

When Buddhadharma comes to the West

Part II: What the Buddha Taught

Throughout his career, Buddha summarized his teaching as:

1. Suffering, and
2. The End of Suffering

His first presentation of this teaching was in the form of the Four Truths of the Noble Ones (*cattāri ariyasaccāni*) (the “Noble Ones” he is referring to are those who have achieved at least the 1st Stage of Awakening). These are:

1. The Truth about the Nature of Suffering
2. The Truth about the Cause of Suffering
3. The Truth about the End of Suffering
4. The Truth of the Path Leading to the End of Suffering

This simple formula contains within it the entire Buddhadharma, which is revealed in more and more detail as you penetrate each deeper layer.

1. The Truth about the Nature of Suffering

Although this first truth is often stated simplistically as “There is suffering”, or “All life is suffering”, or “Life is full of suffering”, such statements totally miss the point. When the Buddha first introduced this teaching, he described it to his listeners as something completely new and different, something that had never been taught before. But the fact that life is full of suffering is not news to anyone. This first truth actually consists in a profound explanation of the very nature of suffering and the relationship between pain and suffering. And the Buddha wasn’t teaching it as just another piece of information to be absorbed and taken away. He presented it as information intended to guide us in conducting our own deep and through investigation of the true nature of our own suffering and the suffering of others. This truth about the nature of suffering is profound and subtle. It has been truly understood only when a person has validated it through his or her own experience.

To penetrate this teaching, we must take a closer look at the word we are translating as “suffering”. That word is *dukkha*, and it literally means “unpleasantness” or “unsatisfactoriness.” The Buddha pointed out that every experience of any kind is associated with some feeling of pleasantness (*sukha*), unpleasantness (*dukkha*), or neutral, neither pleasant nor unpleasant (*asukha-adukha*). The Buddha further noticed that any pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feeling derives from one of only two possible sources – it must be either physical or mental in origin. Therefore he recognized two distinct kinds of *dukkha*: unpleasant feelings that are physical in origin, including those which we ordinarily call pain, and unpleasant feelings that are mental in origin, which constitute mental and emotional suffering.

To say that life is full of *dukkha*, and that the *dukkha* of life is unavoidable tells us nothing new. But to recognize that there are two kinds of *dukkha* provides the key to a wonderful discovery. As physical beings living in a material world, it is obvious that pain is unavoidable. Birth is painful, sickness and injury are painful, aging and death are painful. No matter how hard we try, the experience of pain is an inevitable part of our existence. And most of the time, pain is combined with mental anguish. But as everyone knows from personal experience, there are also occasions where physical pain isn’t necessarily associated with mental suffering. Is it possible that physical pain need not be associated with mental suffering?

The Buddha tells us this is in fact the case. He says that when an ordinary person experiences a painful event, it is like being shot with two arrows. First comes the unpleasant physical feeling. But then it is immediately followed by the second arrow, the emotional suffering that is triggered by the pain. But when a “Noble One” (someone who is Awakened) experiences a painful event, there is only the arrow of unpleasant physical feeling, but no mental suffering follows. Furthermore, he tells us, *all of the other kinds of mental pain – grief and sorrow, lamentation, despair, loss, not getting what you want and getting what you don’t want, can all be overcome as well.* In other words, the Truth of the Nature of *Dukha* is that *pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional.*

As a corollary, what is true of pain and suffering are also true of pleasure and happiness. Life inevitably brings some degree of both pleasure and pain (although too often more of the latter). And both are ultimately beyond our control. But suffering and happiness, on the other hand, are created by the mind and can be influenced by the mind. A subtler truth that the Buddha also teaches is that suffering and happiness are parts of a single continuum. When there is no suffering at all, what remains is the most sublime form of happiness possible. If, as the Buddha assures us, it is possible to completely overcome suffering, then the result is a kind of happiness that is not dependent upon external circumstances, and that far surpasses anything we’ve ever known before. In other words, the larger Truth of the Nature of *Dukha* and *Sukha* is that *pain and pleasure are inevitable and beyond our power to control, but suffering and happiness are optional and we can choose which we will have.*

But it is only when the cause of suffering has been clearly understood that the end of suffering becomes a possibility. Which brings us to the second truth.

2. The Truth about the Cause of Suffering

We often hear this second truth stated as “Desire is the cause of all suffering”, or “Craving is the cause of all suffering”. Craving is a better term to use, because it covers both the desire for what is pleasant, and the aversion to what is unpleasant. The essence of suffering is wanting things to be different than they are, and this includes not wanting what is as much as wanting what is not. As we have seen, *dukkha* means “unsatisfactoriness”, so there is a certain circularity in saying that “the craving for things to be different than they are is the cause of dissatisfaction with the way things are.” But this is precisely how closely suffering and the cause of suffering are intertwined. When we resist physical pain, we experience emotional suffering as well. When we resist anything else about the way things are, we suffer then as well.

