise.

On the other hand, when you assume both the efficacy of action and its effect on rebirth, you are more likely to behave skillfully. To assume otherwise makes it easy to find excuses for lying, killing, or stealing when faced with poverty or death. And from there it's easy to extend the excuses to cover times when it's simply more convenient to lie, etc., than to not. But if you assume that your actions have results, and those results will reverberate through many lifetimes, it's easier to stick to your principles not to lie, kill, or steal even under severe duress. And even

though you may not *know* whether these assumptions are true, you cannot plan an action without implicitly wagering on the issue.

This is why simply stating, “I don’t know,” is not an adequate response to the questions of rebirth and the efficacy of karma. The attitude behind it may be honest on one level, but it’s dishonest in thinking that this is all that needs to be said, for it ignores the fact that you have to make assumptions about the possible results of your actions every time you act.

It’s like having money: Regardless of what you do with it—spending it, investing it, or just stashing it away—you’re making an implicit wager on how to get the best use of it now and into the future. Your investment strategy can’t stop with, “I don’t know.” If you have any wisdom at all, you have to consider future possibilities and take your chances with what seems to be the safest and most productive use of the resources you’ve got.

So it is with all of our actions. Given that we have to wager one way or another all the time on how to find happiness, the Buddha stated that it’s a safer wager to assume that actions bear results that can affect not only this lifetime but also lifetimes after this than it is to assume the opposite.

In [MN 60](#), for instance, he pointed out that anyone who adheres to the annihilationist view espoused by Ajita Kesakambalin would not be expected to avoid unskillful behavior, whereas those who hold to the opposite—mundane right view—*would* be expected to avoid unskillful behavior. Then he said of the first group:

“With regard to this, an observant person considers thus: ‘If there is no next world, then—with the breakup of the body, after death—this venerable person has made himself safe. But if there is the next world, then this venerable person—with the breakup of the body, after death—will reappear in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell. Even if we didn’t speak of the next world, and there weren’t the true statement of those venerable contemplatives & brahmans [who assert the existence of the next world], this venerable person is still criticized in the here-&-now by the observant as a person of bad habits & wrong view: one who holds to a doctrine of non-existence.’ If there really is a next world,

then this venerable person has made a bad throw twice: in that he is criticized by the observant here-&-now, and in that—with the breakup of the body, after death—he will reappear in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell. Thus this safe-bet teaching, when poorly grasped & poorly adopted by him, covers (only) one side, and leaves behind the possibility of the skillful.” — [MN 60](#)

As for the second group—those who hold to mundane right view and act on it—he said this:

“With regard to this, an observant person considers thus: ‘If there is the next world, then this venerable person—with the breakup of the body, after death—will reappear in a good destination, a heavenly world. Even if we didn’t speak of the next world, and there weren’t the true statement of those venerable contemplatives & brahmans, this venerable person is still praised in the here-&-now by the observant as a person of good habits & right view: one who holds to a doctrine of existence.’ If there really is a next world, then this venerable person has made a good throw twice, in that he is praised by the observant here-&-now; and in that—with the breakup of the body, after death—he will reappear in a good destination, a heavenly world. Thus this safe-bet teaching, when well grasped & adopted by him, covers both sides, and leaves behind the possibility of the unskillful.” — [MN 60](#)

These arguments don’t prove the efficacy of action or the truth of rebirth, but they do show that it is a safer, more reasonable, and more honorable policy to assume the truth of these teachings than it would be to assume otherwise. The Buddha didn’t press these arguments beyond that point. In other words, he left it to his listeners to decide whether they wanted to recognize that action is an investment that, like all investments, incurs risks. And he left it to them to decide how they wanted to calculate the risks and potentials that action might involve now and into the future. He didn’t ask that his listeners all commit themselves to an unquestioning belief in the possibility that their actions might lead to rebirth, but he wasn’t interested in teaching anyone who rejected that possibility outright. As we’ve already noted, he saw that

heedfulness lay at the root of all skillful qualities. If a listener couldn't be persuaded to develop an appropriate level of heedfulness around the risks of action, any further teaching would be a waste of time.

4 : *The Noble Truth of Rebirth*

To move his listeners from mundane right view to transcendent right view, the Buddha used the teaching on rebirth to inspire not only a sense of heedfulness in his listeners, but also a sense of *saṃvega*: dismay and terror at the prospect of not gaining release from rebirth.

“Long have you (repeatedly) experienced the death of a mother. The tears you have shed over the death of a mother while transmigrating & wandering this long, long time—crying & weeping from being joined with what is displeasing, being separated from what is pleasing—are greater than the water in the four great oceans.

“Long have you (repeatedly) experienced the death of a father... the death of a brother... the death of a sister... the death of a son... the death of a daughter... loss with regard to relatives... loss with regard to wealth... loss with regard to disease. The tears you have shed over loss with regard to disease while transmigrating & wandering this long, long time—crying & weeping from being joined with what is displeasing, being separated from what is pleasing—are greater than the water in the four great oceans.

“Why is that? From an inconceivable beginning comes transmigration. A beginning point is not evident, though beings hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving are transmigrating & wandering on. Long have you thus experienced stress, experienced pain, experienced loss, swelling the cemeteries—enough to become disenchanted with all fabricated things, enough to become dispassionate, enough to be released.” — [*SN 15:3*](#)

The relationship between heedfulness and *saṃvega* parallels the relationship between the second knowledge of the night of the Buddha’s awakening and the third. Seeing the way in which rebirth depends on one’s views and actions, he saw the need for heedfulness in one’s

thoughts, words, and deeds. Seeing the precarious complexity and pointlessness of the whole process of repeated death and rebirth, he developed the sense of *saṃvega* that inspired him to look for a way out.

The way he chose—and that gave results—was to take the lessons about rebirth obtained in his first two knowledges, and to apply them to the actions of the mind in the present moment and to their effects both in the present and over time. In doing so, he arrived at the four noble truths as the form of right view that would lead to total release and the end of rebirth.

The connection between rebirth and the first noble truth is reflected in the fact that this truth lists birth as one of the forms of suffering that the fourth noble truth brings to an end. In fact, birth stands at the beginning of the list:

“Now this, monks, is the noble truth of stress: Birth is stressful, aging is stressful, death is stressful; sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair are stressful; association with the unbeloved is stressful, separation from the loved is stressful, not getting what is wanted is stressful. In short, the five clinging-aggregates are stressful.” — [*SN* 56:11](#)

The connection between rebirth and the second noble truth is reflected in the fact that this truth defines the cause of suffering as any form of craving or clinging that leads to “further becoming,” which is the condition for further birth:

“And this, monks, is the noble truth of the origination of stress: the craving that makes for further becoming—accompanied by passion & delight, relishing now here & now there—i.e., craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming.” — [*SN* 56:11](#)

Writers who reject the idea that the Buddha is talking about the rebirth of a person in these two noble truths tend to argue in one of two ways: Either that the references to birth don’t imply rebirth; or that they refer to rebirth on the micro level of momentary mind-states, and not on the macro level of beings or persons over time. Neither interpretation, however, does full justice to what the Buddha had to say.

Writers in the first group have made much of the fact that the Buddha used the word “birth” rather than “rebirth” in the first noble truth, concluding that rebirth is not necessarily meant here. This conclusion, though, ignores the relationship of the first truth to the others. All the forms of suffering listed in the first truth are caused by the second truth, and brought to an end by the fourth. If birth were a one-shot affair, there would be—for a person already born—no point in looking for the causes of the suffering of birth, and no way that the fourth truth could put an end to them.

This point is especially clear when we look at the Buddha’s own account of how he explored the causes of suffering after having seen, in his first two knowledges, the sufferings caused by repeated birth. He looked into the possible causes of birth and traced them deep into the mind:

“Monks, before my awakening, when I was still just an unawakened bodhisatta, the realization came to me: ‘How this world has fallen on difficulty! It is born, it ages, it dies, it falls away & rearises, but it does not discern the escape from this stress, from this aging & death. O when will it discern the escape from this stress, from this aging & death?’

“Then the thought occurred to me, ‘Aging & death exist when what exists? From what as a requisite condition come aging & death?’ From my appropriate attention there came the breakthrough of discernment: ‘Aging & death exist when birth exists. From birth as a requisite condition comes aging & death.’

