Dhammapada

The Way of Truth

A Fresh Translation and Commentary
on Buddhism's Most Beloved Text

Peter Feldmeier

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This book contains a fresh translation of the classic and popular Buddhist text called Dhammapada. Dr. Feldmeier's readable translation balances accessibility and accuracy. Each of the twenty-six chapters of verses is followed by a modern commentary, which, besides imparting the wisdom of the verses in the chapter, also provides a larger presentation of basic Buddhist teachings so that by the end of the book the reader will be knowledgeable in the fundamental teachings of Buddhism.

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Introduction

I have meditated on the Dhammapada many times over the past twenty years. It informs my heart and stills my spirit. It confirms what is flourishing in my life and teaches me how I can be even more joyful, peaceful, and free. It also challenges me to recognize what undermines my happiness and keeps me bound. I simply love the Dhammapada, and I am not alone. It is by far the most popular and well-known canonical text in both the Theravada and Mahayana traditions. There are standard versions in Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, Prakrit, and even a modern Tibetan version. Even though there are significant differences between the many schools of Buddhism, happily there is little variance among these versions of the Dhammapada. For this reason, the Dhammapada represents a compilation of wisdom valid to all Buddhist schools. It works as such because it expresses the Buddhist foundations that unite the widely varied schools of Buddhism, including the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the qualities and behaviors of those who are particularly advanced, maxims on morality, skillful relationships, the laws of kamma (Skt: karma) and so on. In many ways, it works like a canon within the Canon, summarizing the basic tenets of Buddhism.

In Theravada Buddhism, it is standard for monastics to memorize the Dhammapada in its entirety as part of their training, and many continue to chant parts of it on a daily basis. In Sri Lanka, a decidedly Theravada country, some hotels provide their guests a copy of the Dhammapada, just as many hotels in the West provide a Gideon's Bible.

According to the tradition, the Buddha himself articulated the vast majority of the Dhammapada's verses, a given verse providing a teaching perfectly suited for a particular situation. The great fifth-century scholar Buddhaghosa provided a commentary in which he recounts these episodes. Whether or not all of his accounts are historical, they are solidly encased in the tradition, and they have long shaped the way in which Buddhists interpret the Dhammapada.

Dhammapada is an excellent and truly apt title for the collection of verses contained therein. It is derived from two words: *dhamma* and *pada*. *Dhamma* (Skt: *Dharma*) can mean so many things, such as "phenomenon," "law," "teaching," and "truth." As should be clear from the title of this book, I prefer "truth." *Pada* typically means "foot," and by extension can mean a "footstep" or "way" (it can even mean "word" or "verse"). To my mind, "The Way of Truth" is a particularly illuminating translation of "Dhammapada." The Dhamma is the truth of the universe for Buddhists, and each aphorism provides imaginative fodder for meditation as one advances along the way.

The Dhammapada has remained popular throughout the last two millennia in part because many of its verses give readers profound aesthetic and religious experiences. While some verses are a bit dry or awkward, many are deeply poetic, particularly in the original Pali. Throughout the Dhammapada, rich metaphors, vivid images, interesting wordplays, ballad-like repetitions, and resonant combinations of sounds all consort to open one's heart. In ancient Indian literature, this evocative style is known as *kāvya*, which intends to draw us emotionally into the reality being described. We get an emotional distaste for unwise thinking or acting, and feel refreshed and inspired by spiritually skillful ways of

being. We are invited to imagine ourselves as lotus flowers in the mud, islands withstanding a torrent, and noble elephants in battle. While we are still on the path, we get a sense and foretaste of what liberation feels like, and thus are inspired to advance toward it. We also get a deepening sense of the bitterness to which unskillful actions lead. We even imaginatively enter into an alarming encounter with Yama, the Lord of Death, an experience that the Dhammapada's powerful language makes particularly valid.

If we were to isolate and analyze each verse in the Dhammapada by itself, we would miss a great deal, for each verse draws much meaning from a larger context. We would also run into problems if we tried to reduce the Dhammapada to a clear, consistent, cohesive set of propositional claims. Such a project would leave us confused and prevent us from fully experiencing the Dhammapada's transformative power. The Dhammapada is a layered set of aphorisms that address the whole array of Buddhist concerns.

There are different levels at which one can read the Dhammapada, just as there are levels of skillful practice. On a basic level the Dhammapada encourages embracing the essence of common spiritual wisdom. All authentic paths recognize, for instance, that nursing resentments or perpetuating violence is morally disastrous. One could also read the Dhammapada at another level by paying particular attention to the dynamics of kamma. This theme is introduced in the first chapter and addressed throughout the whole of the text. The Buddha regularly warned against unskillful actions that bring about bad results and recommended those that ensure good results. Seeing this dynamic clearly is a fundamental tenet to Buddhism.

One can read the Dhammapada at still another level: liberation from *samsara*. Samsara represents wandering

from one lifetime to another. Various verses encourage letting go of any narrow kammic interests for the ultimate boon of Nibbāna (Skt: Nirvāna). In these verses, the Buddha challenges the idea that we should aim to generate merit for the purpose of securing a better rebirth. In his view, such an aim can distract us from the ultimate good, which is liberation from all rebirth.

How do these three layers—basic spiritual wisdom, kammic dynamics, and an emphasis on Nibbāna alone—align with one another? Some address this question along the line of *expedient means*. They argue that the Buddha used different teachings to motivate different psyches, always skillfully adjusting his instruction to the student's level of spiritual maturity. For the less spiritually mature, the very idea of Nibbāna simply wouldn't register. Thus, he highlighted lesser benefits to cajole them along the way. To those less advanced, he drew attention to the kammic fruits of various actions. Anyone would rather have a happy rebirth than a miserable one. In addition, in addressing more advanced students, he often encouraged the exclusive pursuit of Nibbāna. The point here is that the very drive for a blissful rebirth is symptomatic of a craving mind and actually strengthens the bonds of samsara.

Both motivational strategies, encouraging actions that generate good kamma and recommending a sharp focus on Nibbāna, are completely valid in a Buddhist framework. Moreover, they actually complement and support one another. Morally skillful actions that create good results are precisely those that lead to greater clarity about oneself and the path. While they create the conditions for an excellent rebirth, they also facilitate spiritual maturity and increase one's desire for Nibbāna. What's more, in speaking of Nibbāna, the Buddha regularly encouraged his listeners by highlighting the same sorts of benefits that he used to commend lesser goals. Nibbāna is

pleasurable, joyful, free from pain; it is the greatest happiness. Thus, the Buddhist path of truth, from start to finish, draws one from self-defeating suffering to various levels of joy, peace, ease, and happiness, all of which point to and anticipate Nibbāna. Nibbāna is implicitly present throughout the religious imagination of Buddhism. Buddhist benefits, from the tranquility of meditation to the possibility of living in a heavenly state, are not a random assortment of joys. Rather, they form a natural structure, a structure oriented toward the goal of attaining Nibbāna, the perfection of all the goods we experience along the path.

At this point, I should highlight an important consideration: readers should bear in mind throughout this commentary that the path depicted here is aligned to Theravada Buddhism. It is true that the Dhammapada contains wisdom valid in all forms of Buddhism, and indeed my commentary intends to provide the reader with a progressive understanding of basic Buddhism broadly shared by the various schools. It is also true, however, that there are major differences between the schools. For example, in the Theravada tradition, samsara is one expression of existence and Nibbāna is wholly another one. One seeks to escape samsara and attain Nibbāna. In contrast, in the Zen school of Mahayana Buddhism, we find such claims as "samsara and Nibbāna are one!" Another notable difference is how the universe is imagined. The Theravada school understands the universe rather impersonally. Surely, it is filled with many unseen beings, yet these beings rarely come into play. The focus is on the impersonal laws of Dhamma and how to negotiate them skillfully. Many Mahayana schools, however, understand the universe as virtually theistic, with bodhisattvas who advocate and care for humans. For instance, Pure Land Buddhism focuses

much of its energy on devotion to and reliance on the grace of Amitabha Buddha. Like all religions, the Buddhist religious family knows both small and large differences, even points of contention. The Dhammapada and my commentary is decidedly Theravadin. It is for this reason that I have decided to retain technical terms in Pali, the canonical language of the Theravada school, even if their common English vernacular is based off of Sanskrit. Thus, you will see dhamma instead of dharma, kamma instead of karma, sutta instead of sutra, and so on. To readers who are unfamiliar with these standard Pali terms, these may take a little getting used to. I think it's worth it, however, as it allows consistency in presentation and most fully reflects the Theravada tradition.

Before we delve into the Dhammapada, I'll make a few comments concerning my translation. I have tried to provide a translation that follows the principle of the *middle-way*, that is, a balance of values. First, this translation seeks to honor the *otherness* of the Dhammapada. It is an ancient text from a South Asian culture, and it should feel that way. Second, I did not want to render the text so oddly that it would feel out of place in English. Third, I wanted to be particularly accurate and fair. Every translation is an interpretation, but I did not want to take license with the text. Finally, I hoped to produce an echo of the experience intended by the original language, so as to perpetuate the spirit of the Dhammapada. There are jewels in the Dhammapada, and I would not want anyone to miss their radiance.

After each chapter I will offer a commentary, which intends a number of things. Of course, with many of my comments I intend to help the reader get a deeper sense of that given chapter's verses. I also hope to offer something of a spiritual commentary, that is, how to make the

wisdom of each chapter one's own. Finally, any chapter's comments are part of a larger presentation of basic Buddhist teachings. I've intentionally provided a layering of Buddhist doctrine and wisdom, introducing a theme here only to return to that same theme later with another layer of understanding. My intention is that, by the end of the text, the reader will be rather broadly knowledgeable in the fundamental teachings of Buddhism.

List of Abbreviations

AN	Aṅguttara Nikāya (by chapter I-IX; number)
Bv	Buddhavaṃsa
Dhp	Dhammapada (by verse)
DN	Dīgha Nikāya (by sutta number and section)
It	Itivuttaka (by sutta)
J-a	*Jātaka Aṭṭhakathā* (by book and section)
Mhbv	*Mahābodhivaṃsa*
MN	Majjhima Nikāya (by sutta number and section)
PED	*Pāli-English Dictionary*
Skt	Sanskrit
SN	Saṃyutta Nikāya (by saṃyutta and sutta)
Sn	Sutta Nipāta
Th	Theragāthā
Thī	Therīgāthā
Ud	Udāna (by traditional numbering)
Vin	Vinaya
Vism	*Visuddhimagga* (by book and section)

CHAPTER ONE

PAIRS

Yamaka-vagga

1. All phenomena are preceded by the mind,
Created by the mind,
And have the mind as their master.
If one speaks or acts from a corrupted mind,
Suffering follows as the cart-wheel follows the ox's foot.

2. All phenomena are preceded by the mind,
Created by the mind,
And have the mind as their master.
If one speaks or acts with a pure mind,
Happiness follows as an ever-present shadow.

3. He insulted me; he struck me;
He defeated me; he robbed me.
For those who dwell on such resentments,
Enmity never ceases.

4. He insulted me; he struck me;
He defeated me; he robbed me.
For those who do not dwell on such resentments,
Enmity subsides;

5. For enmities are never appeased by enmity.
They are appeased by peace.
This is an eternal law.

6. But many do not realize that we all must die.
Those who do realize this appease their quarrels.

7. One who lives unrestrained in the senses
And focused on pleasant things,
Who is immoderate in food,
Who is listless and lazy:
Māra overcomes him,
Just as wind overcomes a weak tree.