But before we go on, let’s consider another sense in which craving is the cause of suffering. We, and everyone around us, are constantly doing and saying things in an attempt to avoid or decrease our own pain and suffering, and to increase pleasure and happiness for ourselves. But if we look closely and are honest, many of these things we say and do cause suffering to others, further contributing to the total burden of suffering in the world. So, while our desires and aversions are the cause of our own suffering, they are also the cause of an enormous amount of otherwise avoidable and unnecessary suffering that we inflict on others.

This issue of avoidable versus unavoidable, unnecessary versus necessary pain and suffering is an important one. As we saw in our examination of the first truth, a certain amount of pain in life is inevitable. It is an inherent part of existence for any sentient organism in a material world. And it is also inherent within the very nature of life itself that we cannot survive without contributing in some degree to the pain of other beings. That is the unavoidable pain of life. Likewise, until every sentient being has achieved the complete and total cessation of suffering described in the third truth, whatever pain there is will continue to lead to mental and emotional suffering as well.

To attempt never to cause any kind of pain and suffering to any being whatsoever is entirely futile. The closest we could ever come to achieving this would be through our own annihilation, and even that would likely have unpleasant effects on others. But it should be immediately obvious to everyone that the world is filled with far more pain and suffering than is absolutely necessary or unavoidable. If we can overcome the craving that causes our own suffering, at the same time we will cease to contribute to the avoidable and unnecessary suffering of others.

When the Buddha taught that craving was the cause of personal suffering, he asked us to verify this for ourselves, rather than taking his word for it or simply agreeing because it sounds reasonable. If what he tells us is true, then every time you experience suffering, regardless of how slight or severe, there is craving of some kind at the root of it. It means the very experience of suffering is like a warning light, flashing to alert you to the presence of craving. If craving means wanting things to be different, then its opposite is accepting things as they are. So this is the test: If you can discover what it is that you crave to be different, then by letting go of that craving and accepting what is, the suffering should stop.

This is exactly what you will find if you make the effort. Now, you won't always be able to detect the craving at first, and sometimes you will incorrectly identify the craving that is the root source of a particular instance of suffering. But with a bit of practice, you'll become much better at it. Then, when you have identified the desire or aversion that is actually causing your suffering, you can try letting go of it and just accepting things as they are. To the extent that you succeed in doing so, in that moment *the suffering will cease*. The suffering may return again immediately afterwards, but if you can let go of the craving once more, the suffering will again disappear. If you do this for a while, you will become unshakably convinced of two things: *craving is the actual cause of suffering; and when craving ceases, suffering ceases as well*.

Of course, you will have also found that you are not always successful in letting go of the craving, and both the craving and the suffering always return fairly quickly. Which raises the question of whether or not it is really possible to achieve a complete and permanent end to suffering and the craving that causes it. That brings us to the third truth.

3. The Truth about the End of Suffering

The Buddha assures us that a complete and permanent end of suffering is possible, but only through a complete and permanent end of craving. But to overcome craving, we must first destroy the root of craving. He goes on to explain that craving is rooted in a delusion, an intuitive misperception of reality.

We feel, and therefore firmly believe, that we are a separate and enduring “self” in a world of self-existent objects and similarly enduring separate “other beings”. Because our interactions with these objects and other beings results in pleasure and pain, we further believe that our suffering or happiness is dependent upon those interactions. This delusion is so deeply embedded and so completely colors our perception of reality that we never question it. Instead, we invest a huge amount of time and effort in attempts to manipulate the world in hopes of avoiding suffering and finding lasting happiness.

The Buddha described in detail the sequence of events from which the suffering self arises: An ordinary “person” is a conscious psycho-physical entity that has been strongly conditioned since birth by this intuitive misperception of reality. Whenever such a person becomes conscious of something, either a material object known via the five senses or a mental object arising in the mind, there arises an experience of pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feeling. In the next moment, craving arises – craving to have more of or hold on to what is pleasant; craving to get rid of or

avoid in the future what is unpleasant; or craving for something pleasant to replace that which is only neutral. This craving ignites the delusion of there being a self and of there being objects with the potential to satisfy that craving. The mind clings to this delusion. Craving also arouses within that clinging mind the compulsion to act in order to achieve its fulfillment. It is in that moment that a suffering being comes into existence, filled with craving, and compulsively acting in ways likely to cause further pain and suffering for both itself and others.

These misguided actions and intentions only reinforce the conditioning that drives the cycle of delusion, craving and suffering, causing it to repeat endlessly. Buddha called these the “links of dependent origination” (*paticcasamuppāda*): delusion → conditioning → the conscious “person” → contact with objects → pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feelings → craving → clinging to the fabricated notions of “self” and “other” → “becoming” through the compulsion to act → the striving, suffering “self” → more delusion, and so it repeats.

To destroy the delusion that is the root of craving requires us to work backward through this sequence of dependent origination. If we can stop reinforcing the delusion all the time, and instead begin to weaken its power over us, we will not be so driven to act out of compulsion. And we can eventually overcome the clinging to the fabricated “ego” self. Having done so, we will have achieved the first of four stages leading to the final end of suffering. We are not yet free from suffering, but are no longer as vulnerable to it. Clinging to the ego-self is only a part of the root of craving, but overcoming it is enough that we can now make a concerted assault on craving itself.