Then the thought occurred to me, ‘Birth exists when what exists? From what as a requisite condition comes birth?’ From my appropriate attention there came the breakthrough of discernment: ‘Birth exists when becoming exists. From becoming as a requisite condition comes birth....

“Becoming exists when what exists?...

“Clinging/sustenance exists when what exists?...

“Craving exists when what exists?...

“Feeling exists when what exists?...

“Contact exists when what exists?...

“The six sense media exist when what exists?...

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

“Then the thought occurred to me, ‘This consciousness turns back at name-&-form, and goes no farther. It is to this extent that there is birth, aging, death, falling away, & reappearing, i.e., from name-&-form as a requisite condition comes consciousness, from consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-&-form. From name-&-form as a requisite condition come the six sense media.... Thus is the origination of this entire mass of stress. Origination, origination.’ Vision arose, clear knowing arose, discernment arose, knowledge arose, illumination arose within me with regard to things never heard before.” — [SN 12:65](#)

Had the Buddha assumed that birth were a one-time affair, he wouldn’t have explored its causes through becoming, clinging, and on down to name-&-form. He would have stopped his analysis of the causes of suffering at the realization: ‘Aging & death exist when birth exists. From birth as a requisite condition comes aging & death.’ He thus would have limited his analysis of the origination of suffering to what happens after birth. Only because he saw that birth was a repeated process did he probe into the causes of birth and trace them through the factors that he later taught in his description of dependent co-arising.

In other words, if the Buddha hadn’t assumed rebirth, he never would have discovered or taught the central tenets of his teaching: the four noble truths and dependent co-arising. His analysis of suffering and its causes would have been much more limited in scope. And as we will see, the Buddha discovered that the processes leading to suffering are self-sustaining, meaning that unless they are deliberately starved they will

continue repeating indefinitely. In this way, not only birth, but also every factor in dependent co-arising is prefixed with an implicit “re-”, from re-ignorance to re-death.

As for the argument that the “birth” mentioned in the first noble truth could be a repeated process, but only on the micro scale of the momentary arising of mental states: The fact that the Buddha discovered the four noble truths and the factors of dependent co-arising by examining mental events in the present moment would seem to lend credence to this interpretation. But it ignores two important points.

The first is that when the Buddha himself explained birth, aging, and death in the context of these teachings, he did so with reference to birth on the macro scale—i.e., the birth, aging, and death of a person:

“Now which *aging and death*? Whatever aging, decrepitude, brokenness, graying, wrinkling, decline of life-force, weakening of the faculties of the various beings in this or that group of beings, that is called aging. Whatever deceasing, passing away, breaking up, disappearance, dying, death, completion of time, breakup of the aggregates, casting off of the body, interruption in the life faculty of the various beings in this or that group of beings, that is called death.

“And which *birth*? Whatever birth, taking birth, descent, coming-to-be, coming-forth, appearance of aggregates, & acquisition of [sense] media of the various beings in this or that group of beings, that is called birth.” — [*SN 12:2*](#)

The second point is that to insist on limiting the four noble truths and the factors of dependent co-arising to one scale or the other is to miss a crucial feature of these teachings. Remember that the Buddha’s third knowledge came from applying to the micro level lessons learned on the macro level in the first two knowledges. The lesson he learned as a result is that the level of scale is a relative affair: The process is the constant. To compare this to modern physics, it was like Einstein’s proposal that the dimensions of space and time are not constants; the constant is the speed of light.

The fact that the Buddha gained release by discovering a process that held constant across many levels of scale was reflected in the way he

taught, often switching scales in the course of his discussions and refusing to be pinned down to one scale or another. Sometimes he talked about “beings” in the standard sense of the word, and sometimes as attachments ([SN 23:2](#)), i.e., as processes on the mental level. And in particular with dependent co-arising: The teaching is always presented as a process without a fixed reference to where—on the level of scale in the world or in the individual—the factors of the process are playing out.

In this way it’s like a photograph of erosion patterns. Without an extraneous object such as a tree or an insect to indicate scale, it’s difficult to know whether the range of the photograph covers two miles or two inches, whether the erosion runs through a vast plateau or a small patch of sand by the side of a road, and whether the eroded bits in the photograph are boulders or grains of sand. Either way, the photograph can be studied to understand the complex causal patterns underlying erosion; and—more to the point—we can learn more about the processes of erosion by studying it on multiple levels than by limiting ourselves to just one.

In the same way, it’s a mistake to limit the Buddha’s teachings on birth/rebirth to just one level of scale. To limit them just to the micro level is to underestimate the potential for mental events in the present to create long-term suffering, and the radical nature of the cure needed to put an end to that suffering. To limit his teachings just to the macro level makes it impossible to observe directly in the present how birth and its attendant sufferings come about and can be brought to an end. To get the most out of these teachings, it’s best to drop any insistence, in line with one’s metaphysical assumptions, that they apply to one level and not another. Instead, it’s better to look at the processes *as* processes—true across many scales—and use this way of framing the issue as part of the strategy to put an end to suffering.

5 : An Appropriate Frame

As part of his policy of not getting pinned down on issues of scale when presenting the process of rebirth, the Buddha was careful to avoid an issue that animated his contemporaries when they discussed rebirth: the metaphysics of what a person is, and what does or doesn't get reborn after death.

In other words, he refused to explain whether any “what” underlay the experience of rebirth. He simply talked about how the experience happened and what could be done to end it.

In modern philosophy this approach is called phenomenology: talking about the phenomena of experience simply in terms of direct experience, without making reference to any underlying reality that may or may not stand behind that experience. The Buddha was a radical phenomenologist in that he dealt with experience on its own terms. He was a pragmatist in that he adopted this approach because he saw that it worked in bringing suffering to an end.

The Canon reports that the members of the other schools—and even some of his own monks—often expressed frustration over this aspect of the Buddha's approach ([MN 63](#); [AN 10:93](#)). In their eyes, the whole question of rebirth revolved around the “what” that did or didn't get reborn. Either the life force was identical with the body, thus allowing no way for rebirth to occur after the body dies; or else there was a soul or life force separate from the body, which either died along with the body or else survived death. Yet when the Buddha's contemporaries pressed him to take sides on this question and related questions, he consistently put them aside.

The Blessed One said, “From ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications.... From becoming as a requisite condition comes birth.”

When this was said, a certain monk said to the Blessed One: “Which is the birth, lord, and whose is the birth [or: the birth of what]?”

“Not a valid question,” the Blessed One said. “If one were to ask, ‘Which is the birth, and whose is the birth?’ and if one were to say, ‘Birth is one thing, and the birth is that of something/someone else,’ both of them would have the same meaning, even though their words would differ. When there is the view that the soul is the same as the body, there is no leading the holy life. And when there is the view that the soul is one thing and the body another, there is no leading the holy life. Avoiding these two extremes, the Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma via the middle: From becoming as a requisite condition comes birth.” — [SN 12:35](#)

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

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

“Not a valid question,” the Blessed One said. “I don’t say ‘feeds.’ If I were to say ‘feeds,’ then ‘Who feeds on the consciousness-nutrient?’ would be a valid question. But I don’t say that. When I don’t say that, the valid question is, ‘Consciousness-nutrient for what?’ And the valid answer is, ‘Consciousness-nutrient for the production of future coming-into-being. When that has come into being and exists, then the six sense media [are experienced]. From the six sense media as a requisite condition comes contact.’” — [SN 12:12](#)

The tendency to read a “thing” or “no thing” behind the processes of dependent co-arising is still alive with us today. Many people have assumed that the Buddha taught that there is no self—which means that there would be no thing behind the process of dependent co-arising, and

nothing to be reborn. Many others have assumed that he taught a True Self underlying our false sense of an individual self, and therefore underlying the process. Both assumptions, however, are misinformed. The Buddha actually refused to state whether a self of any kind does or doesn't exist. The one recorded time he was asked point-blank whether the self exists, he declined to answer ([SN 44:10](#)).

This was because he saw that questions of this sort interfere with the path of practice leading to the end of suffering. As he said in [MN 2](#), to focus on such questions as—“Am I? Am I not? What am I? What was I in the past? What will I be in the future?”— is a form of inappropriate attention: the kind of attention that ignores the four noble truths and actually leads to further suffering. So if a worldview demands an explanation of the “what” behind rebirth—as we find not only in the worldviews of ancient India but also in many modern worldviews as well—it's simply a form of inappropriate attention that perpetuates suffering. If you want to put an end to suffering, you have to put the metaphysical demands of your worldview aside.