8. One who lives restrained in the senses
And focused on unpleasant things,
Who is moderate in food,
Who has faith and diligence:
Māra cannot overcome him,
Just as wind cannot overcome a rocky mountain.

9. Whoever would take on the yellow robe,
While hampered by defilement,
Being unrestrained and without truth,
Is unworthy of that yellow robe.

10. Whoever has thrown off defilement,
Is well-established in virtue,
And is possessed with self-control and truth,
Is truly worthy of the yellow robe.

11. Those who deem the worthless as valuable,
And see the valuable as worthless:
They do not attain the valuable;
They roam in the field of wrong thought.

12. (But) those who have known the valuable as valuable
And see the worthless as worthless:
They attain the valuable;
They roam in the field of right thought.

13. Just as rain penetrates a poorly thatched house,
So passion penetrates an uncultivated mind.

14. Just as rain does not penetrate a well-thatched house,
So passion fails to penetrate a well-cultivated mind.

15. Here he grieves, following death he grieves;
In both states the evil-doer grieves.
He grieves, he is afflicted,
Having seen his defiled deeds.

16. Here he rejoices, following death he rejoices;
In both states he who has done good deeds rejoices.
He rejoices, he delights,
Having seen his pure deeds.

17. Here he is tormented, following death he is tormented;
In both states the evil-doer is tormented.
He is tormented knowing, "I have done evil."
Reborn to a miserable state, he is tormented all the more.

18. Here he rejoices, following death he rejoices;
In both states he who has done good deeds rejoices.
He rejoices knowing, "I have done good deeds."
Reborn to a blissful state, he rejoices all the more.

19. One who recites much scripture,
But, being negligent, does not act accordingly,
Is like a cowherd counting others' cows,
Having no share in the fruits of monastic life.

20. One who recites little scripture,
But lives in truth according to the teaching,
Having abandoned lust, ill will, and delusion,
Having right knowledge and a well-emancipated mind,
Not clinging in this world or the next:
He truly shares the fruits of monastic life.

Reflection

Immediately, the Dhammapada challenges us to reflect on our lives by contrasting skillful and unskillful ways of living. The opening verses are incisive: choose between patterns of thought and behavior, between habits that lead to enslavement and misery and habits that foster freedom and happiness. Misery is the fruit of a corrupted mind. Those who cultivate resentments maintain a mind embroiled in anger, and those who focus on gratification engender a weak, enslaved mind. In contrast, happiness follows a pure mind, peace and harmony come from letting go of old wounds, and skillfully managing our appetites conditions a strong, free mind and heart.

The Dhammapada—and Theravada Buddhism in general—is indifferent to many of the kinds of issues that dominate other religions, such as the nature of divinity, how the world was created, the relationship between the soul and God, and so on. In many other traditions, these metaphysical issues are foundational, and understanding them is crucial if one is to successfully attain the salvific end. In contrast, the Dhammapada opens: "All phenomena are preceded by the mind, created by the mind, and have the mind as their master." The Buddha's Dhamma is decidedly uninterested in metaphysical issues. He accepted the general Indian world-view regarding the gods and rebirth destinies. Anything beyond this the Buddha regarded as mere conjecture, and even something that undermines a stable mind (AN 4:77; DN 9). Of course, Buddhism, in each of its many branches, involves a complex religious and social system with important devotions, rites, teachings, and philosophies. In essence, though, it always calls us back to our own mind, perceptions, intentions, and actions.

The spiritual drama takes place within. The Dhamma teaches radical personal responsibility and self-development: One is one's own protector (160, 380) and "Purity and impurity arise from oneself. No one can purify another" (165). During the Buddha's final hours he took one of his close disciples to his side and declared, "Therefore, Ānanda, you should live as islands unto yourselves, being your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge..." (DN 16.2.26).

Verses 1 and 2 concern the relationship between experience and perception. We live our lives assuming that what we experience is objective reality. The truth is that the mind is always actively interpreting and evaluating what it experiences. The Dhammapada begins by drawing us squarely into the heart of the Dhamma: what we bring to our experience and how we relate to that experience determines whether our lives will be burdensome or joyful, degrading or wholesome.

The word I translate as "mind" is *mano*, which refers to the rational functioning of consciousness; *mano* interprets the world around us. If one's mind is corrupt, one tends to misinterpret reality and misdirect one's engagement with it. Getting reality right is not nearly as easy as it may appear. Thus we have verses 11–12, which contrast people who cannot distinguish between what is worthless and what is valuable and those who can make such distinctions. When we consider how many misdirected lives there are, we appreciate what a truly daunting challenge apprehending reality accurately is. If one's mind is impure, one has trouble gleaning truths from one's experiences, and thus one's ability to engage that truth well is compromised. A corrupted mind is a setup for suffering, since it regularly conceives reality in a skewed way.

There is even more to consider here. One's past *kamma* (Skt: *karma*) affects not only how one experiences

reality, it also conditions what one experiences in the first place (SN 35:146). Our world is dependent on causes; past kamma is part of what conditions the very stuff of our experience. We are not fated; quite the contrary, and the Buddha was very clear on this (AN 3:61). What we encounter in this world, however, is also not arbitrary. Our past kamma affects who we are and what we experience.[1]

Verses 3–4 express an important principle. While it should be obvious that those who cultivate resentments will retain the anger, it is less clear how to rid ourselves of them. We read in verse 4, "For those who do not dwell on such resentments, enmity subsides." In Buddhist theory of mind, thoughts precede emotions. A thought, when clung to and identified with, produces a corresponding emotion. The only way for the emotion to subside (enmity in this case) is to stop feeding the thought. The thought, in and of itself, is insubstantial, arising and dissipating like a brief mist over a meadow. Many people think that if they rehash the offense enough times, maybe resentment will exhaust itself. Of course it doesn't; indulging these scenarios just keeps the poison of anger flowing. The only way to be truly free from afflictive emotions is to remove their fuel. You don't necessarily have to *do* anything to a toxic thought; it has no substance.

There is a second strategy for addressing toxic or afflictive mental states, and this is addressed in verses 5, 7, and 8, that is, to counter them by their very opposites. Thus we see that enmity is appeased by peace. While Māra, who represents temptation and death, overcomes those who are "focused on pleasant things" (*subhānu-*

1. Kamma (Skt: karma) means "action," and is regularly associated with *kamma vipāka*, the results of deeds. For shorthand, kamma or the laws of kamma refer to the universal laws of cause and effect. I will be using this shorthand to refer to both actions and their results.

passī), Māra is countered by those who cultivate the opposite (*asubhānupassī*), i.e., "focused on unpleasant things." One addresses craving or lust by engaging in meditative practices meant to undermine lust or unhealthy sensuality. One of the great classic works of Buddhism is Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* or *Path of Purification*. In it he describes forty meditation strategies, ten of which focus on forms of *foulness* to help break one's attachments. One example he uses is to meditate on a rotting corpse to reduce lustful thoughts about the human body.

The tradition contains additional approaches which we will consider later, but fundamentally these are the two primary ways to deal with afflictive emotions or toxic mental states. Part of Buddhist wisdom is learning which skillful means is appropriate in a given situation.

Countering afflictive thoughts is very freeing. Say, for example, your neighbor John is very annoying and you have difficulty letting go of anger toward him. You could mentally raise him up in a loving-kindness meditation: "John, I know you are suffering. May you be happy; may you be free from suffering; may you be peaceful and at ease." Such a meditation, engaged deeply and daily, would undermine your toxic thoughts and help you love John with real compassion. There is a saying often attributed to the Buddha: "Harboring anger is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die."

While in the opening verses we see how a corrupted or pure mind dramatically affects our experience in this world, verses 15–18 express how these two mental states affect us at death. Truly integrated Buddhists are not afraid of dying. Trusting in the truth of kamma, they anticipate a rightly earned future: "Here he rejoices, following death he rejoices ... having seen his pure deeds" (16); "He rejoices knowing, 'I have done good deeds'" (18). In contrast, those

who live morally dissolute lives should be unnerved by dying: "Here he grieves, following death he grieves ... having seen his defiled deeds" (15); "He is tormented knowing, 'I have done evil'" (17).

Throughout the Dhammapada we find a number of verses that distinguish appearance from substance. Of course, we all prefer depth over superficiality, the real over the façade. Still, we see how easy it is in our culture to opt for what is easy, where appearance is secured at truth's expense. So we find in verses 9–10 that wearing the yellow robe of a monastic doesn't entail inner purification. There is actually a pun here that gets lost in translation. The term for "defilement" is *kasāva* and for "yellow" is *kāsāva* (adjective derived from stained). So one who is "stained" (defiled) is unworthy of the yellow-stained robe, while one who is without stain is worthy of the yellow-stained robe.

A wise person looks closely to see whether he is free from or still clings to defilement. Likewise, the opening chapter ends by contrasting someone who recites many scriptures without embracing their wisdom with someone who is infused with the Dhamma, even if reciting little of the text. Being infused with Dhamma is what makes one wise, nothing more and nothing less.

CHAPTER TWO

VIGILANCE

Appamāda-vagga

21. Vigilance is the path to the deathless state.
Negligence is the path to death.
The vigilant do not die;
The negligent are as if already dead.

22. Knowing this distinction,
Those wise in vigilance rejoice therein,
Delighting in the field of the noble ones.

23. Absorbed in meditation,
with perseverance and constant effort,
The wise touch Nibbāna,
that ultimate shelter from bondage.

24. For one who is vigilant and restrained,
Who is energetic and mindful,
Who acts carefully and purely,
Who lives the Dhamma,
Fame grows.

25. Through effort, vigilance, restraint, and self-control,
The wise one makes himself an island that a flood could not overwhelm.

26. The ignorant and foolish give themselves to negligence,
While the wise protect vigilance as the supreme treasure.

27. Do not give yourself to negligence
Or be intimate with sensual pleasure.
Being meditative and vigilant,
One attains great happiness.

28. When the wise one expels negligence by vigilance,
Having ascended to the stronghold of wisdom,
And free from sorrow,
He observes the sorrowing crowd,
As a sage, standing on a mountain,
Observes fools on the plain.

29. Vigilant among the negligent,
Wide awake among the sleeping,
The deeply wise one goes forth,
Like a swift horse who leaves the nag behind.

30. By vigilance,
Indra went to the highest seat among the gods.
Vigilance they praise; negligence is ever-derided.

31. The monk, devoted to vigilance and seeing the danger in negligence,
Goes forth like a fire burning every fetter,
gross and subtle.

32. The monk, devoted to vigilance and seeing the danger in negligence,
Is close to Nibbāna and cannot regress.

Reflection

Imagine keeping vigil over a loved one who is ill. You are particularly attentive to the condition and needs of the one you love. Are they comfortable? Do they need anything? While they sleep, you are ever-alert and present.

You are intent, observant, and awake. The term *Buddha* means "awakened one." The Buddha was not only one who was awakened from the dream-world of ignorance, his whole process of enlightenment involved staying awake and being attentive. The story of Gotama's awakening expresses perfectly the importance and power of vigilance. Ashvaghosha, who provided possibly the first full-length biography of the Buddha, tells it like this: "Accompanied only by his resolution, he proceeded to the root of the sacred fig tree.... For he was definitely determined to win full enlightenment soon.... And he said to himself, 'I shall not change this position so long as I have not done what I set out to do!'" Māra, the tempter and personification of death, was unnerved by the Buddha's vigilance. "Look over there at that sage, clad in the armor of determination" (*Buddhacarita*, #10).