Once craving loses its power, we will have achieved the second stage of Awakening, and our capacity for suffering is greatly diminished. When we have completely overcome desire and aversion involving pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experiences, the third stage has been achieved. At this point, there only remains the inherent sense of self, the intuitive perception of being separate, but because of that, there is still a craving for continued existence. This last lingering craving is the only thing that stands in the way of the complete and permanent cessation of suffering of every kind. The final end of suffering comes only when this inherent sense of separateness has disappeared as well.

Now that we have seen that a final end to suffering is possible, we are ready for the fourth truth.

4. The Truth of the Path Leading to the End of Suffering

The path leading to the end of suffering has eight factors:

- Right View
- Right Intention
- Right Speech
- Right Action
- Right Livelihood
- Right Effort
- Right Concentration
- Right Mindfulness

These eight factors are not steps to be followed in sequence, one after another. The Path is described as being “eightfold” because they are eight parallel but separate paths to be followed simultaneously. They have been compared with the intertwined strands of a cable. The eight path factors are divided into three groups or “pillars”, described as Wisdom (*pañña*), Virtue (*sīla*), and Meditation (*samādhi*). Right View and Right Intention are the factors comprising the pillar

of Wisdom. Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood make up the pillar of Virtue. Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration are the factors of the Meditation pillar.

Wisdom constitute both the beginning and the end of the Path overall. We need the understanding provided by Right View as a guide, to show us where we are starting from, where we are heading, and what we need to do to get there. Right Intention is required before a person will begin to engage any of the other factors. But once this beginning has been made, all eight factors are practiced simultaneously, each supporting the others. Right Understanding as the end of the Path is the complete understanding of the true nature of all things. It is the wisdom that completely dispels the delusion that has held us prisoner to craving and suffering. Right Intention as the end of the Path is the pure compassion that naturally arises when the true nature of reality is understood. The cessation of suffering can only be achieved through Wisdom, and Wisdom is always accompanied by Compassion.

Part III: Wisdom and Virtue

The key to the permanent cessation of craving and suffering is to overcome delusion. The training in Wisdom awakens the faculty of penetrating Insight that sees things "as they really are." Wisdom unfolds by degrees, but even the faintest flashes of insight have as their basis a mind that is concentrated and mindful, cleared of disturbance and distraction. This is achieved through training in Meditation, which brings the mental faculties needed to develop Wisdom. At the climax of the process, the mind turns away from conditioned phenomena focuses on the unconditioned state, *nibbana* (*nirvana*), which becomes accessible through the deepened faculty of Insight. *Nibbana* is realized and craving cease in the same moment. When *nibbana* is seen, it is realized as the state of perfect peace

But in order for the mind to be unified in meditation, the predisposition to act out of worldly desire, ill-will and aversion, and the distraction, worry and agitation they produce, must be overcome. This accomplished by the training in Virtue. Thus Virtue is the foundation for Meditation, and Meditation is the foundation for Wisdom.

The pillar of Wisdom consists of Right View and Right Intention

Right View

Right View (*sammā-ditṭhi*) can also be translated as "right understanding".

Mundane Right View characterizes the beginning and the middle of the Path. It is an intellectual understanding achieved through the study. It provides the reasoning behind the Path and inspires us to practice Virtue and Meditation. Right Effort is used to abandon wrong views and to enter into Right View. Right View must be held with a flexible, open mind, without clinging to dogmatic positions, so that it becomes a route to liberation rather than another obstacle. Right Mindfulness is used to constantly remain in Right View. Through the practice of Meditation, right view is gradually transmuted into true Wisdom. Supramundane Right View is the fully matured intuitive Wisdom that marks the end of the Path.

Right View is the cognitive aspect of Wisdom, and the precondition for Right Intention. Its purpose is to clear away our confusion, misunderstanding, and deluded thinking about ourselves, life, and the world, and to help us understand reality. "Wrong view" arises from delusion (*avijja*), and leads to wrong intention, wrong speech, wrong action, wrong livelihood, wrong effort,

wrong mindfulness, wrong concentration – and, of course, suffering. The Buddha said that he saw no single factor so responsible for the arising of unwholesome states of mind as wrong view, and no factor so helpful for the arising of wholesome states of mind as Right View. Again, he says that there is no single factor so responsible for the suffering of living beings as wrong view, and no factor so potent in promoting the good of living beings as Right View (AN 1:16.2). In its fullest measure, Right View involves a correct understanding of the entire teaching of the Buddha, and thus its scope is equal to the range of the Dharma itself.

The simplest definition of right view is to properly understand the Four Noble Truths: the nature of suffering, its origin, its cessation and the way to its cessation. But this is circular, bringing us right back to the Eight-fold Path and to Right View again, inviting us to go deeper. If we accept that invitation, Right View brings us to the Three Characteristics (*tilakkhana*) and Karma.