The Buddha found it more appropriate and fruitful to focus instead on the *process* of how birth is repeatedly generated by factors immediately present to awareness throughout life, and directly experienced by factors in the present moment. This is because these factors lie enough under your control to turn them toward the ending of repeated rebirth.

An understanding of the process as process—and in particular, as an example of the process of dependent co-arising—can actually contribute to the end of suffering. It gives guidance in how to apply the tasks appropriate for the four noble truths to the process of birth: i.e., comprehending suffering, abandoning its cause, realizing its cessation, and developing the path to its cessation. When these duties have been completely mastered, they can bring birth to an end by abandoning its causes, thus opening the way to the ultimate happiness that comes when the mind is no longer entangled in the process of birth.

The Buddha used several models for explaining the process of dependent co-arising, with each model listing a sequence of interdependent factors. In the most standard model, the factors are these:

ignorance (of how to apply the four noble truths),

fabrications (intentional acts shaping the experience of body, speech, and mind),
consciousness (at the six senses, counting the mind as the sixth),
name-&-form (mental phenomena [intention, attention, feeling, perception, and contact]; and physical phenomena [the body as experienced from within in terms of energy, warmth, liquidity, and solidity]),
the six sense media (counting the mind as the sixth),
contact (at the six sense media),
feeling (of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain, based on that contact),
craving (for sensuality, for becoming, or for non-becoming),
clinging (to sensuality, habits and practices, views, and doctrines of the self),
becoming (the assumption of an identity in a particular world of experience on the level of sensuality, form, or formlessness),
and
birth (into that identity)
—followed by the suffering of *aging, illness, and death*.

This list has many complications, with certain factors appearing at several points in the sequence. For example, the factor of ignorance is identical with the sub-factor of inappropriate attention, under name-&-form. The list also contains many feedback loops, sequences where an effect returns to influence the next instance of its cause. As we will see, the existence of feedback loops in the process is what makes it self-sustaining and gives it the potential to continue indefinitely.

For the moment, however, we can focus on one of dependent co-arising's most obvious features: its lack of outside context. It avoids any reference to the presence or absence of a self or a world around the processes it describes.

Instead, it forms the context for understanding “selves” and “worlds.” In other words, it shows how ideas of such metaphysical contexts are created and clung to, and what happens as a result. In particular, it shows in detail how the acts of creating and clinging to metaphysical assumptions about the existence or non-existence of the self or the

world actually lead to birth and suffering. This means that dependent co-arising, instead of existing in a metaphysical context, provides the phenomenological context for showing why metaphysical contexts are best put aside.

The important factors leading from metaphysical assumptions to rebirth are “name,” “contact,” “clinging,” and “becoming.”

Under “name” is the sub-factor of attention, which [MN 2](#)—as we have seen—depicts as the act of choosing which questions to ask. When attention is inappropriately directed to questions of the metaphysics of identity—about what you are or whether you exist—it entangles you in a “thicket of views, a writhing of views” that keep you trapped in suffering and stress. As for views of what the world is and where it came from, the Buddha shows that these all derive from contact at the six senses ([DN 1](#); [SN 35:82](#)). These views about self and world then become objects of clinging, which in turn gives rise to becoming: the act of taking on an identity within a particular world of experience defined around the craving underlying that clinging. Becoming, in turn, is the condition for repeated birth.

The antidote to this process is to direct attention appropriately to identifying the four noble truths as they’re experienced. This form of attention enables you to see the act of view-formation as a process, to see the drawbacks of the process, and so to abandon any clinging to the content of those views. This removes the conditions for further becoming and birth. Even though the four noble truths count as a type of view, their ability to see all views—even themselves—as part of this process, means that they contain the seeds for their own transcendence ([AN 10:93](#)).

So if you want to get the most use out of dependent co-arising, then rather than viewing dependent co-arising as occurring within the context of self and world, you’d do better to view ideas of self and world as occurring within the context of dependent co-arising.

The advantage of adopting this approach is that it focuses attention away from things for which you aren’t responsible—metaphysical entities that may or may not underlie experience—and points instead to events for which you are: acts of attention and the various forms of intention under “fabrications” and “name.” This is why, even though the Buddha didn’t take a stand on the issues of the metaphysics of rebirth,

he devoted a lot of time to explaining the connection between rebirth and action. Action is what leads to rebirth, but action—skillful action—can also bring it to an end.

When you adopt this perspective, you focus directly on actions as they are experienced as factors: parts of a causal sequence. And this, in turn, makes it easier to apply the duties of the four noble truths with greater precision. In other words, it helps you notice which factors—such as ignorance—cause suffering and so should be *abandoned* by replacing them with right view; which ones—such as attention and intention, under “name”—can be converted to the path to the end of suffering and so should be *developed* before they, too, are abandoned; and which ones—such as clinging, becoming, and birth—constitute suffering and so should be *comprehended* to the point of disenchantment and dispassion, leading to the realization of the end of suffering: release.

6 : Food for Rebirth

What does it mean to “comprehend” birth as an instance of suffering? And what is accomplished by viewing it in that way?

The Buddha often compared all suffering to the acts of clinging and feeding: acts inherently stressful not only for those clung to and fed upon, but also for those who, through the disease of hunger ([Dhp 203](#)), keep needing to cling and feed.

In fact, for the Buddha, feeding and clinging are virtually one and the same. The Pāli word for clinging—*upādāna*—also means fuel or sustenance and the act of taking sustenance from fuel. In his explanation of how a fire burns, for instance, the fire feeds itself by clinging to its fuel—an image he also used to illustrate how rebirth happens through the process of clinging to craving:

“But, Master Gotama, at the moment a flame is being swept on by the wind and goes a far distance, what do you designate as its clinging/sustenance then?”

“Vaccha, when a flame is being swept on by the wind and goes a far distance, I designate it as wind-sustained, for the wind is its clinging/sustenance at that time.”

“And at the moment when a being sets this body aside and is not yet born in another body, what do you designate as its clinging/sustenance then?”

“Vaccha, when a being sets this body aside and is not yet born in another body, I designate it as craving-sustained, for craving is its clinging/sustenance at that time.” — [SN 44:9](#)

By introducing a “being” into this passage, the Buddha might be suspected of introducing a “what” into his discussion of birth. And this is not the only place where he talks about a being-to-be-born in this context.

“Monks, the descent of the embryo occurs with the union of three things. There is the case where there is no union of the mother & father, the mother is not in her season, and a *gandhabba* [the being-to-be-born] is not present, nor is there a descent of an embryo. There is the case where there is a union of the mother & father, and the mother is in her season, but a *gandhabba* is not present, nor is there a descent of an embryo. But when there is a union of the mother & father, the mother is in her season, and a *gandhabba* is present, then with this union of three things the descent of the embryo occurs.” — [MN 38](#)

However, on the level of dependent co-arising, the Buddha did not treat the concept of a being as a “what.” His definition of a “being” shows that he recommended that it, too, be regarded as a process:

As he was sitting there, Ven. Radha said to the Blessed One: “‘A being,’ lord. ‘A being,’ it’s said. To what extent is one said to be ‘a being’?”

“Any desire, passion, delight, or craving for form, Radha: When one is caught up [*satta*] there, tied up [*visatta*] there, one is said to be ‘a being [*satta*].’

“Any desire, passion, delight, or craving for feeling... perception... fabrications...

“Any desire, passion, delight, or craving for consciousness, Radha: When one is caught up there, tied up there, one is said to be ‘a being.’” — [SN 23:2](#)

So the Buddha advocated viewing a “being” simply as a process of attachment to desire, passion, delight, and craving. A being in this sense can take birth, die, and be reborn many times in the course of a day—as attachment develops for one desire, ends, and then develops for another one—to say nothing of how often it occurs during the lifetime of a physical body. This is why the processes leading to rebirth can be observed and redirected in the present moment, for—as we have already noted—the mental processes that move from moment to moment on the micro level are identical with the mental processes that move from body to body on the macro level.

Once born on either the micro or the macro level, the being-process is maintained by the four nutriments of consciousness: physical food, sensory contact, sensory consciousness, and the intentions of the mind.