Ashvaghosha tells us that Māra was so unsettled by Buddha's resolve that he assailed him with demons, but they failed to shake him. Māra then tried to physically throw Gotama from his seat, but Gotama was protected by his own merit, that is, his deeply ingrained habit of stillness and equanimity kept him grounded. Undaunted, Māra insisted that he was the master over the realm of samsara, but Gotama touched the ground calling on Mother Earth to testify to his right to seek escape. As his last foray, Māra sent his three daughters, Discontent, Delight, and Thirst, to seduce Gotama. He remained vigilant. Gotama kept his vigil through the night. In his first watch, he reviewed his past lives. In the second watch, he surveyed the entire universe and found nothing enduring or permanent. In the third watch, he saw what conditions all things and recognized the Four Noble Truths (see also MN 19).

The title of our chapter, *Appamāda*, which I have translated as "vigilance," could also be translated as

"thoughtfulness," "carefulness," or even "conscientiousness." They are all related terms and contrast directly with negligence. *Appamāda* represents zeal and intentionality. We see in this chapter that vigilance is "the supreme treasure" (26) and "the path to the deathless state" of Nibbāna (21). It is the vigilant person who quickly proceeds along the path to awakening, while the negligent one plods along at best. Verse 29 characterizes the vigilant person as being "like a swift horse who leaves the nag behind."

Consider the five basic moral precepts (*pañca-sīla*) that are the basis for Buddhist practice. They are all framed as refraining from something. We refrain from injuring a living being, from not taking what is not offered, from sexual misconduct, from unskillful speech, and from intoxicants. Attentiveness to our behavior lies at the heart of all five precepts. They shouldn't be considered merely negative precepts, but precepts filled with mindfulness. For example, refraining taking what is not offered involves more than simply not stealing. Rather, not taking what is not offered is a way of living that honors others without presumption. The precept draws us to lives of simplicity. Similarly, to exercise skillful speech is to maintain a posture of mindfulness and care, so that we can be assured that what we say helps and never harms others. Finally, consider refraining from intoxicants; we refrain because they cloud the mind and induce negligence.

Mental stillness is another form of vigilance. This chapter introduces this key aspect of the Buddha's Dhamma. "Absorbed in meditation, with perseverance and constant effort, the wise touch Nibbāna, that ultimate shelter from bondage" (23). The term I have translated as "absorbed in meditation" is *jhāna*, which literally means "meditative" and could even be used to speak of being intent on something. The Canon, however, typically uses this term to represent jhāna-practice, which is the eighth

part of the Eightfold Path: right concentration. Vigilance in jhāna-practice refers to developing a strong, wholesome mind. Such a mind allows one to see reality as it is. So important is jhāna that the Buddha described it as his own meditative foundation while sitting under the bodhi tree. We also learn that upon his deathbed the Buddha entered into each of the four standard levels of jhāna, absorbed in the fourth at the moment of his death.

Jhāna-practice works by first suppressing hindrances to meditation, these being lust, ill will, lethargy, restlessness, and doubt. Once settled, one aspires to the qualities of applied thought (focus), sustained thought (staying anchored), happiness, bliss, and one-pointedness. When the mind is firmly saturated with these qualities one has attained the first level of jhāna. Subsequent levels then remove those qualities that are less subtle so as to become even more deeply absorbed. One sees that applied and sustained thought are less subtle, so one focuses one's attention on happiness, bliss, and one-pointedness. This is the second jhāna level. Focusing especially on bliss and one-pointedness brings one into the third level. Finally, one attains the fourth level by attending exclusively to one-pointedness.

On the one hand, staying vigilant is hard work. The mind forever has to work against factors of negligence and, until we have attained Nibbāna, we can never rest on our laurels. On the other hand, the intention to be vigilant has its own power, and the more we practice it the easier it gets. The Dhamma holds us; it carries and guides us. The more deeply we penetrate the Dhamma, the more we realize its way of wholesomeness and its foundation for a joyous life.

CHAPTER THREE

THE MIND

Citta-vagga

33. The mind is wavering and unsteady,
Difficult to guard, hard to restrain.
The wise one sets it straight,
As a fletcher straightens the arrow's shaft.

34. Like a fish thrown on land from its home in the water,
This mind thrashes to escape Māra's realm.

35. Good is the taming of the mind,
So difficult to control, so swift,
Jumping toward what it desires.
The tamed mind brings happiness.

36. The wise should guard the mind,
So difficult to perceive, so subtle,
Jumping at what it desires.
The protected mind brings happiness.

37. The mind wanders far and alone,
Incorporeal and resting in the cavern (of the body).
Those who restrain it will be released from Māra's bonds.

38. Wisdom does not mature in one of unsteady mind
And drifting faith,
Who knows not the true Dhamma.

39. For the one who is awake,
Whose mind is neither afflicted nor filled with desire,

Who has transcended merit and demerit,
There is no fear.

40. Having understood this body as a clay pot,
Having established this mind as a fortress,
One should battle Māra with the sword of wisdom,
And protect what has been conquered, clinging to nothing.

41. Soon indeed, this body will lie on the earth,
Without consciousness,
Cast away as a worthless log.

42. Whatever an enemy would do to an enemy,
A hater to one hated,
Worse than that is the harm that a wrongly directed mind can do to itself.

43. Whatever mother, father, or other relative may do,
Better still, the good that a well-directed mind can do for itself.

Reflection

The Dhammapada opens with the words, "All phenomena are preceded by the mind, created by the mind, and have mind as their master." It is not as though the mind literally creates reality itself or that reality doesn't exist except as the mind creates it. While this is the claim of the Yogācāra philosophical school, it doesn't correspond well to either the Canon or the Buddha's comments about reality. In fact, the Buddha even found such speculations distracting (SN 12:48). The central issue is the mind's relationship to experience. The "mind" as used in the first two verses of Chapter One is *mano*, which primarily designates the rational function of the mind. This

chapter is about *citta*, which represents the more personal, emotional part of our psyche. Sometimes *citta* is even translated as "heart" or "heart-and-mind." In some Buddhist texts, *citta* is even combined with *viññāṇa*, which is our consciousness. Thus, *citta* represents a core part of our identity.

The present chapter, entitled "The Mind," begins by reminding us how erratic the mind can be: "The mind is wavering and unsteady, difficult to guard, hard to restrain" (33). Sometimes Buddhists use the term "monkey mind" to reflect this condition. A monkey seems to have little concentration and jumps from one thing to the next, focusing on whatever is most interesting in the immediate moment. It is forever "jumping at what it desires" (36). Upon reflection, we see that being subject to a wild, uncultivated mind is often torturous. "Whatever an enemy would do to an enemy, a hater to one hated, worse than that is the harm that a wrongly directed mind can do to itself" (42).

In Buddhism, the reactive mind is dominated by three characteristics: lust (*rāga*), ill will (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*). These are the three defilements that we first encountered in verse 20. One might think that one's mind is hardly dominated by heated passion, rarely cultivates malice, and has a fairly realistic sense of the world, but we would do better thinking of these qualities on a continuum. Whenever we experience something, we find that it is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. If pleasant, we incline ourselves to it; it has a magnetic draw on our consciousness. If unpleasant, we experience some kind of aversion, even if subtle. If it is essentially neutral, we tend to become bored with it; it puts us in a state of lethargy or mental sleepiness. Interestingly *moha* (delusion) can also be translated as mental dullness.

When Buddhists say that the mind is conditioned by attachments and aversion, they are highlighting the

mind's tendency to be reactive; our experience is dominated by such reactivity. We are forever inclining to, fighting against, or being lulled by our experiences. Additionally, we identify with these experiences: something good or ill is happening to *me*! This sort of response is illusory. The Buddha taught that there is no unchanging, separate, or permanent *self* that lies behind experiences. This identification is even a form of affliction. In contrast, "the tamed mind brings happiness" (35), because it is no longer a prisoner to such ignorance and the whims of impulsive reactivity.

The mind's complexity makes it especially difficult to harness. As we see in verse 36, the mind is "difficult to perceive, so subtle." Buddhist philosophy or *abhidhamma* details eighty-nine mental elements of the psyche and forty different mental functions. Moreover, these elements fall into three different categories and occur on four different levels. The mind is overwhelmingly intricate.

In Chapter Two, we were introduced to Māra, who acts as tempter and is sometimes seen as the personification of death itself. Māra tried to keep Gotama from attaining Nibbāna. Māra is also often characterized as the lord of the realm of samsara. So, to escape Māra is to attain Nibbāna. Māra would not have been nearly so alarmed if the Buddha were to live a deeply spiritual life and gone on to be reborn in a heavenly state, for this would still be an existence in the realm of samsara. Until we gain full enlightenment, we still suffer from some level of the conditioned mind and are still within Māra's grasp. Thus, we see "The mind wanders far and alone, incorporeal and resting in the cavern (of the body). Those who restrain it will be released from Māra's bonds" (37). To combat Māra is to wield the "sword of wisdom ... clinging to nothing" (40).

If one were to truly and fully realize that all things are impermanent (*anicca*), that there is no essential, eternal self (*anattā*), and that no experience can ultimately satisfy or provide a true refuge (*dukkha*), then one would not grasp or cling. There would be nothing worth grasping and there would be no one to do the grasping. One would stop seeking either for benefits in this life or for a better existence in the next. This is the point of verse 39: the sage is "neither afflicted nor filled with desire, (but) who has transcended merit and demerit." Māra simply cannot understand a fully liberated person, one who identifies with nothing and clings to nothing, and whose cultivated mind renders one free from lust, ill will, and delusion.

CHAPTER FOUR

FLOWERS

Puppha-vagga

44. Who will conquer this earth,
The worlds of Yama, and those of the gods?
Who will select a well-taught Dhamma word,
As an expert gardener selects a flower?

45. The disciple will conquer this earth,
The worlds of Yama, and those of the gods.
The disciple will select the well-taught Dhamma word,
As an expert gardener selects a flower.

46. Knowing this body to be like foam,
Realizing its mirage-like nature,
Cutting off the flowers of Māra,
One may go unseen by the King of Death.

47. The one with a clinging mind,
Who is just gathering flowers,
Is carried away by death,
As a sleeping village is carried away by a great flood.

48. The one with a clinging mind,
Who is only gathering flowers,
Is overpowered by death.

49. As a bee departing the flower,
Having taken its nectar,
Does no harm to its color or fragrance,
So should a sage go through a village.

50. Do not attend to others' wrong doings,
What they have done or failed to do.
Attend only to yourself,
And what you have done and failed to do.

51. Like a beautiful flower
That is full of color but lacking fragrance,
So too are well-said words,
Fruitless when not lived.

52. Like a beautiful flower
That is full of color and fragrant,
So too are well-said words,
Fruitful when lived.

53. As many garland strands could be made from a heap of flowers,
So should one born mortal do much good.

54. Neither the fragrance of the flower,
Nor that of sandalwood, tagara, or jasmine,
Can go against the wind,
But the fragrance of the good does go against the wind;
It pervades all directions.

55. Sandalwood, tagara, jasmine, and lotus,
Among these perfumes the fragrance of virtue is unbounded.

56. Faint is this fragrance of tagara and sandalwood,
But the scent of the virtuous one blows supreme;
It wafts even among the gods.