The Three Characteristics

As we have seen, the cause of suffering is craving and the root of craving is delusion. Right View describes things as they really are, beginning with the truth hidden behind our delusions. The world of human experience has three characteristics:

Everything is Impermanent and Empty

The world of enduring self-existent objects that we think we know and understand so well is an illusion. Everything is constantly changing. The existence of any object is dependent upon causes and conditions and the parts that make it up. The existence of the parts is in turn dependent on other causes and conditions and even smaller parts. Causes and conditions are constantly changing, and so is everything that is dependent upon them. Therefore, all of reality is in constant flux at every level, has no enduring nature, and there is nothing that is self-existent. In short there is *only* flux. But we think and act as though things, people, and situations will last. Then we grieve when their impermanence is revealed. Clinging to what is impermanent only leads to pain and suffering.

Any apparently enduring object is not only rapidly changing, but it has no more inherent “thingness” than a ripple in a stream or the whirlpool in the bottom of a draining bathtub. The apparent *nature* of any given object is only a projection, an imputation of the mind superimposed on a transitory collection of parts. We can speak of a car that is lacking a license plate. But the idea of a car that lacks everything but a license plate is ridiculous. But where is the line drawn, on one side of which there is car-ness, on the other side there isn't? This is what “emptiness” refers to – that objects are empty of the inherent self-nature we project onto them. And what if the car was made of marshmallow or pixie dust instead of metal, glass and plastic. Would it still be a car? If you could sit in it and drive from Tucson to Phoenix and back, you would probably agree that it's still a car, otherwise not. It's actually the ability to perform a *function*, to participate in the dance of cause and effect that defines reality, not these imaginary objects that the mind projects onto the flux being. Where the mind infers a particular *nature* and set of *properties* as inherently a part of these imaginary objects, there is in fact only a function that has been performed.

In a consensual reality, where everyone shares the same illusions, this isn't much of a problem. But the more complex the “object” and the more sophisticated its projected “nature”, the more different our individual projections tend to be. That's where consensual reality begins to fail. We feel deceived, betrayed, or confused when this happens. Other people, social groups, and life circumstances are important examples of things that are just too complex for our minds to label and categorize effectively. But we do it anyway. Then we attach values to the representations we've made in our minds, make judgments based on all this projection, and proceed to act and

react out of those judgments. The result is that each of us is living in our own world, and is happy or sad according to the kind of world we imagine ourselves to be in. In other words, we live the stories our mind makes up for us. Your and my consensual realities may be more or less the same, but my personal reality may be heaven while yours is hell. But so long as we believe in these stories and neither of us understands how our minds create these subjective realities, the chances are good that both of us are going to experience a lot of suffering. To cling to what is empty as if it were real only leads to pain and suffering.

The Self we think we are is as Empty and Impermanent as everything else

Each of us has an inherent sense of being a separate, self-existent entity. If we reflect on that sense more deeply, it involves three properties: unity or oneness – we are or have only one “self”; endurance – we have always been the same “self”, although our bodies and minds have undergone many changes; and separateness – the “self” is separate and distinct from everything else, which is “other”, or “not self”.

The Buddha identified the individual person as consisting of the body and mind (*nama-rupa*), and further described these as being made up of five different collections or aggregates:

- Form or materiality, which is actually the aggregate of physical sensations. It is on the basis of touches, sights, sounds, etc. that we infer the actual existence of our bodies and the physical universe.
- Feelings, which refers not to sensations or emotions, but to the aggregate of affective experiences of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral that constantly arise and pass away every moment in association with conscious events.
- Perceptions, which are the interpretations, based on previous knowledge and experience, by which the mind makes sense of and draws meaning from raw sensory data.
- Mental constructs, which includes essentially every kind of mental “activity” – thoughts, emotions, memories, judgments, intentions and so forth.
- Consciousnesses, which is the aggregate of various types of conscious experience, consciousness of visual objects tactile objects, mental objects, and so on.

He asserted that everything that we identify as ourselves, our personal identity in its entirety, could be found within those five aggregates. He challenges us first to contemplate this and find anything that is unaccounted for.

Once we are satisfied that nothing has been omitted from this description, he invites us to find anything corresponding to our sense of “self” or “soul” anywhere within those five aggregates. We can go through the five aggregates methodically, looking at the individual elements within each, combinations of these elements, each aggregate as a whole, combinations of aggregates, and the five aggregates in its entirety. We will find nothing that is not multiple, changing, dependent and interdependent. There is nothing that we have absolute dominion over, and no part has dominion over everything else. Nor is there anything that is not impermanent, perishable, and subject to suffering. In other words, there is nothing at all that corresponds to the sense of a single, enduring and separate self. If we’ve followed the Buddha’s instructions, we’ve already determined that everything that is associated with our unique, individual “self” has already been accounted for in the five aggregates. Therefore, there is no “self” other than the five aggregates, and the kind of self we feel we are must be an illusion.

Please note, the Buddha is not addressing the issue of whether or not there is some undefined and indefinable subtle essence or “soul”. Merely that such cannot be found within the five aggregates, and is not required to make a complete accounting of the individual person. When

asked, he refused to even discuss such possibilities. Rather, he placed them in a category of topics that are unknowable, the object of endless speculation, and of no value or relevance to the Path to wisdom, compassion, and the end of suffering. Remember, the Buddha didn't teach any religious view, and didn't care what views others held, as long as they were not in conflict with Right View and didn't interfere with the practice of the Path.