“Where there is passion, delight, & craving for the nutriment of physical food, consciousness lands there and increases. Where consciousness lands and increases, there is the alighting of name-&-form. Where there is the alighting of name-&-form, there is the growth of fabrications. Where there is the growth of fabrications, there is the production of renewed becoming in the future. Where there is the production of renewed becoming in the future, there is future birth, aging, & death, together, I tell you, with sorrow, affliction, & despair....

“[Similarly with the nutriment of (sensory) contact, the nutriment of intellectual intention, and the nutriment of (sensory) consciousness.]” — [SN 12:64](#)

There is a complex relationship between craving and nutriment in sustaining this process. On the one hand, as the above passage shows, craving has to be actively present before consciousness will land on any of the forms of nutriment. On the other hand, had there been no past craving, none of these forms of nutriment would even exist:

“These four nutriments have craving as their cause, craving as their origination, are born from craving, are brought into being from craving.” — [MN 38](#)

This means that craving produces the food that it then feeds on—a fact that allows for the processes leading to birth to lead to repeated rebirth. The role of craving here is closely connected with that of consciousness, which—like craving—produces the food on which it feeds.

Because these processes are self-sustaining, any attempt to map them has to be complex. One of the primary complaints about dependent co-arising is that it is overwhelmingly complicated. This, however, is like complaining about the complexity of a city map that shows all the streets. You put up with the complexity so that you can find precisely the street you want. In the same way, once you accept the fact that the

processes leading to suffering are complex, you appreciate the usefulness of the maps provided by dependent co-arising: They point out precisely where in the processes you can make a difference, so that causal patterns can be directed away from suffering and toward its end.

We can see this clearly in the way the two prime models of dependent co-arising depict the self-sustaining pattern by which consciousness produces the food on which consciousness can then continue to feed. This pattern is most obvious in the model that traces the causes of birth back to a mutual causality between consciousness on the one hand, and name-&-form—the mental and physical dimensions of experience—on the other.

“‘From consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-&-form.’ Thus it has been said. And this is the way to understand how from consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-&-form. If consciousness were not to descend into the mother’s womb, would name-&-form [the mind & body of the fetus] take shape in the womb?”

“No, lord.”

“If, after descending into the womb, consciousness were to depart, would name-&-form be produced for this world?”

“No, lord.”

“If the consciousness of the young boy or girl were to be cut off, would name-&-form ripen, grow, and reach maturity?”

“No, lord.”

“Thus this is a cause, this is a reason, this is an origination, this is a requisite condition for name-&-form, i.e., consciousness.” — [*DN 15*](#)

In playing a part in the process of birth and growth, consciousness also depends on the phenomena it sustains:

“If consciousness were not to gain a foothold in name-&-form, would a coming-into-play of the origination of birth, aging, death, and stress in the future be discerned?”

“No, lord.”

“Thus this is a cause, this is a reason, this is an origination, this is a requisite condition for consciousness, i.e., name-&-form.” — [*DN 15*](#)

In this way, consciousness directly feeds the factors that it, in turn, feeds upon. So this model for mapping dependent co-arising focuses on one place to break the sequence: the mutual dependence between consciousness and name-&-form.

[Ven. Sāriputta:] “It’s as if two sheaves of reeds were to stand leaning against one another. In the same way, from name-&-form as a requisite condition comes consciousness, from consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-&-form....

“If one were to pull away one of those sheaves of reeds, the other would fall; if one were to pull away the other, the first one would fall. In the same way, from the cessation of name-&-form comes the cessation of consciousness, from the cessation of consciousness comes the cessation of name-&-form.” — [SN 12:67](#)

The more standard model for dependent co-arising gives a more precise picture of what it means to “pull away” consciousness and name-&-form. This model—whose factors we listed in the preceding chapter—traces the causes of suffering back to ignorance, and in so doing provides a more complex picture of the way in which consciousness produces its own food.

At first glance, the pattern of a self-sustaining consciousness-process is less obvious in this model because consciousness appears as a factor only once. However, it functions as a sub-factor at two other points in the process, where it feeds off the factors it sustains. Because the picture here is more complex, it’s more explicit in showing where to focus your attempts to deprive the process of food.

Consciousness first appears in the process as the factor of consciousness itself. This factor follows on ignorance and fabrication, and acts as the condition for name-&-form. The fact that consciousness occurs immediately after fabrication emphasizes that it is driven by intention. As [SN 22:79](#) notes, the element of intention is what turns the potential for sensory consciousness into an actual experience of sensory consciousness.

“For the sake of consciousness-hood, fabrications fabricate consciousness as a fabricated thing.” — [SN 22:79](#)

Thus every act of sensory consciousness is purposeful. As long as ignorance drives fabrication, there is no such thing as a totally passive or pure state of consciousness. Every act of consciousness is colored by the intentional element that shapes it.

The fact that the factor of consciousness appears before name-&-form emphasizes the fact that consciousness has to be present for all the remaining factors—including “intention” under “name”—to occur. And because both consciousness and name-&-form depend on fabrication, which in turn depends on ignorance of the stressful nature of fabrication, this model shows that one way to deprive the consciousness-process of food is to develop right view about the intentional element of fabrication underlying that process.

The second point where consciousness appears in the process of dependent co-arising is as a component of the factor of contact at the six senses. Its role here carries over from its dependence on fabrication, emphasizing the fact that sensory contact is never purely passive. Even the barest contact already contains an element of intentional fabrication that colors it with ignorance.

“It’s in dependence on a pair that consciousness comes into play. And how does consciousness come into play in dependence on a pair? In dependence on the eye & forms there arises eye-consciousness. The eye is inconstant, changeable, of a nature to become otherwise. Forms are inconstant, changeable, of a nature to become otherwise. Thus this pair is both wavering & fluctuating—inconstant, changeable, of a nature to become otherwise.

“Eye-consciousness is inconstant, changeable, of a nature to become otherwise. Whatever is the cause, the requisite condition, for the arising of eye-consciousness, that is inconstant, changeable, of a nature to become otherwise. Having arisen in dependence on an inconstant factor, how could eye-consciousness be constant?

“The coming together, the meeting, the convergence of these three phenomena is eye-contact.

“[Similarly with ear-, nose-, tongue-, body-, and intellect-consciousness.]” — [SN 35:93](#)

What this shows is that, to starve the consciousness-process of food, you have to focus less on how you react to sensory contact and more on what you bring to sensory contact—the habits of ignorant fabrication that shape what you sense.

At the third point in the series, consciousness together with its nutriment plays the role of feeding and clinging: building on craving, and leading to becoming—a sense of one’s identity in a particular world of experience—which is the prerequisite for birth. (Think of the way in which, when you fall asleep, a dream world appears in the mind, and you then enter into that world.) In this case, the Buddha said, consciousness plays the role of a seed that—when watered by craving and delight—blooms into becoming on the level of sensuality, form, or formlessness.

“Karma is the field, consciousness the seed, and craving the moisture. The consciousness of living beings hindered by ignorance & fettered by craving is established in a lower property [the level of sensuality]... a middling property [the level of form]... a refined property [the level of formlessness]. Thus there is the production of renewed becoming in the future. This is how there is becoming.” — [AN 3:77](#)

“Like the earth property, monks, is how the four standing-points for consciousness [the properties of form, feeling, perception, and fabrications] should be seen. Like the liquid property is how delight & passion should be seen. Like the five types of plant propagation [roots, stems, joints, cuttings, and seeds] is how consciousness together with its nutriment should be seen.” — [SN 22:54](#)

To view consciousness and its nutriment here as a seed watered by craving, delight, and passion helps focus attention on the role played by these three latter mind-states in producing food for endlessly repeated suffering and birth. These are the mind-states that sustain the consciousness-process as it moves from one standing-point to another. Perhaps the Buddha switched from the feeding analogy to the seed analogy here because the implications of the food analogy at this point would have been too harsh to state explicitly in polite company: We keep feeding off the by-products of our earlier feeding. The seed analogy, however, makes this point more indirectly. Just as seeds, when watered,

grow into plants that both produce seeds and, when they die, add fertilizer to the soil that feeds those seeds, in the same way, consciousness nourished with karma and craving keeps producing more standing-points—the aggregates of form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness—for future acts of consciousness to feed on:

“Should consciousness, when standing, stand attached to form, supported by form (as its object), landing on form, watered with delight, it would exhibit growth, increase, & proliferation.

“Should consciousness, when standing, stand attached to feeling, supported by feeling (as its object), landing on feeling, watered with delight, it would exhibit growth, increase, & proliferation.