57. Māra does not find the tracks of those
Consummate in virtue,
Who dwell in vigilance,
And are freed by perfect knowledge.

58. Just as from a rubbish heap on the roadside,
A lotus flower, so pure of smell and pleasing to the mind, can grow;

59. So in the midst of the rubbish heap of blind, ordinary people,
A disciple of the Fully Awakened One shines radiantly with wisdom.

Reflection

Flowers can be used as symbols for so many different things, from natural beauty to fragility. Gardens demand conscientious skill to develop and maintain, and they portray beauty and elegance. Some arboretums are so lovely they can be literally enchanting. A rose can be a visual sonata, and a bouquet of bright red tulips can energize a whole room. And flowering trees, whose blossoms come and go so quickly, remind us just how momentary a delicate delight can be. This chapter invites us to imagine flowers both as positive expressions of spiritual practice and as examples of realities that lack substance.

The opening verses compare the authentic disciple to an expert gardener. Just as the gardener can identify the perfect flower for a given setting, so the wise disciple can identify the perfect insight of the Dhamma for a given situation. The key word in these verses is *pacināti*, the term for "selecting." Fascinatingly, *pacināti* also means "to understand" or "to realize." Just as the expert gardener can choose just the right flower for an arrangement, because he deeply understands flowers, so the authentic disciple can select the right teaching, because he deeply understands the Dhamma.

The Buddha was famous for his ability to know just what a particular disciple needed to hear at a particular moment. To one person he recommended certain practices that would assure the kammic reward of an excellent rebirth. To another, he recommended renouncing the pursuit of merit-making altogether so as to attain Nibbāna, which is beyond concerns of kamma or making merit. In both cases, he taught the truth about reality, but they were different truths for different people. Similarly, his advice to a given disciple changed over time as that disciple's life and spiritual maturity evolved. In essence, every person's path is unique, and the Buddha's guidance was always carefully, delicately suited to everyone's particular need in the moment.

There is a story of a warlord who was ravaging a countryside, murdering every remaining person and looting their possessions. He came to a monastery where a completely composed abbot stood at the door. "Do you not know," he sneered, "that I am the kind of man who could thrust my sword right through you without even blinking?" The abbot replied calmly, "And do you not know that I am the kind of man who could have a sword thrust through him without even blinking?" At that moment the warlord saw clearly the evil within and realized that he was no match to this spiritual warrior. He immediately became the abbot's disciple. Of course, the abbot could have admonished the warlord, perhaps by warning him about the hell states his kamma was generating. Or he could have pleaded with the man to have mercy or to recognize his own deluded suffering. Instead, he demonstrated an uncanny ability to choose the right Dhamma words.

On a personal note, I came to know a Buddhist master during a week-long conference. On the last day I asked her for a teaching. She demurred and said that she

had no special teaching, and then simply casually spoke about living the truth before us. Although I cannot recall her exact words, the conversation drew me to realize truths about my inner life that I did not know existed, truths about myself that affected the next several years of my spiritual life. This Buddhist master gave me a great gift in her skillful selection of the right Dhamma words.

The Dhammapada's reflection on flowers includes two important images. The lotus flower is fragrant, beautiful, and can grow just about anywhere the climate is conducive, even in a "rubbish heap" (58–59). Typically, the metaphor of the lotus involves a muddy or slimy pond. Lotuses have the ability to shed the muck, remaining pure. Just so, living the Dhamma deeply allows one to walk in any circumstance and remain unstained and beautiful. Another image in this chapter has to do with a flower's scent. Various verses invite us to imagine a flower's fragrance to be its essence. So, someone who speaks about spiritual things without being holy is like a pretty flower that lacks scent (51). Yet, when a disciple is truly transformed, he authentically witnesses to the Dhamma, and he is "full of color and fragrant" (52). As we saw in Chapter One, the universe is very interconnected, and one's kamma affects the very reality one experiences. There is a rippling effect with kamma in how it changes the world around us. This phenomenon, we find, is just like a flower whose fragrance extends well beyond itself. The flower's fragrance is so powerful that it can even defy the wind, even be noticed in the realm of the gods (54, 56).

Flowers are also great metaphors for sensual pleasures (47–48). Sense pleasures are not inherently problematic, just as something unpleasant is not somehow intrinsically beneficial. The danger is getting lost in sensual experiences or devising a life that is devoted to them. In other words,

problems arise when the mind clings only to gathering flowers. As we saw, jhāna-practice is quite gratifying, but this is hardly problematic. Sense pleasures are more complicated. They can be satisfying and even invigorating. Still, they are rarely associated with spiritual practice, and they can also tend to agitate the mind rather than provide harmony and peace.

According to the Buddha's legend, when Prince Siddhattha came to realize the truth of sickness, old age, and death, he actually became more alarmed by sensual gratification. One of the king's counselors, Udāyin, begged him to return to the palace, but he responded: "You will not prevail upon me to devote myself to ignoble sense pleasures." To recognize your body as impermanent, as no-self, and to see your destiny as aging and death need not cause one to be depressed. As verse 46 reminds us, we are "like foam," having a "mirage-like nature." Realizing this frees us from clinging, from the agitation of devoting oneself to what can surely only disappoint.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE FOOL

Bāla-vagga

60. Long is the night for the wakeful,
Long is a trek for the weary,
Long is samsara for fools,
Who do not understand the true Dhamma.

61. If a traveler should not find another better or equal to himself,
Then he should resolutely travel alone.
With fools there is no companionship.

62. The fool worries: "I have sons, I have wealth."
He does not even possess himself.
How then sons? How then wealth?

63. A fool who considers himself foolish is,
In this, like a sage.
But a fool who is proud of his cleverness
Is truly called *fool*.

64. A fool who spends a lifetime attending on a sage,
Will not apprehend the Dhamma,
Just as a spoon can never know the soup's flavor.

65. An intelligent person who attends on a sage,
Even for a moment,
Will quickly apprehend the Dhamma,
Like the tongue perceiving the soup's flavor.

66. Thoughtless fools act as their own enemies,
Doing evil deeds that bear bitter fruit.

67. That deed is not well-done,
Which one regrets when accomplished,
Which results in crying and a tear-streaked face.

68. That deed is well-done,
Which one does not regret when accomplished,
Which results in delight and joy.

69. As long as evil has not ripened,
The fool thinks it honey;
When evil ripens, the fool suffers.

70. Though month after month
He may eat his food with the tip of the grass blade,
The fool is not worth a fraction
Of one who has realized the Dhamma.

71. Indeed, like fresh milk,
An evil deed does not immediately curdle.
Burning, it follows the fool,
Like a fire concealed by ashes.

72. Only to his detriment does knowledge arise in the fool.
It destroys his good fortune and splits his head.

73. He seeks undue respect, honor among monks,
Authority in monasteries, and devotion by families not his own.

74. "Let both householder and monk think that alone I have done this,
Let them be under my will in every task."
So thinks the fool, whose desire and pride grow.

75. There is one path to worldly gains,
And a very different path to Nibbāna.
Let the monk who knows this,

The disciple of the Awakened One,
Not rejoice in honor, but cultivate solitude.

Reflection

Bāla is typically a term used for a little child, one who is young, unknowing and presumably trainable. This chapter's title certainly is not using *bāla* that way. Rather, here *bāla* is the fool who contrasts directly with the wise person, which is the subject of the next chapter. Fools differ from people who are merely ignorant or who make honest mistakes, even if such mistakes abound. Such people can grow in knowledge and learn from past errors. A fool is precisely someone who refuses to learn and whose ignorance is a decidedly cultivated way of living. The traditional Western religious term for this willful ignorance is *scotosis*, which is Greek for "blindness." It refers to the systematic blocking of awareness and a twisted view of oneself and the world. *Scotosis* can so degrade one's moral and intellectual sensibilities that one errs no longer through weakness but by determination.

Recall in Chapter Two we looked at the five hindrances to jhāna-practice. These were: lust, ill will, lethargy, restlessness, and doubt. While these are indeed impediments to a wholesome, stable mind, they also have a more active power: they distort our perceptions of reality. The clearer and more cultivated the mind is, the more obvious becomes the difference between what is skillful and unskillful. In contrast, the more we are caught up in the hindrances, the more we are likely to err in assessing what's true. What the deeply practiced person knows to be good, the fool sees as afflictive, and what the wise person knows to be harmful, the fool finds attractive. Thus, fools become their own enemies (66);

they imagine evil yet to ripen to be sweet as honey (69); and they destroy their own good fortune (72).

Above all, fools are filled with desire and pride (74). Verses 72–74 are particularly interesting in that they describe someone who has become a monk so as to gain adulation, power, and authority in the Sangha, the monastic community. The very point of shaving one's head and taking on the robes is to renounce the culture of adulation, ridding oneself of such trappings so as to deeply penetrate the Dhamma, and thus become free. To attempt to use a monastic life (a holy life!) in order to imprison oneself all the more is the height of delusion, the essence of foolishness. As we saw earlier in verse 42: "Whatever an enemy would do to an enemy, a hater to one hated, worse than that is the harm that a wrongly directed mind can do to itself." The fool is literally at war with himself.

In Chapter Three, we looked at the term "monkey mind," that is, a consciousness that jumps from one thing to another. Monkeys are regularly used as examples of unskillful practices or mental states. In one famous sutta, the Buddha describes how a hunter can catch a monkey by using pitch, which is a kind of tar. Wise monkeys avoid the pitch and sense the inherent danger, but the foolish monkey cannot resist his curiosity—he itches to touch it and discover what it feels like. Immediately, his paw gets stuck. The Buddha then describes the foolish monkey's ongoing mistakes:

> Thinking, "I will free my hand," he seizes it with his other hand; he gets caught there. Thinking, "I will free both hands," he seizes it with his foot; he gets caught there. Thinking, "I will free both hands and my foot," he seizes it with his other foot; he gets caught there. Thinking, "I will free both hands and feet," he applies his muzzle to it; he gets caught

> there. Thus, bhikkhus, that monkey trapped at five points lies there screeching. He has met with calamity and disaster and the hunter can do with him as he wishes. (SN 47:7)

Of course, the monkey could have easily predicted every misstep if he would have simply paid attention and learned from his past behavior. The person who is merely ignorant learns from his mistakes, and mistakes in life can even be useful for personal growth. The fool, on the other hand, seems virtually determined to go deeper and deeper into error.

There is an interesting modern version of this story in which hunters catch monkeys using hollow coconuts. The hunter creates the trap by drilling a small hole in the coconut just large enough for a monkey's hand to squeeze through. Then he places a treat inside and secures the coconut. A monkey wandering by squeezes its hand inside to retrieve the sweet, but while the hole is large enough for this, it is too small for the monkey's fist to make it out. That is, the monkey can squeeze its hand out but not while holding on to the treat. The monkey thrashes around and howls at being trapped by the secured coconut, and might do so for days. Of course, all the monkey would need to do to be free is to let go of the treat, but this thought never occurs to it. While we might be amazed at how a relatively intelligent animal could be trapped by its clinging, such an image is apt for the human condition: we cling to what entraps us.