The inherent *feeling of being a separate self* is ultimately at the root of all our other delusions and the craving and suffering that arise from them. The problem with feeling that we are a separate self is that it divides the world into self and other. The boundary between self and other then becomes a battlefield, a war zone in which the self struggles to obtain what it needs and to avoid what is harmful to it – in other words, desire and aversion are the inescapable consequences of a view of reality in which self and other are separate. To make things worse, the mind responds to the “sense” of self by fabricating a “conceptual” self to fill that role. This is the “ego” self to which we become attached, that is vulnerable to insult and injury, and whose needs drive our darkest passions and most despicable behaviors. But even as a fabrication, this ego-self doesn't fulfill the idea of single, enduring, separate self. It is multiple rather than singular, different ego-selves being slipped on and off like hats as we move from one situation to another. It (or they) are also constantly changing. You no more operate with the same set of ego-selves today as you did ten years ago than you wear the same clothes now as you did then. And your ego-selves don't even really belong to you. They are a product of your environment, your culture, and your associates. You use these ego-selves to navigate through the world as though you really are separate, but it is the so-called “other” that has actually created them and given them the form they take.

Life is filled with Unnecessary Suffering

Delusion makes us deny what is and crave what does not exist. This is a form of suffering from which there is no respite.

Grasping to illusions brings only temporary satisfaction, which will inevitably turn to pain. As this happens over and over, knowing it won't last decreases even the temporary satisfaction we experience, yet we cling all the more fiercely. When the empty nature of the “self” and all that we are attached to reveals itself, as it inevitably does, life loses meaning and despair begins to set in. The normal reaction is to seek escape through immersion in sense pleasures and chasing after distractions, rather than trying to discover what might lie on the other side this existential abyss.

In the beginning, Right View entails an intellectual grasp of the impermanent and empty nature of worldly objects, the emptiness of self, and the suffering caused by clinging to either of these. But the culmination of Right View is a direct intuition of those same truths. The attainment of Wisdom coincides with the end of suffering, and vice versa. By embracing what is, the pleasures of life are experienced to the full, not blunted by futile clinging and attachment. The inevitable pains of life are impermanent, coming and going just as they are in themselves, not magnified by resistance and aversion, and in no way diminishing the bliss of a mind in its natural state. Bathed in the wonder and mystery of ultimate reality, the realization of emptiness is a gain rather than a loss.

Causality and Karma

A fundamental assertion of Buddhadharma is that absolutely everything is the result of causes and conditions. Furthermore, every action by way of body, speech, or mind has consequences. The key to Right View of the Path is understanding the consequences of our actions, and of the intentions behind them. The latter is sometimes called the Law of Karma.

A wanderer named Sivaka once asked the Buddha if it was true, as the Brahmins said, that karma is the cause of everything.¹ Now *karma* (*kamma* in Pali) is a Sanskrit word that literally means “action”. It would have been quite true to say that everything that happens is the result of previous “action” of some sort or another. But the Buddha answered differently because, in the culture of the time, the word “karma” had come to mean specifically the *moral* aspect of *personal* actions. So what Sivaka was actually asking was whether everything that happened to a person was a *moral consequence* of *his own* previous actions. The Buddha explained that this was not the case, that karma was only one of many causes of things that happen to us.

Karma is one of five different kinds or “orders” of causality discussed by the Buddha. The first order of causality is *physical*, which is the realm of physics and chemistry. The second order of causality, which is an extension of the first, is *biological*, and is the domain of genetics, biochemistry, medicine, and indeed all of the biological sciences. The third order of causality is *mental*, it is an extension of biological causality that emerges in organisms with brains and minds, and it is the domain of behavioral sciences. All organisms with minds behave in ways determined by mental causality. But certain organisms with minds have the capacity to learn and change, to *reprogram their own minds*. This is *karma*, the fourth order of causality and it is an extension of the third. It falls within the domain of psychology, morality, and philosophy, and will be explained in detail below. The fifth order of causality is the *Dharma*, an extension of the fourth that allows us to use karmic causality to transcend karma, and thereby to achieve Awakening, Wisdom, compassion and the end of suffering.

Right View requires that we clearly understand karma and its relationship to other kinds of causality. The actual consequences of our actions take various forms, and are determined by any of the different orders of causality that happen to be involved in a particular action. And as Buddha explained to Sivaka, when something happens, it can be a result of many different orders of causality, not just karma.

But the word karma had come to mean specifically the actions of an individual that had moral consequences for that same individual, not action in general. Therefore the Buddha needed to redefine karma before he could explain how it worked in terms of the Path: “Intention (*cetana*) I tell you, is karma. Intending, one acts by way of body, speech, & mind.”² In other words, the moral consequences for the person who commits an act depend upon the intention behind the act. But the action can produce all kinds of other consequences as well, affecting both the one who acts and others as well. This may seem quite obvious to us today, but has been a source of considerable confusion in the past.

More recently, the word karma has come to be used for the *results* of our actions and intentions. This is an error and creates confusion. The effects or results of an *action* are due to physical, biological, or mental causality. They are called *phala* or “fruits”. The karmic effects, caused by the *intention* behind the action, are called *vipaka*, the “ripening” of karma.