“Should consciousness, when standing, stand attached to perception, supported by perception (as its object), landing on perception, watered with delight, it would exhibit growth, increase, & proliferation.

“Should consciousness, when standing, stand attached to fabrications, supported by fabrications (as its object), landing on fabrications, watered with delight, it would exhibit growth, increase, & proliferation.

“Were someone to say, ‘I will describe a coming, a going, a passing away, an arising, a growth, an increase, or a proliferation of consciousness apart from form, from feeling, from perception, from fabrications,’ that would be impossible.” — [SN 22:54](#)

In other words, as long as delight and passion—this phrase is a synonym for clinging—nourishes the consciousness-process, consciousness in turn keeps creating the food to keep the process going indefinitely, even after the form of this body is cast aside. This is why repeated birth-as-process will not end until it’s deprived of the water of craving and clinging. And the only way to deprive the process of its water and food is to develop dispassion for activities that sustain it.

This is where this model for dependent co-arising shows its pragmatic value. It demonstrates not only that the food and water for rebirth can be directly experienced, but also that these processes are the direct consequence of choices made in the mind: the intentional activity of

fabrication based on ignorance. In this way, it points to the possibility that the suffering of repeated rebirth can be ended by choice: choosing to develop appropriate attention—right view concerning the four noble truths—which puts an end to craving and ignorance. That way, instead of getting entangled in trying to destroy the conditions of birth—which would lead to taking on a destroyer-identity, which would merely continue the process of becoming—you choose simply to starve the process of its sustenance, allowing it to end on its own.

That choice is where the path, the fourth noble truth, begins.

7 : Choosing Dispassion

Given that passion is something we habitually enjoy, it's not easy to choose a path leading toward total dispassion. You have to be strongly motivated to take it up and to stick with it. At the same time, you have to hold yourself to high standards all along the way, for it's all too easy to fall for subtle levels of passion that can pull you back into the processes leading to renewed suffering and rebirth. This is one of the reasons why right view comes at the beginning of the path—to provide motivation for and guidance to all the other path factors: right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

As a part of right view, conviction in rebirth—and of the influence of action in leading to rebirth—plays an important role in performing both of these functions: motivating the initial choice to follow the path, and guiding choices made along the way. We have already noted in chapter four how the Buddha used belief in rebirth to inspire a general desire to escape the rounds of suffering; here the specifics of right view about rebirth help focus that desire specifically on the path.

Some people claim that belief in rebirth breeds complacency—you have many lifetimes to follow the path, so you can take your time—but the Buddha's descriptions of the dangers of rebirth present a very different picture: You could die at any moment, and there are plenty of miserable places—realms where it would be impossible to practice—where you could easily be reborn. And even if you do manage to reach a good level of rebirth the next time around, the chances of a good rebirth after that are very slim. So you have to get started on mastering the path while you can.

Then the Blessed One, picking up a little bit of dust with the tip of his fingernail, said to the monks, “What do you think, monks?

Which is greater: the little bit of dust I have picked up with the tip of my fingernail, or the great earth?”

“The great earth is far greater, lord. The little bit of dust the Blessed One has picked up with the tip of his fingernail is next to nothing. It doesn’t even count. It’s no comparison. It’s not even a fraction, this little bit of dust the Blessed One has picked up with the tip of his fingernail, when compared with the great earth.”

“In the same way, monks, few are the beings who, on passing away from the human realm, are reborn among human beings. Far more are the beings who, on passing away from the human realm, are reborn in hell... in the animal womb... in the domain of the hungry ghosts.

... “In the same way, monks, few are the beings who, on passing away from the human realm, are reborn among devas. Far more are the beings who, on passing away from the human realm, are reborn in hell... in the animal womb... in the domain of the hungry ghosts.

... “In the same way, monks, few are the beings who, on passing away from the deva realm, are reborn among devas. Far more are the beings who, on passing away from the deva realm, are reborn in hell... in the animal womb... in the domain of the hungry ghosts.

... “In the same way, monks, few are the beings who, on passing away from the deva realm, are reborn among human beings. Far more are the beings who, on passing away from the deva realm, are reborn in hell... in the animal womb... in the domain of the hungry ghosts.

“Therefore your duty is the contemplation, ‘This is stress ... This is the origination of stress ... This is the cessation of stress.’ Your duty is the contemplation, ‘This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress.’” — [*SN 56:102-113*](#)

The Buddha also used conviction in rebirth to encourage his listeners not to be deterred by difficulties faced along the path. Compared to the sufferings of repeated rebirth, those difficulties count for nothing.

“Monks, suppose there was a man whose life span was 100 years, who would live to 100. Someone would say to him, ‘Look here, fellow. They will stab you at dawn with 100 spears, at noon with

100 spears, & again at evening with 100 spears. You, thus stabbed day after day with 300 spears, will have a lifespan of 100 years, will live to be 100, and at the end of 100 years you will realize the four noble truths that you have never realized before.’

“Monks, a person who desired his own true benefit would do well to take up (the offer). Why is that? From an inconceivable beginning comes transmigration. A beginning point is not evident for the (pain of) blows from spears, swords, & axes. Even if this (offer) were to occur, I tell you that the realization of the four noble truths would not be accompanied by pain & distress. Instead, I tell you, the realization of the four noble truths would be accompanied by pleasure & happiness.

“Which four? The noble truth of stress, the noble truth of the origination of stress, the noble truth of the cessation of stress, and the noble truth of the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress.

“Therefore your duty is the contemplation, ‘This is stress.... This is the origination of stress.... This is the cessation of stress.... This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress.’” — [SN 56:35](#)

In principle, the path to the end of suffering can be completed in one lifetime. The Canon contains many stories of people who gained full awakening after hearing only one of the Buddha’s discourses, and [MN 10](#), among other discourses, states that in some cases even just seven days’ determined practice can be enough to complete the path. But that’s in principle. Each person’s awakening, though, is a specific case, and the Buddha knew that, for most of his listeners, the path would be a multi-lifetime affair. And it’s hard not to imagine that many of his listeners—just like many people today—looked at the entanglements of their lives and realized that they would never have enough free time in this lifetime to devote fully to the practice.

So, instead of trying to please them by paring the path down to what they might reasonably accomplish within the limitations of this lifetime, the Buddha encouraged them with a multi-lifetime perspective on the path, to convince them that whatever efforts they made in the direction of awakening wouldn’t come to naught. He kept the bar high, and with good reason: Only when you have a realistic view of what the path to the

end of suffering actually entails will you be able to follow it and gain the full results.

At the same time, the Buddha encouraged people on their deathbed to make an effort to develop dispassion for the various realms of rebirth. He even stated that they might actually achieve full awakening while doing so. In this way they would be able to prevent huge amounts of future pain and suffering ([SN 55:54](#)). A person assuming only a single lifetime would not see the value of these sorts of efforts—which means that the single-lifetime perspective would underestimate what a dying person can do, and would instead favor drugging the person even to the point of losing mindfulness to reduce his or her present pain. Because a drugged state of mind is in no position to withstand craving, this means that a single-lifetime perspective would place the dying person at a severe disadvantage—and would actually be the more complacent and irresponsible view.

In addition to providing motivation in practicing the path, the assumptions of karma and rebirth play an important role in ferreting out attachments to fabrications and other processes that you might otherwise overlook as you follow the path. If you don't believe, for instance, that a particular instance of passion or delight could have huge repercussions in the future, and if it seems enjoyable right now, you can easily regard it as insignificant and allow it to keep bubbling away in the mind.

“There is, monks, an intergalactic void, an unrestrained darkness, a pitch-black darkness, where even the light of the sun & moon—so mighty, so powerful—doesn't reach.”

When this was said, one of the monks said to the Blessed One, “Wow, what a great darkness! What a really great darkness! Is there any darkness greater & more frightening than that?”

“There is, monk, a darkness greater & more frightening than that.”

“And which darkness, lord, is greater & more frightening than that?”