The Buddhist tradition includes four fundamental things that we cling to. The first is *sensuality*, which we initially addressed in Chapter Four. The Buddha framed it as a kind of fire consuming us: "All delights in sensuality are burning and boiling, aggravated, aglow ... a firebrand.... Those who do let go do not get burned .... It

burns those who do not let go" (Thī 14.1). Here, one ought not to imagine sensuality as only referring to sexual desire. It refers to striving for and clinging to any delights of the senses. Because we are sensory beings, we must never think escaping the life of the senses to be something good, much less possible. We can even be grateful for things that are pleasant to the senses as they can be refreshing. We suffer, however, when we cling to or identify with sensual pleasures. Skillful practice involves watching our experience without identifying with it. Pleasant and unpleasant arise and dissipate on their own accord. The Buddha teaches, "Due to distortion of perception your mind is on fire. ... See mental formations as other, as *dukkha*, and as not self" (Th 21.1).

The second kind of clinging is known as *clinging to views*. Of course, Buddhism has teachings that it takes quite seriously. Having confidence in these teachings is crucial if one is to progress along the path. Clinging to views, however, refers to attachment to any theory that attempts to capture reality, particularly regarding metaphysical issues. "Views" is the translation of the word *diṭṭhi*, which refers to an error in procedure. Engaging in *diṭṭhi* is getting caught up in questions that either have no answers or are impediments to spiritual progress. In the *Cūḷamāluṅkya Sutta*, Māluṅkyāputta posed certain metaphysical questions to the Buddha, such as whether the universe is eternal or whether the Buddha exists after his death. The Buddha likened Māluṅkyāputta to a person who was shot by a poisoned arrow and insists on asking various questions rather than removing the arrow and accepting treatment; he wants to know all about the arrow, the bow and the archer. All the while he is dying from the poison. The Buddha responds to Māluṅkyāputta: "Because it is unbeneficial, it does not belong to the fundamentals of the holy life, it does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to

cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna" (MN 63). Views pose a further danger: they inevitably create disputes with winners and losers, thus fostering unwholesome states of mind.

The third form of clinging is *attachment to precepts and vows*. Intentional precepts and skillful practices are crucial in Buddhism, especially in monastic communities, but they can likewise become traps if clung to. We can identify with them, obsess about them, and even judge others through them. There is a story in the Jātaka where the Buddha intervened on quarrelling monks, who divided themselves on whether to excommunicate a monk who had unknowingly broke a monastic precept. The Buddha, having told a story of reconciling kings, announced, "Brethren, you ought to make it clear that you too, having embraced the religious life according to so well-taught doctrine and discipline, can be forgiving and tender-hearted." When the monks did not cease quarrelling the Buddha remarked, "These foolish folk are like men possessed..." (J-a 428). Clearly, the Buddhist monastic tradition takes its precepts seriously, but attachment to precepts and vows imagines that this represents the essence of the spiritual practice. It is a problem of misplaced emphasis.

The fourth main type of clinging is *attachment to doctrines* concerning the nature of the self, a topic we'll take up in Chapter Twelve. While Buddhism places much emphasis on *anattā* or the truth of no-self, this must be understood as an instrumental doctrine. Asking such questions as *Who is being released in Nibbāna?* or *What exists in final-Nibbāna?* is a useless exercise. The Buddha rejected both nihilism, the view that there is nothing left upon death, and eternalism, that there is an eternal self that survives death. To the philosophical mind, it must be one or the other. To the Buddha, such an obsession over the question is yet another form of clinging.

CHAPTER SIX

THE WISE ONE

Paṇḍita-vagga

76. One ought to regard another who sees one's faults,
And censures what should be censured,
As a revealer of treasures.
One should associate with such an intelligent and wise person,
For such company is always for the better.

77. He who would counsel, instruct,
And restrain another from base behavior
Is dear to the good, but displeasing to the bad.

78. Do not associate with bad friends.
Do not associate with depraved people.
Associate with virtuous friends.
Associate with the best of people.

79. One who drinks in the Dhamma sleeps happily
With a clear mind.
The wise one ever-delights in the Dhamma
Proclaimed by the noble ones.

80. Irrigators guide water,
Fletchers straighten the shaft,
Carpenters bend wood,
The wise master themselves.

81. Just as a solid rock is unmoved by the wind,
So the wise are unmoved by blame or praise.

82. Just as a deep lake is clear and undisturbed,
So the wise become clear,
Having heard the teachings.

83. The good are not pleasure-lovers who seek idle chatter;
Always, they are detached.
Though touched by comfort and then by affliction,
The wise manifest no elation or depression.

84. One who would not want, for the sake of oneself or another,
A son, wealth, a kingdom, or unjust success;
This is one who is virtuous, wise, and righteous.

85. Few are those who have gone to the other shore;
Many are those who run about on this side.

86. But those who live according to the well-taught Dhamma
Will go beyond the realm of death, so difficult to cross.

87. Having abandoned the dark state,
The wise one cultivates the light;
Having gone from home to homelessness,
He enters solitude, so difficult to enjoy.

88. Owning nothing, having abandoned sense pleasures,
Having cleansed himself from mental defilements,
There, let the wise one wish for delight.

89. Those who have minds well-developed in the means of awakening,
Who, having removed the toxins, delight in renouncing attachments:
They are radiant and completely emancipated in this world.

Reflection

This chapter acts as a counterpoint to the last chapter on the fool. The deluded fool becomes ensnared in his passions and attachments, and is so caught up that he has no conscious wish to escape. The wise one lives a life of spiritual freedom. He is free from the ravages that accompany an imprisoned mind. The fool thinks he is happy just so long as his kammic fruit has yet to ripen, unaware that even before this ripening his mind is afflicted. In contrast, the wise one is truly happy. "One who drinks in the Dhamma sleeps happily with a clear mind. The wise one ever-delights in the Dhamma proclaimed by the noble ones" (79). Pali synonyms for "delight" appears three times in this chapter (79, 88, and 89). The Buddha's Dhamma is one of joy: "Happiness follows as an ever-present shadow" (2).

Being wise and being free are intimately interconnected. While the fool is controlled by what others think of him, the wise one is "unmoved by blame or praise" (81); "Though touched by comfort and then by affliction, the wise manifest no elation or depression" (83).

Much of this short chapter concerns skillful relationships, and negotiating them well is both a sign of wisdom and the condition for attaining wisdom. Because humans are social animals, we need friends, and the friendships we maintain either support or undermine our spiritual path. We know this from experience. When we associate with those who speak unskillfully, our own speech becomes compromised. When our friends are morally lax or spiritually disengaged, we tend to lose our own focus. Conversely, when our friends are spiritually conscientious, they thereby encourage us to be the same, and thus support our spiritual development. In verses 76 and 77, we find that wise and intelligent friends are of the utmost

importance. They counsel and challenge us, because they have our best interests in mind.

Buddhism has a tradition of true friendship. The Buddha taught, "With regard to external factors, I do not envision any other single factor like good friendship as being so helpful for a monk in training" (It 17, see also Ud 4.1). In the *Sigālaka Sutta* (DN 31) he contrasts good friends and harmful friends. While bad friends seek gain, self-promotion, or offer excuses for being unsupportive, a good friend is constant in support, becomes an intimate, and challenges one in the Dhamma.

What may we, in the twenty-first century, take away from this chapter? First, we can embrace the idea that a flourishing spiritual life involves others; Dhamma brothers and sisters give one another support, guidance, inspiration, and love. The Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha are "the three jewels" in which we may always take refuge. Second, we can appreciate the enormous impact of the other people in our lives: they shape our habits, dispositions, and even our perceptions. They profoundly affect how we experience the world as a whole. In skillfully navigating relationships, we can ask questions such as: Who brings out my best qualities? With whom am I most naturally loving, wholesome, and compassionate? Whom do I admire, and from whom can I learn? With whom do I feel most free? With whom do I struggle, falter, or suffer? Reflecting carefully on such questions and practicing mindfulness during interactions with others can help us strengthen relationships that foster fulfilling, lives, lives marked by joy, authenticity, and love.

Some of this chapter suggests that a truly wise person leaves everyone behind. He is homeless and enjoys solitude (87) and is detached and emancipated from the world (82, 89). Given the monastic impulse in Buddhism, this shouldn't surprise us. Such a preference for solitude

and emancipation in no way suggests aloofness in regard to the conditions of society or the needs of others. One advanced in practice is said to be infused with three qualities, all of them concerned with the well-being of others. They are generosity (*alobha*), benevolence (*adosa*), and understanding (*amoha*). Indeed, many canonical texts challenge monks to see the needs of others as their own needs. What seems like a contradiction really reflects interior and exterior cohesion. The wise one is unperturbed by all and unattached from all. Because of this freedom, one is now able to be generous to all, loving to all, and skillful in relationships that support authentic spiritual practice and foster flourishing spiritual lives.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE ARAHANT

Arahanta-vagga

90. There is no fever for one
Who has completed the journey,
Who is without sorrow,
Who has abandoned all fetters,
Who is freed in every way.

91. Those who are mindful depart;
They do not delight in a house.
They leave behind every home,
Like geese who abandon a pond.

92. The one who is not acquisitive,
Who knows well the role of food,
Whose field is empty, unmarked freedom,
Is like a bird in the sky
Whose destination is difficult to discern.

93. The one who has destroyed all toxins,
Who is unattached to food,
Whose field is empty, unmarked freedom,
Is like a bird in the sky
Whose path is difficult to discern.

94. One whose senses are as calm
As horses well-tamed by a charioteer,
Who has abandoned pride and is free from toxins,
Is envied even by the gods.

95. For one who, like the earth, does not oppose,
Who is like a pillar of Indra,

Who is deeply devout,
Who is like a deep unclouded pond,
There is no more wandering.

96. Calm is the mind, speech, and action
Of such a one freed by right understanding.

97. The one who is faithless [beyond believing],
Who is ungrateful [knows the Uncreated],
Who is a burglar [severs connections],
Who destroys opportunities [breaks the chain of rebirth],
Who is despondent [throws off desire]:
This is the ultimate person.

98. Whether in the village, forest, valley, or highland,
Wherever the arahants dwell is a place of delight.

99. Delightful are the forests where few find delight.
There, those who seek no sensual pleasures,
Who are free of passion, will delight.

Reflection

In the Hindu Vedic tradition, an *arahant* was someone who was typically a high official, and the Sanskrit word could be translated as "deserving" or "worthy." The Buddha used this term to designate someone who had become freed from wandering countless lifetimes in samsara and attained Nibbāna. The Canon has a repeated description for an arahant: "Destroyed is birth, lived is a chaste life, done is what had to be done, after this present life there is no beyond."

In the Buddha's day, many of his disciples became arahants. Their rapid spiritual development was due in part to the presence and wisdom of the Buddha himself, who led them quickly along the path. In addition, they

were primed for release because of the ripening of kammic fruit over many past lives. The legends of the arahants, *Theragatha* and *Therigatha*, are filled with heroic stories of their past lives, lives in which their virtues deepened continually through the eons. Now, having attained Nibbāna, they evidence perfect generosity, as all impediments to generosity have been removed. With nothing to grasp or seek, they devote themselves to the well-being of others. Like the Buddha himself, they radiate boundless compassion. Consider it this way: those fully awakened see most clearly the ravages of suffering of the human condition, and there is nothing to impede a compassionate response.

The fruits of deep, developed practice provide the possibility for all wholesomeness and care. According to the tradition, there are ten particular fetters that impede one from full enlightenment. Verse 31 briefly refers to these fetters, where the developed one "goes forth like a fire burning every fetter, gross and subtle." The gross impediments are views of the self, skeptical doubt, clinging to precepts and vows, sensuous craving, and ill will. Of course, these can take very subtle forms, such as attachment to pleasant experiences, or slight reactivity to what is unpleasant.