Any action is distinguished as wholesome or unwholesome depending on its consequences (*phala*). The intention behind an action, on the other hand, is distinguished as wholesome or unwholesome according to the roots (*mula*) from which it springs. As expressed in the *Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta* (MN 9):

¹ SN 36.21, *Sivaka Sutta*: To Sivaka.

² AN 6.63, *Nibbedhika Sutta*.

"When, friends, a noble disciple understands the unwholesome, the root of the unwholesome, the wholesome, and the root of the wholesome, in that way he is one of right view, whose view is straight, who has perfect confidence in the Dhamma, and has arrived at this true Dhamma"

Let's take these points in order.

The Wholesome and The Unwholesome

1. Any act (mental, verbal or physical) is considered *morally and ethically* unwholesome if it is conducive to suffering for oneself and/or others. An act of neglect or omission or a failure to act can also be considered unwholesome if there is a missed opportunity to relieve or prevent suffering. Wholesome acts, on the other hand, are beneficial for oneself and others. This includes, of course, acts that relieve or prevent suffering. The Buddha selected ten primary examples, of which three are physical, four are verbal, and three are mental:

Unwholesome Physical Acts

1. Destroying life
2. Taking what is not given
3. Sexual misconduct

Unwholesome Verbal acts

4. False speech
5. Divisive or slanderous speech
6. Harsh speech (*vacikamma*)
7. Idle talk and gossip

Unwholesome Mental Acts

8. Covetousness
9. Ill will
10. Wrong views

Their opposites are: abstaining from the first seven, being free from covetousness and ill will, and holding Right View. Note that all of these, including the seven cases of abstinence, are exercised entirely by the mind and do not entail overt action. The corresponding overt acts are:

Wholesome Physical Acts

1. Giving protection, aid, and comfort.
2. Protecting the property of others, and giving generously.
3. Sexual conduct (and in fact every other kind of interpersonal behavior as well) that is respectful of oneself and others, honest, free from coercion or exploitation, for the benefit of all, and without harm to any.

Wholesome Verbal acts

4. Speaking the truth, but *only* when it is beneficial, and *only* at the right time.
5. Speech that creates harmony and leads to greater cooperation, mutual respect, and tolerance.
6. Speech that is soothing, uplifting, and conducive to the well-being of others.
7. Speech that contributes to the wisdom and virtue of others.

Wholesome Mental Acts

8. Sympathetic joy at the good fortune of others.
9. Patience and loving kindness.
10. Wisdom and compassion.

The Roots of the Wholesome and the Unwholesome

2. Any act is considered karmically wholesome or unwholesome according to whether its underlying "root intention" (*mula*) is wholesome or unwholesome. The unwholesome roots are

greed, aversion, and delusion. An action originating from these roots is karmically unwholesome, regardless of its “fruits”. The three wholesome roots are their opposites, expressed negatively as non-greed (*alobha*), non-aversion (*adosa*), and non-delusion (*amoha*). Expressed positively they are the corresponding virtues of equanimity and generosity; patience, loving-kindness, compassion, and gentleness; and wisdom. Any action originating from an intention with these roots is karmically wholesome.

It is important to note that an act can be morally wholesome but karmically unwholesome at one and the same time, and vice versa.

Karma ripens (*vipaka*) as the tendency to base future intentions on similar wholesome or unwholesome roots. Delusion is the basis of greed and aversion, so delusion is a part of every unwholesome intention. Therefore, the ripening of unwholesome karma strengthens craving and reinforces delusion. Intentions rooted in greed and aversion serve to reinforce delusion, moving us away from wisdom, *and this is precisely what makes them karmically unwholesome*. Craving causes suffering, so the intensification of delusion and craving also inevitably leads to increased suffering.

The ripening of wholesome karma weakens and counteracts delusion and craving:

"When a noble disciple has thus understood the unwholesome, the root of the unwholesome, the wholesome, and the root of the wholesome, he entirely abandons the underlying tendency to lust, he abolishes the underlying tendency to aversion, he extirpates the underlying tendency to the view and conceit 'I am,' and by abandoning ignorance and arousing true knowledge he here and now makes an end of suffering. In that way too a noble disciple is one of right view, whose view is straight, who has perfect confidence in the Dhamma and has arrived at this true Dhamma." *Sammāditṭhi Sutta*

The final goal to which the Path leads us is liberation from suffering, which depends ultimately on overcoming delusion. What makes an intention karmically wholesome is that it leads away from delusion and towards the Awakening to ultimate truth; away from ignorance and towards Wisdom; away from *samsara*, the endless cycle of suffering, and towards *Nirvana*. Intentions rooted in non-greed and non-aversion weaken delusion, moving us towards Wisdom, *and this is what makes them karmically wholesome*.

The importance of understanding what karma is, its consequences, and how it works cannot be overstated. As the Buddha said, "I am the owner of my karma. I inherit my karma. I am born of my karma. I am linked to my karma. I live supported by my karma. Whatever karma I create, whether good or evil, that I shall inherit."³ More simply stated, we create ourselves through our karma. Who and what we are is the result of our karma.