“Any contemplatives or brahmans who do not know, as it has come to be, that ‘This is stress’; who do not know, as it has come to be, that ‘This is the origination of stress’ ... ‘This is the cessation of

stress’ ... ‘This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress’: They revel in fabrications leading to birth; they revel in fabrications leading to aging; they revel in fabrications leading to death; they revel in fabrications leading to sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair. Reveling in fabrications leading to birth... aging... death... sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair, they fabricate fabrications leading to birth... aging... death... sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair. Fabricating fabrications leading to birth... aging... death... sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair, they drop into the darkness of birth. They drop into the darkness of aging... the darkness of death... darkness of sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair. They are not totally released from birth, aging, death, sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, & despairs. They are not totally released, I tell you, from suffering & stress.” — [SN 56:46](#)

Only when you appreciate the potential for even the most natural or innocuous-seeming attachment to lead to long-term suffering will you be willing to take it seriously and work to abandon it. And only then will you really be following the path.

We’ve already noted, in chapter three, that a multi-lifetime perspective helps to keep you on track in the area of virtue, a point that applies to the path factors of right speech, right action, and right livelihood. The same principle also applies to the factors more directly connected to meditation. This can be illustrated with two examples from the Buddha’s two-step meditative strategy for developing dispassion for clinging and craving.

In the first step, he has you focus on the drawbacks of craving for sensuality: the mind’s tendency to get obsessed with plans for sensual pleasures. If you’re limited to an exclusively one-life view of the practice, it’s hard to fully appreciate the power and drawbacks of sensual craving. After all, the evolution of life has depended on this craving, and for many people it provides the only pleasure and excitement they know, so it’s easy to justify sensuality as a good thing. Even when you consider the many drawbacks of sensuality visible in this life, it remains simply a matter of taste as to whether you feel the drawbacks are enough to deter you from sensual pursuits: Some people prefer peace and safety; others,

the thrills of danger and risk. If everything ends in oblivion and annihilation, who's to say that harmful pleasures are worse than harmless? But when you take seriously the long-term consequences of sensuality over many lifetimes, it changes the equation entirely. You find it easier to see that the pleasures and thrills offered by sensuality are not worth the price.

“It's with sensuality for the reason, sensuality for the source... that (people) engage in bodily misconduct, verbal misconduct, mental misconduct. Having engaged in bodily, verbal, and mental misconduct, they—on the breakup of the body, after death—re-appear in the plane of deprivation, the bad destination, the lower realms, in hell.” — [MN 13](#)

Only when you can see sensuality in this light are you genuinely ready to follow the path to fully undercut the sensual craving that acts as one of the causes of suffering and stress. However, even this understanding is not enough to uproot sensual craving. The mind needs an alternate source of pleasure to sustain it on the path. This pleasure is provided by *jhāna*: the path factor of right concentration.

“Even though a disciple of the noble ones has clearly seen with right discernment as it has come to be that sensuality is of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks, still—if he has not attained a rapture & pleasure apart from sensuality, apart from unskillful mental qualities, or something more peaceful than that—he can be tempted by sensuality. But when he has clearly seen with right discernment as it has come to be that sensuality is of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks, and he has attained a rapture & pleasure apart from sensuality, apart from unskillful qualities, or something more peaceful than that, he cannot be tempted by sensuality.” — [MN 14](#)

Still, even though the pleasures of *jhāna* are a necessary part of the path, they aren't totally safe. To enter *jhāna* is to take on a state of becoming, and so it, too, can be an object of craving. And because some of the higher *jhānas* touch dimensions of nothingness and neither perception nor non-perception, they are easy to mistake for states of non-becoming. This means that even though the practice of *jhāna* can

help you overcome sensual craving, on its own it's not enough to overcome the two remaining types of craving—for becoming and non-becoming—that lead to further suffering and stress.

Here again, a multi-lifetime perspective is helpful in detecting these subtle attachments—attachments that even the contemplation of not-self, if it's not informed by this perspective, can easily miss. As [MN 106](#) states, it's possible to develop the perception of not-self, applying it to all phenomena, and arrive at a refined formless level of jhāna, the dimension of nothingness. At that point, you experience a subtle level of equanimity, so subtle that you can easily miss the fact that you're clinging to it. If you don't see that even this equanimity can lead to future dangers, you won't feel inclined to investigate it.

This may be why many meditators with a one-lifetime perspective equate equanimity with nibbāna: They don't see that there's any need to question their attainment of refined equanimity, for they feel it's enough to maintain them in good stead through the remainder of this lifetime. And if they hold to the materialist view that all we can know is known through the senses, then equanimity in the face of sensory experience would be the greatest peace they could imagine. But as the Buddha points out in [SN 35:117](#), there is a dimension of experience beyond the senses where an even greater peace can be found through the total end of fabrication. And as he states in [MN 140](#), if—with the possibility of this more peaceful dimension in mind—you see that even subtle levels of equanimity can lead to long lifetimes, but that those lifetimes will end, you're more inclined to investigate those levels of equanimity to see how they're fabricated. Only through this sort of investigation can you develop dispassion for the last traces of seemingly innocuous fabrication that stand in the way of full release.

This is the second step in the Buddha's strategy. In one of the standard descriptions for how to develop dispassion for jhāna ([MN 51](#); [AN 4:124](#); [AN 4:126](#)), the Buddha first has you master jhāna—you can't overcome attachment to it by not doing it. Then he has you contemplate the mental events sustaining jhāna as processes—aggregates, which play a role in dependent co-arising under the factors of fabrication, consciousness, and name—to see that they, too, have their drawbacks. This focuses attention directly on the factors that dependent co-arising—

in its various models—highlights as the spots where the self-sustaining processes leading to suffering can be starved.

This is also where we most clearly see why the Buddha discussed all the factors leading to rebirth as processes. If you're looking for your inner essence or the ground of being for the world, it's all too easy—when reaching a state of jhāna—to mistake that state for what you're looking for. This, however, leads simply to more ignorance and attachment. But if you view jhāna as the result of actions and processes, then when you reach this stage, you find it easier to develop dispassion for jhāna without feeling that anything substantial is being lost.

“Suppose that an archer or archer's apprentice were to practice on a straw man or mound of clay, so that after a while he would become able to shoot long distances, to fire accurate shots in rapid succession, and to pierce great masses. In the same way, there is the case where a monk ... enters & remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. He regards whatever phenomena there that are connected with form, feeling, perception, fabrications, & consciousness, as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a disintegration, an emptiness, not-self. He turns his mind away from those phenomena, and having done so, inclines his mind to the property of deathlessness: ‘This is peace, this is exquisite—the pacification of all fabrications; the relinquishing of all acquisitions; the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; Unbinding.’

“[Similarly with the second, third, and fourth jhāna.]” — [AN 9:36](#)

In line with the Buddha's approach of seeing how these processes manifest on many levels, he advises that you view even the “being” doing jhāna as a process composed of aggregates. When this contemplation yields a sense of dispassion for all aggregates past, present, and future—even those used on the path—it starves the process by which craving can lead to further rebirth.

“Where there is no passion for the nutriment of physical food, where there is no delight, no craving, then consciousness does not land there or increase. Where consciousness does not land or

increase, there is no alighting of name-&-form. Where there is no alighting of name-&-form, there is no growth of fabrications. Where there is no growth of fabrications, there is no production of renewed becoming in the future. Where there is no production of renewed becoming in the future, there is no future birth, aging, & death. That, I tell you, has no sorrow, affliction, or despair.

“[Similarly with the nutriment of (sensory) contact, the nutriment of intellectual intention, and the nutriment of (sensory) consciousness.]” — [SN 12:64](#)

“If a monk abandons passion for the property of form... the property of feeling... the property of perception... the property of fabrications... the property of consciousness, then owing to the abandonment of passion, the support is cut off, and there is no landing of consciousness. Consciousness, thus not having landed, not increasing, not concocting, is released. Owing to its release, it is steady. Owing to its steadiness, it is contented. Owing to its contentment, it is not agitated. Not agitated, one is totally unbound right within. One discerns that ‘Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for the sake of this world.’” — [SN 22:54](#)

What remains is a dimension free of birth and death.

“There is, monks, an unborn—unbecome—unmade—unfabricated. If there were not that unborn—unbecome—unmade—unfabricated, there would not be the case that emancipation from the born—become—made—fabricated would be discerned. But precisely because there is an unborn—unbecome—unmade—unfabricated, emancipation from the born—become—made—fabricated is discerned.” — [Ud 8:3](#)

This dimension is characterized by a type of consciousness that lies outside of the range of the sensory consciousness involved in dependent co-arising and the realm of the six senses—a realm the Buddha calls the “all.” Thus it’s totally free from suffering.