The tradition describes the person who has attained the final levels of liberation as having undergone a *change-of-lineage*. A *stream-winner*, one who has attained the first stage of enlightenment has undergone a profound and lasting change of outlook. This person has utterly eliminated the first three of these gross fetters, and will attain Nibbāna within the next seven lifetimes. A *once-returner* describes someone who has additionally dramatically thinned out the final two. This one will come back for only one more lifetime at most. A *non-returner* is one who has entirely eliminated all five and will be reborn in

a heavenly state before attaining final-Nibbāna. The subtle fetters are craving for fine material existence, craving for immaterial existence, conceit, restlessness, and ignorance. Once these are eliminated, one becomes an arahant and attains Nibbāna.

With no fetters and fully enlightened, the arahant engages life uniquely. Māra cannot understand arahants and we cannot either; they are beyond any frame of reference. Verses 92–93 describes arahants as those "whose field is empty, unmarked freedom." *Gocaro* is the term for "field," and could simply refer to the kind of field an animal wanders through. For the arahant, the field is empty, that is, there is no kammic energy produced or marker there for reference. *Gocaro* also means "sphere," as in sphere of existence. Their sphere of existence is utterly empty with no clinging and no *self* that clings.

Without any craving or reactivity arahants are truly free. They are tranquil in every situation. Verse 95 likens them to the "pillar of Indra." Indra's pillar refers to a monument or free-standing pillar at the gate of many cities. According to Buddhaghosa's Commentary, Hindu devotees would pay homage to Indra's pillar as a sign of piety and devotion. Blasphemers, in contrast, would curse Indra's pillar, and some would even urinate on it. The pillar, of course, stood unmoved by either praise or blame. So too stand arahants, who are beyond any reactivity. Whether honored or besmirched, whether experiencing something pleasing or displeasing, they remain unmoved.

In many religions, saints are unconventional. They seem to have transcended common sensibilities, and there is a disturbing numinous quality about them. It's helpful to keep this in mind in connection to verse 97, which might seem somewhat shocking. Here we find the arahant described as faithless, ungrateful, a housebreaker, a

destroyer of opportunities, and despondent: "This is the ultimate person." Pali words often have multiple meanings, and this allows for wonderful opportunities for wordplay. Following Buddhaghosa's Commentary, we see that the Pali word for "faithless" can refer to one who has attained the truth and thus no longer requires the testimony of others; an "ungrateful" person (*akataññū*) can also refer to one who understands the Uncreated (*akataṃ*); the term for "burglar" is *sandhicchedo*, which literally means a "breaker of joints" and thus can also refer to one who has broken the chains of samsara; an "opportunity destroyer" has left further rebirths behind and thus fulfilled the path; and a "despondent" person is one who has transcended all craving and aversion. So, the wordplay challenges us to go deeper than conventional meaning. It is also useful for another reason: it helps us see those fully enlightened as untamable, different, unconventional—the ultimate person.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THOUSANDS

Sahassa-vagga

100. Better than a thousand vacuous statements
Is one meaningful word,
Which, having been heard, brings peace.

101. Better than a thousand vacuous verses
Is one line of verse,
Which, having been heard, brings peace.

102. Better than a recitation of one hundred meaningless verses
is one Dhamma word,
Which, having been heard, brings peace.

103. Greater in battle than one who conquers thousands upon thousands
Is the one who conquers himself.

104. It is better to conquer oneself than others.
For the self-tamed one, ever-vigilant in self-control,

105. Neither a god nor a divine musician,
Nor Māra and Brahmā together,
Could turn such a victory into defeat.

106. Better than offering a thousand sacrifices,
Month after month for a hundred years,
Is one moment's homage
To one who has developed himself.

107. Better than one hundred years dwelling in the forest
And tending the sacred fire,

Is one moment's homage
To one who has developed himself.

108. Whatever offering or sacrifice in the world
A merit-seeker might offer for a year,
All this is not one-fourth the merit gained
From showing respect to the upright.

109. For one who is respectful,
Who constantly reveres the elders,
Four things grow: life, beauty, happiness, and strength.

110. Better than living one hundred years,
Immoral and ungrounded,
Is living one day,
Virtuous and absorbed in meditation.

111. Better than living one hundred years,
Foolish and ungrounded,
Is living one day,
Wise and absorbed in meditation.

112. Better than living one hundred years,
Indolent and slothful,
Is living one day
With steadfast vigor.

113. Better than living one hundred years
Without seeing arising and dissipation,
Is living one day,
Seeing arising and dissipation.

114. Better than living one hundred years
Without seeing the deathless way,
Is living one day,
Seeing the deathless way.

115. Better than living one hundred years
Without seeing the supreme Dhamma,
Is living one day,
Seeing the supreme Dhamma.

Reflection

Thousands is a wonderful title for this chapter, not only because the term comes up a good five times in the verses, but because the word "thousands" highlights the many things we do, even good things, that do not contribute much to our spiritual advancement. Verses 106–108 express the great merit that comes from honoring an arahant. This practice is contrasted with practices that, on the surface, seem incredibly virtuous, such as offering a thousand sacrifices for a hundred years, or dwelling in a forest and tending the sacred fire for a hundred years—indeed any sacrifice. The wise practitioner knows which activities are most conducive to spiritual development.

Interestingly, the value and benefit of a given practice differs from person to person and varies for a single person over time. You have to know yourself and your propensities. Buddhaghosa writes, "When a man cultivates what is unsuitable, his progress is difficult and his direct-knowledge sluggish. When he cultivates what is suitable, his progress is swift" (Vism III.16). Buddhaghosa outlines six personality types: greedy; angry; deluded; faithful; intelligent; and speculative. These can even be aligned. The greedy person's personality lines up with the faithful one, the angry with the intelligent, and the deluded with the speculative. Buddhaghosa describes how you would know which one you are by your stance, gait, actions, eating habits, and the kinds of mental states that arise when you look at objects. Walk into a room, for example. If

you immediately look to see how pleasing it is, you would be a greedy/faithful person. If you immediately scrutinize it, this marks you as an angry/intelligent person. And if the environment leads you to get lost in your own thoughts, you are likely a deluded/speculative person.

The point is to learn about your predilections so that you can live and practice in a way best suited for your personality. Through such practice, you would eradicate your unskillful habits and draw on your strengths. A greedy/faithful person ought to live modestly and wear plain, rough clothes. Living this way would diminish one's greed and still align to one's romantic notions of simplicity. In terms of practice, one might want to meditate on the objective qualities of one's changing body to counteract one's sensuality or on the virtues of the Buddha to strengthen one's inclination to faithfulness. Angry/intelligent personalities, in contrast, would do well in pleasant surroundings, eating tasty food, and wearing decent clothes. Thus, pride and judgmentalism is kept in check ("I'm living so much stricter than others") and a gratifying lifestyle (still simple by middle-class standards) would be appreciated by one's intelligence. The kinds of meditations most helpful would be those more abstract. Finally, the deluded/speculative person should live in a very dull environment, something that would not trigger day-dreaming, and his meditative practices would be especially conducive to deep concentration (Vism III.76–103).

We need not embrace Buddhaghosa's exact typologies to appreciate the point. It simply does little good to embrace a lifestyle and spiritual practices that do not align well with our personality. One could love the poor and wish to share the Dhamma in far-away countries. But if mission work is not suitable to one's personality, such an undertaking is surely bound to be compromised and unfulfilling.

This chapter encourages us to reflect wisely on how we engage the spiritual journey. Recall the verses in Chapter Four that praised the one who wisely picks the right Dhamma word just as an expert gardener who selects the right flower. It takes time and patience to develop the ability to know what part of the Dhamma most readily applies in a given situation. Such knowledge comes to those who cultivate the practice intentionally and who progressively come to understand the Dhamma deeply. Deep, wise, mature practice takes courage. So, we see in verses 103–105 that one who can truly conquer himself is far greater and more courageous "than one who conquers thousands upon thousands" (103).

Our chapter challenges us to focus bravely on what we need to free ourselves from. I am reminded of the famous dialogue between Kāmada and the Buddha (SN 2:6):

Kāmada: Hard to do, Blessed One! Very hard to do, Blessed one!

Buddha: They do even what is hard to do, the trainees endowed with virtue, steadfast. For one who has entered the homeless life contentment brings along happiness.

Kāmada: That is hard to gain, Blessed One, namely, contentment.

Buddha: They gain even what is hard to gain, who delight in calming the mind, whose minds, day and night, take delight in development.

Kāmada: That is hard to concentrate, Blessed One, namely, the mind.

Buddha: They concentrate even what is hard to concentrate, who delight in calming the faculties. Having cut through the net of Death, the noble ones, O Kāmada, go their way.

Kāmada: The path is impassable and uneven, Blessed One.

Buddha: Though the path is impassable and uneven, the noble ones walk it Kāmada. The ignoble ones fall down head first, right there on the uneven path, but the path of the noble ones is even, for the noble are even amidst the uneven.

The final six verses challenge us to consider one day of truth, wisdom, and skillful meditation as better than one hundred years of foolishness, dissipation, and restlessness. This seems counter-intuitive to most people, who would surely prefer one hundred years of a normal life—with its joys and sorrows—to one exquisite day of spiritual perfection. This is only because we do not see our lives as they truly are. Perhaps we might rephrase it: would you rather live an utterly excellent day of joy and truth or one hundred years of misery? When we see how dissatisfying a conditioned life really is, then we are immediately attracted to even a day of freedom and joy. Every moment of our lives is like a microcosm of samsara. We are ever-changing, ever-seeking one gratification after another and running from one affliction after another. We can enjoy moments of bliss, much like a deva's life (god-like), or moments of hunger, like that of a hungry ghost who lives with incessant appetite, but these moments have no meaning or substance. On deep scrutiny, even the deva's experience is ultimately unsatisfying. Our day-to-day existence is the prison of samsara. We can make our cell more comfortable and try to ensure pleasant distractions, but in the end we are trying to distract ourselves from the fact that we live in a prison cell. Our chapter challenges us: focus on escape.

CHAPTER NINE

EVIL

Pāpa-vagga

116. Hasten to do good;
Restrain your thoughts from evil.
When the mind is slow in doing good
It delights in evil.

117. Should one do evil,
He should not do it again and again.
He ought not to desire this.
Accumulated evil brings great suffering.

118. Should one do good,
He should do it again and again.
He ought to desire this.
Accumulated good brings great happiness.

119. An evil person sees benefit
As long as the evil has not ripened.
When the evil does ripen,
He realizes misfortune.

120. Even a good person sees detriment
Before the goodness has ripened.
When the good does ripen,
He realizes benefit.

121. Do not disregard evil, thinking, "It will not come to me."
Even as falling drops of water can fill a jug,
So the fool becomes full of evil,
Collecting it little by little.

122. Do not disregard good, thinking, "It will not come to me."
Even as falling drops of water can fill a jug,
So the wise one becomes full of goodness,
Collecting it little by little.

123. One should avoid evil deeds,
As a merchant with great wealth in a small caravan
Avoids the dangerous road,
As one who desires life avoids poison.

124. Without a wound, the hand can carry poison.
With no wound, the poison has no effect.
So evil has no effect for those who do not practice it.

125. As fine dust thrown against the wind,
So does evil return to the fool
Who wrongs the innocent, the faithful, and the pure.

126. Some arise in the womb;
Evildoers arise in hell;
The righteous emerge in heaven;
And those without toxins enter final-Nibbāna.