To say that we create ourselves through our karma may seem a bit much, but let's look at how it happens. Our “selfhood” and the world of objects we cling to is nothing other than a stream of impermanent and conditioned moments of conscious experience. Each moment of consciousness contributes to the accumulation of the five aggregates:

1. An *object of perception* is known by means of one of the six senses;
2. The object is identified in an *act of perception* on the basis of pre-existing conceptual formations;
3. There is conscious awareness of the *perceived object*;

³ AN V.57, *Upajjhatthana Sutta*.

4. Positive, negative or neutral feeling accompanies the *act of perception*, and becomes strongly associated with the *perceived object*; and
5. *Intentions*, conditioned by our past thoughts, words and deeds, arise in response to that perception, and a restructuring of conceptual formations occurs due to these intentions and the acts following from them.

These newly restructured aggregates determine the perceptions, feelings, intentions, and actions that will arise with the next sense object that arises.

The result of our karma is not what happens to us, but who it happens to, and how we will *experience* those events. Some people will be unhappy and suffer no matter what happens, while others will be happy no matter what happens. Some people can never have enough, but others always have enough to share. What is a disaster for one is an opportunity for another. That is the result of karma.

Watch your thoughts, for they become words.
Watch your words, for they become actions.
Watch your actions, for they become habits.
Watch your habits, for they become character.
Watch your character, for it becomes your destiny.

Source Unknown

Mundane Right View affirms that we have an influence on our destiny, and it opposes the deterministic view that our present choices and future circumstances are predetermined.

Supramundane Right View overturns the nihilistic view that we are a separate self in a world of chance whose existence terminates with death.

Right Intention

Right Intention (*sammā sankappa*) can also be translated as "right resolve" or "right motivation".

The three Right Intentions are:

- a) Renunciation, which means resistance to the desire for worldly things and greater commitment to the spiritual path
- b) Good will, which means resistance to feelings of anger and aversion, freedom from ill will, and the cultivation of loving-kindness.
- c) Harmlessness, which means not thinking or acting cruelly, violently, or aggressively, and developing compassion.

The three are opposed to three parallel kinds of wrong intention: desire, ill will, and harmfulness.

While Right View refers to the cognitive aspect of wisdom, Right Intention refers to the volitional aspect. Right Intention follows as a natural consequence of Right View. When we understand the nature and pervasiveness of suffering, and how suffering derives from craving, the mind inclines to renunciation — to abandon the craving that binds us to suffering. Then, when we apply this same understanding to other living beings, the mind is similarly inclined toward good will and harmlessness. We see that, like ourselves, all beings seek happiness, and thoughts of good will arise — the wish that they may be well, happy, and peaceful. The recognition that all beings experience suffering causes thoughts of harmlessness to arise — the compassionate wish that they be free from suffering.

Right Intention forms the link between cognition and active engagement in the world. Actions spring from intentions, and intentions are formed according to views. One who understands the Four Noble Truths, the Three Characteristics, and the Law of Karma, will frame his intentions according to this understanding. The Buddha succinctly sums up the matter when he says that for

a person who holds a wrong view, his actions, speech, and intentions grounded in that view will lead to suffering, while for a person who holds right view, his actions, speech, and intentions grounded in that view will lead to happiness (AN 1:16.2). Right Intention is a *commitment* to ethical and mental self-improvement, to shape our minds by right intentions as opposed to wrong intentions.

Since greed and aversion are deeply grounded, they do not yield easily; however, overcoming them is possible if the right strategy is used. The path devised by the Buddha makes use of an indirect approach: greed and aversion surface in the form of thoughts, and thus can be eroded by a process of "thought substitution," by replacing them with opposing thoughts. Since contrary thoughts cannot coexist, thoughts of renunciation dislodge thoughts of desire. Aversion manifests as angry, hostile, or resentful thoughts; or in thoughts of cruelty, aggression, and destruction. Thoughts of loving kindness and compassion offer an antidote to aversion.

The Intention of Renunciation

Desire must be abandoned, not because it is morally evil in itself, but because it is a root of suffering. Putting an end to suffering depends on eliminating desire, and that involves renunciation. Thus renunciation becomes the key to freedom from desire and attachment.

But there is a powerful inner resistance to letting go of attachment. The mind does not want to relinquish its hold on the objects to which it has become attached. It has been accustomed to gaining, grasping, and holding for so long that it can seem impossible to break these habits by an act of will. One might agree to the need for renunciation, might want to leave attachment behind, but the mind recoils and continues to move in the grip of its desires.

So the problem arises of how to break the shackles of desire. Repression — the attempt to drive desire away with a mind full of fear and loathing — does not work. It only pushes the problem below the surface, where it continues to thrive. The tool the Buddha holds out to free the mind from desire is understanding. When we understand the nature of desire, when we investigate it closely with keen attention, desire falls away by itself, without need for struggle.