“Consciousness without surface, endless, radiant all around, has not been experienced through the earthness of earth... the liquidity

of liquid... the fieriness of fire... the windiness of wind... the allness of the all.’” — [MN 49](#)

The canonical image for this sort of consciousness, totally independent of nutriment, is of a ray of light that doesn’t land anywhere.

“Just as if there were a roofed house or a roofed hall having windows on the north, the south, or the east. When the sun rises, and a ray has entered by way of the window, where does it land?”

“On the western wall, lord.”

“And if there is no western wall, where does it land?”

“On the ground, lord.”

“And if there is no ground, where does it land?”

“On the water, lord.”

“And if there is no water, where does it land?”

“It does not land, lord.”

“In the same way, where there is no passion for the nutriment of physical food... contact... intellectual intention... consciousness, where there is no delight, no craving, then consciousness does not land there or grow. Where consciousness does not land or grow, name-&-form does not alight. Where name-&-form does not alight, there is no growth of fabrications. Where there is no growth of fabrications, there is no production of renewed becoming in the future. Where there is no production of renewed becoming in the future, there is no future birth, aging, & death. That, I tell you, has no sorrow, affliction, or despair.” — [SN 12:64](#)

In line with his discussion of rebirth, the Buddha never offered a metaphysical explanation of *what* this consciousness is or *how* it might be. After all, it would be a mistake to justify the reality of the unconditioned with reference to the conditioned, as it’s not dependent on any thing or any “how” in any way.

However, the Buddha did show how to get there: That’s why his image for the practice is a path. A path to a mountain doesn’t cause the mountain, but it does provide the opportunity for walking there. The path of practice doesn’t cause the unconditioned, but it does provide the opening for attaining it.

The Canon, when describing a person's full awakening, never depicts the accompanying knowledge as touching on "what" or "how" this unconditioned consciousness is. Instead, the knowledge is said to begin with a realization of release from the *āsavas* (fermentations, effluents) of sensuality, becoming, and ignorance ([MN 19](#)), along with the realization that that release is once and for all ([MN 146](#)). Then it proceeds to a realization of the future implications of that release ([DN 29](#)), starting with the fact that it has put an end to any future rebirth.

In the Buddha's own case, he expressed the knowledge like this:

"Knowledge & vision arose in me: 'Unprovoked is my release. This is the last birth. There is now no further becoming.'" — [SN 56:11](#)

The two most frequently used descriptions of the knowledge accompanying the attainment of arahantship make the same point like this:

"With release, there is the knowledge, 'Released.' One discerns that 'Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for the sake of this world.'" — [SN 35:28](#)

Dwelling alone—secluded, heedful, ardent, & resolute—Ven. Anuruddha in no long time reached & remained in the supreme goal of the holy life for which clansmen rightly go forth from home into homelessness, knowing & realizing it for himself in the here-&-now. He knew: "Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for the sake of this world." And thus Ven. Anuruddha became another one of the arahants. — [AN 8:30](#)

In other words, when the mind returns to the fabricated dimension after its total encounter with the unfabricated dimension and has realized its release, the realization that it's through with birth/rebirth—on both the macro and the micro levels—is the first thing that spontaneously occurs to it. This realization of the ending of birth leads to the further realization that all suffering has been ended as well.

8 : *Modern Ironies*

People who hold to a modern materialist view of the world and the self tend to react to these canonical descriptions of what is known in awakening by offering three main reasons for resisting them.

The first is that these descriptions, in their eyes, go beyond what a human being could possibly know. Sometimes this argument is supported by the claim that the Canon's descriptions violate the Buddha's own criteria, stated elsewhere in the discourses, for what can and cannot be known. The passage most commonly cited in this argument is this:

“What is the all? Simply the eye & forms, ear & sounds, nose & aromas, tongue & flavors, body & tactile sensations, intellect & ideas. This, monks, is termed the all. Anyone who would say, ‘Repudiating this all, I will describe another,’ if questioned on what exactly might be the grounds for his statement, would be unable to explain, and furthermore, would be put to grief. Why? Because it lies beyond range.” — [SN 35:23](#)

The argument maintains that “beyond range” here means “beyond the range of possible knowledge.” Therefore, the existence of a dimension lying beyond the six senses—such as that of consciousness without surface described in [MN 49](#)—is impossible to know. This would invalidate any claim that one has known such things—and, by implication, the freedom from rebirth that such a knowledge would imply.

However, there is clear evidence that “beyond range” here simply means “beyond the range of adequate description,” for there are other canonical passages indicating that even though the dimension beyond the six senses cannot be adequately described, it can still be known.

MahaKotthita: “With the remainderless ceasing & fading of the six spheres of contact [vision, hearing, smell, taste, touch, & intellection] is it the case that there is anything else?”

Sāriputta: “Don’t say that, my friend.”

MahaKotthita: “With the remainderless ceasing & fading of the six spheres of contact, is it the case that there is not anything else?”

Sāriputta: “Don’t say that, my friend.”

MahaKotthita: “...is it the case that there both is & is not anything else?”

Sāriputta: “Don’t say that, my friend.”

MahaKotthita: “...is it the case that there neither is nor is not anything else?”

Sāriputta: “Don’t say that, my friend.”

MahaKotthita: “Being asked... if there is anything else, you say, ‘Don’t say that, my friend.’ Being asked... if there is not anything else... if there both is & is not anything else... if there neither is nor is not anything else, you say, ‘Don’t say that, my friend.’ Now, how is the meaning of this statement to be understood?”

Sāriputta: “Saying... is it the case that there is anything else... is it the case that there is not anything else... is it the case that there both is & is not anything else... is it the case the there neither is nor is not anything else, one is objectifying the non-objectified.

However far the six spheres of contact go, that is how far objectification goes. However far objectification goes, that is how far the six spheres of contact go. With the remainderless ceasing & fading of the six spheres of contact, there comes to be the ceasing, the allaying of objectification.” — [AN 4:173](#)

“Monks, that dimension should be experienced where the eye [vision] ceases and the perception of form fades. That dimension should be experienced where the ear ceases and the perception of sound fades... where the nose ceases and the perception of aroma fades... where the tongue ceases and the perception of flavor fades... where the body ceases and the perception of tactile sensation fades... where the intellect ceases and the perception of

idea/phenomenon fades: That dimension should be experienced.”
— [SN 35:117](#)

So there’s nothing in the Pāli discourses to indicate that the Buddha would have agreed with a modern materialist view that experience is limited to the six senses. And it’s doubtful that he would have tried to justify his claims in terms that a modern materialist would accept. After all, he noted that the Buddha-range of a Buddha, and the jhāna-range of a person in jhāna are “inconceivables that are not to be conjectured about, that would bring madness and vexation to anyone who conjectured about them” ([AN 4:77](#)). This means that he wouldn’t encourage the sort of conjecture that a materialist—or anyone else—might make about what a mind trained to master jhāna or attain the supreme level of awakening could or couldn’t know.

A second modern argument against accepting the canonical accounts of what’s known in awakening—and in particular, the knowledge of rebirth achieved in awakening—is that one can still obtain all the results of the practice without having to accept the possibility of rebirth. After all, all the factors leading to suffering are all immediately present to awareness, so there should be no need, when trying to abandon them, to accept any premises about where they may or may not lead in the future.

This objection, however, ignores the role of appropriate attention on the path. As we noted above, one of its roles is to examine and abandon the assumptions that underlie one’s views on the metaphysics of personal identity. Unless you’re willing to step back from your own views—such as those concerning what a person is, and why that makes rebirth impossible—and subject them to this sort of examination, there’s something lacking in your path. You’ll remain entangled in the questions of inappropriate attention, which will prevent you from actually identifying and abandoning the causes of suffering and achieving the full results of the practice.

In addition, the terms of appropriate attention—the four noble truths—are not concerned simply with events arising and passing away in the present moment. They also focus on the causal connections among those events, connections that occur both in the immediate present and over time. If you limit your focus solely to connections in the present while

ignoring those over time, you can't fully comprehend the ways in which craving causes suffering: not only by latching on to the four kinds of nutriment, but also giving rise to the four kinds of nutriment as well.

This narrow focus places an obstacle in your ability to develop right view—and in particular, your ability to see dependent co-arising as a self-sustaining process. If, in line with the standard materialist view, you regard consciousness as a mere by-product of material processes, then there's no way you can appreciate the full power of consciousness and craving to generate the food that can sustain the processes of suffering indefinitely. And if you don't fully appreciate this power, there's no way that you can effectively bring it to an end.