127. There is no place in the world—
Neither in the sky, nor the ocean depth,
Nor inside a mountain cave—
Where one would be free from one's evil deed.

128. There is no place in the world—
Neither in the sky, nor the ocean depth,
Nor inside a mountain cave—
Where death is not victorious.

Reflection

Philosophers usually distinguish between natural evil, such as the suffering that comes from sickness or earthquakes, and moral evil, such as the suffering that comes from disordered desires. Often, of course, natural and moral evils are related. Cancer is correlated with unhealthy life-choices and even our weather is related to the consequences of global warming. One might even say that many of our experiences of natural evil are themselves kammic consequences of past moral failings. Still, even the Buddha, with all his innumerable lifetimes of excellent moral virtue, had to experience the reality of natural evil. *Pāpa* is decidedly about moral evil. In Western parlance, it would easily be rendered "sin," though this is not a typical term among Western Buddhists. In the West, we usually use the term "unskillful." This can be misleading, however, since "unskillful" can refer to something that is unwise but morally neutral. *Pāpa* is a violation of the universe's moral fabric, a violation of Dhamma. The first verse of our chapter provides two words that act as a counter-reference: *puñña* and *kalyāna*, both of which mean "good" or "virtuous." They can both also mean "merit," while *pāpa* can mean "demerit." Both evil and good are intrinsically part of the laws of kamma. Many of the verses here highlight this connection. *Pāpa* is a dangerous road where we will surely be robbed; it is a dangerous poison (123).

Most people do not recognize the prevalence of *pāpa* in their lives because they do not readily see the nature of the conditioned mind. One of the great benefits of mindfulness practice is that of coming to see, with increasingly clarity, just how dramatically factors such as ill will can shape our perceptions and actions. The first step toward freedom is to recognize that these qualities are present

and that they are running much of our lives. This chapter begins by reminding us that unless we are intent on virtue the mind "delights in evil" (116). Of course, only the most disturbed person delights in utter, unadulterated evil. Remember, though, that lust and ill will needn't involve unrestrained passion or outright malice. Lust is any attachment to pleasures of the body or mind. Likewise, ill will includes such guilty pleasures as judgmentalism or gossip. Indeed, it includes any attachments we have to our experiences of aversion.

Much of this chapter emphasizes the dynamics of *habit*. Modern brain studies show that our minds are highly plastic; they are always being formed and reformed as we strengthen some neuro-pathways and weaken others. In many ways, we become our habits. The Buddha taught incisively how habit works, and later Buddhist philosophy (*abhidhamma*) detailed it with extraordinary precision. It is not merely that we gain good kamma with good actions and bad kamma with bad actions—though this is very important—we become different persons by our habits of good and evil. The verses the Dhammapada offers for consideration sound more banal than profound: "Should one do evil, he should not do it again and again" (117); "Should one do good, he should do it again and again" (118). The verses are not so much simplistic as they are direct: look at your habits; scrutinize your lifestyle; recognize patterns. While these insights about the nature of habit are sobering, they offer hope. When we strengthen the habits of exercising compassion, love, mindfulness, and careful thinking, we transform ourselves into beings who are loving through and through, and we begin to perceive the world with loving eyes.

The good and evil that we do are typically not shocking to the system. Rarely does an average person instantly embrace radical poverty for the sake of the Dhamma and

start a soup kitchen to feed the poor. Rarely too does an average person do something heinous. Both cases would be a shock to the psyche. The more skillfully we practice, the deeper we engage the Dhamma, the more our possibilities expand. Little by little we become our spiritual engagement. One who is advancing in the Dhamma progressively finds profound commitment to service quite within the realm of possibility. The contrary is true as well, of course. One who becomes increasingly lost in lust, ill will, and delusion ends up doing selfish things that years before would have been unimaginable. The Buddha likens evil deeds to drops of water accumulating in a jug. Each drop is but a drop and seemingly insignificant. Like drops that eventually fill a jug, selfish acts accumulate: "So the fool becomes full of evil" (121).

Let us consider the Four Noble Truths: (1) Life is suffering (or dissatisfaction); (2) Suffering comes from craving; (3) Eliminate craving and you eliminate suffering—this is Nibbāna; and (4) The way to eliminate craving is by the Eightfold Path. But why do we crave? The Buddha teaches that we crave because we do not understand the very nature of existence: it is impermanent, there is no eternal self, and all experience is ultimately unsatisfying. If we simply understood our *selflessness* we would not crave, cling to, or identify with our experiences. Ironically, our very craving and clinging keeps us from seeing the truth about ourselves and our experience. Craving and clinging generate the energy that creates kamma and new births.

While the ultimate goal of Buddhism is attaining Nibbāna and leaving behind all kamma, this chapter is dominated by the laws of kamma and the kinds of kamma we produce. Good kammic activity fosters both spiritual maturity and a favorable rebirth, while bad kamma leads to increased spiritual bondage and a woeful

rebirth. We should not think of kammic consequences as either merciful or vengeful; they simply reflect our intentions and actions, and indeed reflect the truth about how these shape who we are. The laws of kamma are analogous to the laws of physics. We do not thank gravity or begrudge it; it is simply a law to negotiate skillfully or unskillfully. Kammic laws do not work in obvious ways. Rather, they operate within a large personal and cosmic field. Kammic fruit can ripen in one's current life, next rebirth, or future rebirth, and it ripens somewhat unpredictably. In terms of a future rebirth, there are four different kinds of kamma. *Weighty kamma* refers to dramatic acts in our lives. *Proximate kamma* refers to the state of our consciousness at the time of death. *Habitual kamma* references the kind of person we become in life. Finally, *random kamma* designates the ripening of kammic energy from a vast field of past actions. In future rebirths, typically weighty kamma controls our next rebirth if present, then proximate, then habitual, and finally random kamma, if the other three are not terribly strong.

Kammic dynamics are also a bit complicated. Some kamma can be strengthened by more of the same (*supportive kamma*). Other kamma is weakened by its opposite (*counteractive kamma*) or even annulled completely (*destructive kamma*). For example, suppose that a person with a deeply ingrained habit of loving-kindness were to lash out in anger. The bad kamma from that unskillful act would weaken the good kamma, but not by much. The Buddha imaged this as salt thrown in water. If a handful were thrown in a glass, it would be bitter. But if it were thrown into the Ganges, the river would remain essentially unchanged (AN 3:110).

Many of the verses in the Dhammapada work like couplets, and verses 119 and 120 represent an example:

"An evil person sees benefit as long as the evil has not ripened. When the evil does ripen, he realizes misfortune" and "Even a good person sees detriment before the goodness has ripened. When the good does ripen, then he realizes benefit." The first verse is somewhat obvious. The so-called benefit of an evil deed is the satisfaction of one's desire, even as that desire is disordered. The apparent good feels satisfying on a gross level until its kammic fruit emerges. The second verse, however, is less obvious. Why would a good person see detriment from a good deed, even if this would be prior to experiencing the good kamma it produces? I think what is being pointed out is that the result of many good deeds can be initially painful. One could consider how much, for example, parents or teachers do for their children or students, only to be countered with indifference or even hostility. It's easy to get deflated. Here the laws of kamma offer good news. We realize that, in the end, such service produces good fruit, both for others and, in the long run, certainly for us. We may not see the good results quickly, but we know that kammic laws ultimately protect us.

CHAPTER TEN

THRASHING

Daṇḍa-vagga

129. All tremble at a thrashing.
All fear death.
Likening others to oneself,
Do not kill or lead another to kill.

130. All tremble at a thrashing.
All hold life dear.
Likening others to oneself,
Do not kill or lead another to kill.

131. One who himself seeks happiness,
And yet hurts others who desire happiness,
Will realize no happiness after death.

132. One who himself seeks happiness,
And does not hurt others who desire happiness,
Will realize happiness after death.

133. To none speak harshly.
Those spoken to would respond in kind.
Contentious speech is painful;
Retaliation would befall you.

134. If, like a broken gong,
You yourself are unstirred,
You have attained Nibbāna,
And no contention exists within.

135. Just as a cowherd drives a cow to pasture with a stick,
So old age and death drive the life of sentient beings.

136. A fool does not recognize his own evil act.
Devoid of wisdom, he is tormented by his actions,
As one burned by fire.

137. One who does violence to the innocent and peaceable
Will quickly encounter one of ten states:

138. Intense pain, destitution, bodily injury, disease of body, disease of mind,

139. Oppression from the king, cruel slander, loss of relatives, loss of wealth,

140. Loss of houses by fire;
And after death, such a one, so devoid of wisdom, will be reborn in hell.

141. Neither nakedness nor matted hair,
Neither a mud-smeared body nor fasting,
Neither lying on the ground, nor dust and sweat,
Nor sitting on one's heels,
Can purify one who has not overcome doubt.

142. Even if one would walk around luxuriously attired,
If one is tranquil, tame, self-restrained, and living a holy life,
Having renounced violence toward any living being,
Such is a brahmin, a renunciant, a monk.

143. Where in this world exists
One who is restrained by conscience and avoids blame,
As a good horse avoids the whip?

144. Be like a good horse when touched by the whip—ardent and alarmed.
Through strength, virtue, and vigor,
Through concentration and investigation of truth,

Mindful and possessed of right knowledge and conduct,
You will leave this great suffering behind.

145. Irrigators guide water;
Fletchers straighten shafts;
Carpenters bend wood;
The well-practiced master themselves.

Reflection

Daṇḍa is a harsh term. Along with thrashing, it can mean "cutting," "destroying," "violence," "punishment," or even refer to the "rod of punishment." *Daṇḍa* is not just physical violence, for it can be verbal as well (133). *Daṇḍa* can also be mental violence, whereby we do harm to ourselves with our own anger and resentments. Their toxic qualities violate us like no abuser can. As we discovered earlier: "Whatever an enemy would do to an enemy, a hater to one hated, worse than that is the harm that a wrongly directed mind can do to itself" (42).

Actually, this chapter begins not with violence, but with sympathy. "All tremble at a thrashing. All fear death. Likening others to oneself, do not kill or lead another to kill" (129). Sympathy and compassion are core Buddhist postures, and they are intimately related. Compassion (*karuṇā*) has as its etymology "quaking heart." When we sympathize, we see another's suffering and our heart quakes. Buddhaghosa writes, "When there is suffering in others, good people's hearts are moved" (Vism IX.92).

The very nature of wisdom includes sympathy and compassion; one cannot be wise without these qualities. Conversely, sympathy and compassion require wisdom,

that is, seeing deeply into the nature of suffering. Those out of touch with their own suffering and all that accompanies it, usually respond to others' suffering with either indifference or a kind of judgmentalism. A third response might also be pity, which is neither sympathy nor compassion but a kind of aversion to another's pain. When we pity someone, we push away his or her pain, finding it distasteful. Of course, we wish the person we pity to be free of pain, but this wish stems from fear. With wisdom, sympathy, and compassion, we recognize "All tremble at a thrashing ... likening others to oneself" (129–130). In the next verses, we recognize the universal desire for happiness. In the Buddhist tradition, compassion is our mind's natural state when freed from lust, ill will, and delusion. Even before attaining Nibbāna, the less these conditioned qualities rule our minds, the more our inherent compassion arises. "Go forth, monks," the Buddha commanded, "for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world" (Vin I 20).