The Intention of Good Will

Aversion and ill-will are the other root of suffering. There are two ineffective ways of handling ill will. One is to yield to it, to express the aversion by bodily or verbal action. This releases the tension, gets the anger "out of one's system," but it also breeds resentment, provokes retaliation, creates enemies, poisons relationships, and generates unwholesome karma. In the end, the ill will does not leave the "system" after all, but instead is driven to a deeper level where it continues to affect one's thoughts and conduct. The other approach, repression, also fails to dispel the destructive force of ill will. It merely turns that force around and pushes it inward, where it turns into self-contempt, chronic depression, or a tendency to irrational outbursts of violence.

The remedy the Buddha recommends to counteract ill will, is *metta*. *Metta* means "loving-kindness": an intense feeling of selfless love for other beings, radiating outwards as a heartfelt concern for their well-being and happiness. *Metta* is not just sentimental good will. It is a deep inner feeling, characterized by spontaneous warmth.

The love involved in *metta* does not hinge on particular relations to particular persons. Here the reference point of self is utterly omitted. The practice of loving-kindness involves suffusing the mind with caring for others, which ideally is extended to all living beings without discriminations or reservations. The idea of deliberately developing love has been criticized as contrived, mechanical, and calculated. Love, it is said, can only be genuine when it is spontaneous, arisen without inner prompting or effort. But the mind cannot be commanded to

love spontaneously; it can only be shown the means to develop love and trained to do so through practice. At first the means has to be employed with some deliberation, but through practice the feeling of love becomes ingrained in the mind as a natural and spontaneous tendency.

The meditation on loving-kindness is one of the most important kinds of Buddhist meditation. It meditation begins with the development of loving-kindness towards oneself because true loving-kindness for others only becomes possible when one is able to feel genuine loving-kindness for oneself. Probably most of the anger and hostility we direct at others springs from negative attitudes we hold towards ourselves.

Once one has learned to kindle the feeling of *metta* towards oneself, the next step is to extend it to others. The shift is purely psychological, entirely free from theological and metaphysical postulates. If we look into our own mind, we find that the basic urge of our being is the wish to be happy and free from suffering. Now, as soon as we see this in ourselves, we can immediately understand that all living beings share the same basic wish. All want to be well, happy, and secure. We use our own desire for happiness as the key, experience this desire as the basic urge of others, then come back to our own position and extend to them the wish that they may achieve their ultimate objective, that they may be well and happy.

The Intention of Harmlessness

The intention of harmlessness is thought guided by compassion (*karuna*), aroused in opposition to cruel, aggressive, and violent thoughts. Compassion supplies the complement to loving-kindness. Whereas loving-kindness has the characteristic of wishing for the happiness and welfare of others, compassion has the characteristic of wishing that others be free from suffering. It springs up by considering that all beings, like ourselves, wish to be free from suffering, yet despite their wishes continue to be harassed by pain, fear, sorrow, and other forms of *dukha*.

To develop compassion as a meditative exercise, it is most effective to start with somebody who is actually undergoing suffering, since this provides the natural object for compassion. One contemplates this person's suffering, either directly or imaginatively, then reflects that, like oneself, he or she also wants to be free from suffering. The thought should be repeated, and contemplation continually exercised, until a strong feeling of compassion swells up in the heart. Then, using that feeling as a standard, one turns to different individuals, considers how they are each exposed to suffering, and radiates the gentle feeling of compassion out to them. To increase the breadth and intensity of compassion it is helpful to contemplate the various sufferings to which living beings are susceptible.

Virtue

Virtue grounds the moral distinction between good and evil, wholesome and unwholesome, in a personally verifiable and objective universal principle. It affirms moral responsibility and the possibility of a truly meaningful life, and it opposes the ethical subjectivism that makes good and evil into a matter of personal opinion, group consensus, and a means for social control.

The underlying moral principle behind Buddhist Virtue is *ahimsa*, or harmlessness. As we have discussed earlier, life involves a certain amount of pain and suffering that is unavoidable, and it is impossible to live in this world without contributing to the harm of other beings in some way or another. That fact is what makes *ahimsa* a moral principle, rather than an injunction to literally cause no harm. It should be understood in this way:

Considering that all living beings are subject to pain and suffering, it is morally incumbent upon us endeavor to refrain from causing any avoidable and unnecessary pain

and suffering to any living being. Furthermore, we should undertake, through positive action wherever possible, to prevent the avoidable and unnecessary pain and suffering of living beings.

The pillar of Virtue consists of Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. These factors provide an ethical framework within which to follow the moral principle of harmlessness.

Right Speech means abstaining from false speech, divisive speech, harsh speech, and idle talk and gossip.

Right Action means abstaining from taking life, taking what is not given, and sexual misconduct.

Right Livelihood means abstaining from sources of livelihood that bring harm to other beings.

This would include, for example, activities such as trading in weapons, slaves, intoxicants, poisons, and the slaughter of animals.

For more details on these, and their positive counterparts, please see the section on “The Wholesome and the Unwholesome” above. These are not commandments. They are practices. These practices are wholesome in themselves. But the purpose of these practices is to train ourselves to overcome the defilements of desire, aversion, and delusion, and to generate wholesome karma. Through wholesome karma, we recreate ourselves as virtuous beings. Thus,

Virtue becomes the vehicle for a happy existence.

Through Virtue, good fortune is attained.

Virtue is the vehicle for liberation