A third argument against accepting the knowledge of rebirth as a necessary part of awakening is that many modern people who claim to have experienced the levels of awakening described in the Canon gained no knowledge of rebirth or of the end of rebirth as part of those experiences. The fact that people in the Buddha's time claimed to gain this sort of knowledge in the course of their awakening can thus be written off as a cultural artifact: They were primed to see it because of their cultural background, and so it wasn't really an essential part of the experience.

There are, however, two problems with this argument. The first is that, as we have seen, rebirth was not a universally accepted assumption in the Buddha's time. An important part of any person's experience of awakening—then as now—would be to prove for oneself whether the Buddha was right on the topic.

The second, more telling, problem with this third argument is that it actually defeats itself. If one's experiences of awakening don't agree with the Canon's descriptions of the levels of awakening, why would one want to claim the Canon's labels for those experiences? An essential part of even the first level of awakening described in the Canon—stream entry—confirms the rightness of right view ([MN 48](#)), which includes the understanding that there is a deathless, birthless dimension (Mv.I.23.5), and that there is a level of craving that, if not abandoned, will lead to repeated birth. The distinguishing mark of the attainment of arahantship—as opposed to the lower levels of awakening recognized in the Canon—

is that it has put an end to that craving, thus putting an end to birth. If the Canon is wrong on these points, then the terms it uses to describe the levels of awakening are bogus as well.

This means that if one's experience of awakening doesn't match the descriptions in the Canon, one would do well to examine one's motivation for wanting to claim a canonical label for that experience. If one's teacher has certified that experience with a canonical name, the teacher's knowledge and motivation should be examined, too. And if one seriously wants to put an end to suffering, one would do well to take to heart the Canon's insistence that if one's awakening has not put an end to becoming and birth, the possibility for continued suffering remains.

The irony in all three of these arguments against the teaching on rebirth is that the people who make them all assume that the Buddha was incapable of questioning the views of his time, and yet the fact is that they themselves are unwilling to accept the Buddha's challenge to step back and question their own. We know how the Buddha responded to materialism in his own time, and there's no reason to assume that he would respond any differently to materialism today.

Some people might object that modern materialism is much more sophisticated now than it was in the time of the Buddha, and so it deserves a more serious hearing. But is that really the case? The questions that neurobiologists presently bring to issues of consciousness—"What is personal identity? What sort of thing is consciousness? How can consciousness be measured in material terms?"—are precisely the questions that the Buddha listed under inappropriate attention. Even though modern scientific experiments may be more sophisticated than Prince Pāyāsi's experiments on criminals, the scientists who conduct them are just as wrong-headed in thinking that a phenomenological process—consciousness and mental events as experienced from within—can be captured and measured in physical terms. Although rebirth is often presented as an unscientific view, the material sciences actually have no way at all of proving the issue one way or the other.

As for the efficacy of human action, the scientific method can never prove whether the scientists applying it are actually exercising free will

in designing their experiments. It also can't prove whether their actions in designing and running an experiment actually have an impact on the experiment's results. Scientific inquiry and peer review certainly act as if these assumptions are true—the idea of criticizing a poorly designed experiment would make no sense if scientists had no free will in designing their experiments. And if we can judge by appearances, the assumption of free will and the responsibilities it carries have been crucial in enabling scientific knowledge to advance. But the scientific method itself can't prove whether the appearance of free will and efficacious action is anything more than an appearance. And of course there's the irony that many scientists assume that the phenomena they observe operate under strict deterministic laws, while the method they employ assumes that they themselves are not driven by such laws in applying that method. This means that science is in no position to prove or disprove the Buddha's teachings on the range and powers of human action.

Finally, there's the whole question of how valid it is to divorce the Buddha's psychological insights from his cosmological teachings. As we noted in chapter one, we in the West—beginning with the European Romantics and American Transcendentalists—have long assumed that cosmology is the rightful sphere of the physical sciences, while religion should limit itself to the care of the human psyche. But one of the central insights of the Buddha's awakening is that events on the micro scale in the mind actually shape experiences on the macro scale in time and space. If we can't question the clear line our culture draws between psychology and cosmology, we won't be in a position to appreciate the ways in which the Buddha's insight on this issue can actually help bring suffering to an end.

So we're faced with a choice. If we're sincere about wanting to end suffering and to give the Buddha's teachings a fair test, then—instead of assuming that he was a prisoner of his own time and place, unable to question his cultural assumptions—we have to examine the extent to which, in adhering to our own cultural assumptions, we're imprisoning ourselves. If we don't want to drop our self-imposed restrictions, we can still benefit from any of the Buddha's teachings that fit within those limitations, but we'll have to accept the consequences: that the results

we'll get will be limited as well. Only if we're willing to submit to the test of appropriate attention, abandoning the presuppositions that distort our thinking about issues like karma and rebirth, will we be able to make full use of the Canon's tools for gaining total release.

Glossary

Arahant: A “worthy one” or “pure one;” a person whose mind is free of defilement and thus not destined for further rebirth. A title for the Buddha and the highest level of his noble disciples.

Āsava: Fermentation; effluent. Four qualities—sensuality, views, becoming, and ignorance—that “flow out” of the mind and create the flood (*ogha*) of the round of death & rebirth.

Brahmā: An inhabitant of the higher heavenly realms of form or formlessness.

Brahman: A member of the priestly caste, which claimed to be the highest caste in India, based on birth. In a specifically Buddhist usage, “brahman” can also mean an arahant, conveying the point that excellence is based not on birth or race, but on the qualities attained in the mind.

Deva (*devatā*): Literally, “shining one.” A being on the subtle levels of sensuality, form, or formlessness, living either in terrestrial or heavenly realms.

Dhamma: (1) Event; action; (2) a phenomenon in and of itself; (3) mental quality; (4) doctrine, teaching; (5) nibbāna (although there are passages describing nibbāna as the abandoning of all dhammas). Sanskrit form: *Dharma*.

Gotama: The Buddha’s clan name.

Jhāna: Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration focused on a single sensation or mental notion.

Kamma: (1) Intentional action; (2) the results of intentional actions. Sanskrit form: *Karma*.

Nibbāna: Literally, the “unbinding” of the mind from passion, aversion, and delusion, and from the entire round of death and rebirth. As this term also denotes the extinguishing of a fire, it carries connotations of stilling, cooling, and peace. Sanskrit form: *Nirvaṇa*.

Pāli: The language of the oldest extant Canon of the Buddha’s teachings.

Samvega: Dismay over the pointlessness of life as it’s ordinarily lived.

Sutta: Discourse.

Tathāgata: Literally, one who has “become authentic (*tatha-agata*)” or who is “truly gone (*tatha-gata*)”: an epithet used in ancient India for a person who has attained the highest religious goal. In Buddhism, it usually denotes the Buddha, although occasionally it also denotes any of his arahant disciples.

Upādāna: Clinging, which takes four forms: to sensuality, to habits & practices, to views, and to theories about the self.

Abbreviations

PĀLI BUDDHIST TEXTS:

<i>AN</i>	<i>Aṅguttara Nikāya</i>
<i>Dhp</i>	<i>Dhammapada</i>
<i>DN</i>	<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>
<i>MN</i>	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>
<i>Mv</i>	<i>Mahāvagga</i>
<i>SN</i>	<i>Saṃyutta Nikāya</i>
<i>Sn</i>	<i>Sutta Nipāta</i>
<i>Ud</i>	<i>Udāna</i>

VEDIC TEXTS:

<i>BAU</i>	<i>Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad</i>
<i>ChU</i>	<i>Chāndogya Upaniṣad</i>
<i>KathU</i>	<i>Kaṭha Upaniṣad</i>

References to DN and MN are to discourse (*sutta*). The reference to Mv is to chapter, section, and sub-section. Those to Dhp are to verse. References to other texts are to section (*saṃyutta, nipāta, or vagga*) and discourse. Numbering for AN and SN follows the Thai Edition of the Pāli Canon.

All translations from these texts are by the author, and are based on the Royal Thai Edition of the Pāli Canon (Bangkok: Mahamakut

Rajavidyalaya, 1982) and the BUDSIR IV edition of the Canon and Commentary produced by Mahidol University, Bangkok.

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