Cultivating one's innate disposition for sympathy and compassion involves recognizing the power of verbal violence. "Do not speak harshly. Those spoken to would respond in kind. Contentious speech is painful; retaliation would befall you" (133). On the surface, it looks like the Buddha is simply suggesting ways of avoiding retaliation, but this is really shorthand for addressing the precept of skillful speech. Right speech includes refraining from speech that is dishonest, divisive, abusive, or idle. In addition, skillful speech is honest, lovingly given, and intended to benefit another (AN 5:198). Surely, the Buddha often spoke challenging words as he pointed out unskillful behavior. It is clear, though, that these words were always offered in care, from profound self-possession, and at a time when they would be most beneficial.

The Dhammapada, in fact, often names things for what they are in clear, straight-forward language. Consider verses 136–140: The violent encounter such states as pain, injury, disease of mind, and so on, and after death a woeful state. This is simply the truth of the matter. We should see it less a threat and more a simple articulation of the laws of kamma. As we saw in Chapter Two, the five precepts involve refraining from killing or violence, from taking what is not offered, from sexual misconduct, from lying, and from intoxicants. We might even consider these other four in association with unskillful speech. We refrain from killing another's spirit or trust by our speech, from not claiming insights that are not ours, from any words of seduction or compromise, and from any form of toxic speech.

One of the more interesting verses is 141, which insists that even the most rigorous spiritual practices are useless in purifying oneself until one has overcome doubt. It seems, however, that the Buddha encouraged skepticism: "Do not go by hearsay, nor by what is handed down by others, nor by what people say, nor by what is stated on the authority of your traditional teachings" (AN 1:188). Rather, we have to discover for ourselves the truth of the Dhamma (AN 3:65). On the other hand, faith or trust is considered one of the five critical spiritual faculties, and this is regularly confirmed in verses in the Dhammapada. As we saw earlier, doubt is even a hindrance to meditation. The truth is, one needs to embrace a healthy sense of both. We must start with enough skepticism to determine if a practice or teaching is authentic. Given the marketplace of ideas, we simply cannot uncritically accept just anything anyone claims on authority. Once something is fundamentally secured as reliable, however, we need a sense of faith; we need a reservoir of trust that protects us from temporary

emotional or intellectual turbulence. Such faith allows the truth to evidence itself in our hearts and experience. Authentic spiritual practice needs both faith and healthy skepticism.

A final insight from this chapter comes from the images of violence used to describe spiritual training. For instance, a well-trained practitioner learns how to avoid the whip or suffering (143), and we are encouraged to be like the good horse who knows how to act when disciplined (144). Such verses address the vigilance one needs to maintain along the path and the kind of energy one needs to bring to spiritual practice. One of the essential parts of the Eightfold Path is Right Effort (*sammā ājīva*), which encourages us to cultivate an energetic will. Right Effort, however, is not simply zealous intent; it is also balanced practice or balanced effort. Trying too hard to concentrate doesn't allow the mind to be spacious enough. On the other hand, a deficit of intentionality leaves the mind without the fuel it needs to focus. The mind is like a flower bud: you cannot force its petals to open, but you have to support the conditions that allow its natural unfolding.

In a conversation with the monk Soṇa, the Buddha likened balanced practice to strings on a lute: "When the strings of your lute were neither too taut nor too loose, but tuned to be right on pitch, was your lute in tune and playable?" "Yes, lord," he said. "In the same way, Soṇa, over-aroused persistence leads to restlessness, overly slack persistence leads to laziness. Thus you should determine the right pitch for your persistence." Soṇa, embracing the virtue of Right Effort, quickly then became an arahant (AN 6:55).

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DECAY

Jarā-vagga

146. Why laughter, why joy,
While ever-aflame?
Covered in darkness,
Do you not seek the light?

147. Look at this beautified image, with many plans—
A diseased mass of sores that has no permanence.

148. This body, a nest of illness that is wasted away,
This foul mass breaks up,
For truly life ends in death.

149. On seeing these gray bones,
Scattered like gourds in autumn—
What is the fondness?

150. It (the body) is a city made of bones, plastered in flesh and blood,
Where old age, death, conceit, and hypocrisy are stored.

151. Even the king's chariots, so splendidly adorned, decay.
Alas, the body too decays.
But the Dhamma of the good does not age;
Indeed, the good declare it to one another.

152. He of little learning grows old like an ox;
His bulk increases, but his wisdom does not.

153. Through many rounds of birth have I run,
Seeking and not finding the builder of this house.
Painful is birth, again and again.

154. House-builder you are seen! You will build no more!
Your rafters are broken, the roof destroyed.
The mind, having gone to the Unconditioned,
Has attained the destruction of craving.

155. Not having lived a holy life,
Not having obtained wealth in youth,
They brood,
Like old herons in a lake without fish.

156. Not having lived a holy life,
Not having attained wealth in their youth,
They lie like arrows shot from a bow,
Lamenting the past.

Reflection

In Buddhism, like many other religious traditions, elders are given respect. As the dictum goes, *with age comes wisdom*. Of course, we also know *there's no fool like an old fool*. Which of these contrasting dicta applies to a given senior depends on whether he or she has lived skillfully and cultivated a wise, compassionate character. Aging also highlights the reality of samsara, the wandering from lifetime to lifetime. Interestingly, while we usually think of samsara as the cycle of rebirth, its original meaning was re-death. The unenlightened go from *death to death*. "With the arising of birth comes the arising of aging and death" (MN 9.21).

In a striking text, Ānanda, a close disciple of the Buddha, reflected how aged the Buddha was getting. The Buddha agreed emphatically and declared, "Fie on you, wretched aging, aging which makes beauty fade! So much has the charming puppet been crushed beneath advancing age. One who may live a hundred years also has death as its destination. Death spares none along the way, but comes crushing everything" (SN 48:41). The Buddha once described aging as "... decrepitude, broken teeth, grey hair, wrinkled skin, shrinking with age, decay of the sense faculties ..." (DN 22.18). Aging is the topic of the chapter. The title in Pali is *Jarā*, which can refer to being crushed or overwhelmed as well as being decayed, old, or even wretched. All of these associations are at play in this chapter.

In the story of the Buddha, we learn that his father tried to keep him from anything unpleasant, but on four different occasions outside of the palace he saw a sick man, an old man, a corpse, and finally a holy man seeking liberation. Ashvaghosha, who wrote a central biography of the Buddha, describes it like this: "When he thus gained insight into the fact that the blemishes of disease, old age, and death vitiate the very core of this world, he lost at the same moment all self-intoxication, which normally arises from pride in one's own strength, youth, and vitality" (*Buddhacarita*, #6).

Sometimes the Buddha's story is imagined as though aging, sickness, or death had simply not occurred to Prince Siddhattha. Had the future Buddha never gotten sick or seen anyone else so? Had he never noticed that people aged or had he never been to a funeral? Ashvaghosha specifies: when Siddhattha realized these realities lie at the *core* of existence he lost his youthful self-intoxication. That is, he fully faced the essence of the human condition. Such a clear vision is rare. In the Hindu epic,

The Mahābhārata, Krishna reflects that the greatest mystery in the universe is that everyone knows that all will die, but no one actually lives as though it will happen to themselves.

Buddhist wisdom centers on seeing reality for what it actually is without sentimental add-ons or fantasy colorings. That everything living moves to death is not macabre; it is an obvious fact. So intoxication with our bodies, our minds, our plans, or our achievements comes from not paying attention. As mentioned in Chapter One, Buddhaghosa lists ten of his forty meditations on *foulness*, and he recommends that a self-indulgent personality would do well to meditate on a decomposing corpse. Doing this for eight hours a day for a week or two would make short work of self-intoxication. Another famous method—and one you could actually do today—involves reviewing your body by its constitutive parts:

> In this body there are head hairs, body hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone marrow, kidney, heart, liver, midriff, spleen, lungs, bowels, entrails, gorge, dung, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, spittle, snot, oil of the joints, and urine (MN 119.7).

When I lead students in this meditation, they consider it gross. Some have even suggested that I framed it in a way to stack the deck on the repulsiveness of the body, but what other parts might we add to make it more attractive? Of course, if we were repulsed by our bodies, this would be an instance of aversion, which we also ought to avoid. The best result from such a meditation would be to see the body for what it is. The Dhammapada considers those who refuse to recognize the truth of sickness, aging, and death as old useless oxen, old brood-

ing herons, or aimlessly shot and now rotting arrows (152, 155, 156).

The chapter starts out with paradoxical language. We are "ever-aflame" and "covered in darkness." Then we are asked, "Do you not see the light?" The flame here is, of course, our craving. This kind of flame enlightens nothing, but rather intensifies the darkness. Caught up in our addictions, our preoccupations, and our delusions, we miss the real light of the Dhamma. Thus, this chapter, while seemingly morbid, is really about taking the first steps in seeing reality for what it is and recognizing the light of Dhamma that will help us escape from the flames torturing us. The Buddha provides five facts we ought to reflect on: I am subject to aging; I am subject to illness, I am subject to death; I will lose whatever is dear to me; and I am responsible for my own kamma (AN 5:57). This motivates us to recognize, and thus halt, what perpetuates ongoing rebirth: "House-builder, you are seen! You will build no more!" (154). This verse quotes the Buddha's moment of enlightenment. In another place the Buddha taught, "Monks, mindfulness of death, when developed and pursued, is of great fruit and benefit. It gains a footing in the Deathless [Nibbāna], and has the Deathless as its final end" (AN 6:20).

We can pretend that aging and death do not exist. Western culture has many strategies for this option, such as plastic surgery or dressing up and painting corpses. Or perhaps we can concede these, but merely as depressing facts. More wholesomely, we can embrace these truths as motivation to grow spiritually and advance toward liberation. During a conversation with an old man named Pingiya, the Buddha observed, "Seeing people suffering on account of their bodies, heedless people are oppressed on account of their bodies. The heedful, Pingiya, let go of the body for the sake of no further becoming" (Sn 5.16).

Being born human is considered rare and fortunate, for humans have a unique opportunity to practice deeply. If one were born a deva (a godlike existence), life would be too blissful for one to be concerned about spiritual advancement. If one were born in a hell state, one would be too preoccupied with suffering. The human condition not only offers the kind of consciousness that allows for spiritual practice, it also carries with it many instances of pleasure and pain, suffering and joy. We have the opportunity to engage this vast array of experiences. Facing our aging, our decay, and our death is the first step in taking advantage of that opportunity.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE SELF

Atta-vagga

157. If one would know oneself as dear,
One would keep oneself well-protected.
The wise man should guard himself
Throughout the three watches of the night.

158. One should first establish oneself in what is proper.
Then only could the wise man instruct others and
remain unstained.

159. If one would only do oneself what one instructs
others to do!
Then, well-restrained, he would well-train others.
Truly, training oneself is most difficult.

160. Truly oneself is one's own protector.
What other protector could there be?
Only by being well-trained oneself
Does one obtain the true protector, so hard to gain.

161. By oneself is evil done;
It proceeds from oneself, it originates from oneself.
It crushes the fool,
Like a diamond crushes a precious stone.

162. He who covers himself with depraved conduct,
Like a creeper covers a sala tree,
Does to himself what an enemy desires for him.

163. It is easy to do wrong,
So harmful to oneself.

It is indeed most difficult to do good,
So beneficial to oneself.

164. He who scorns the teaching of the arahants,
Those nobles who live the Dhamma,
Is the fool who relies on evil views.
Like the fruit of a bamboo, he ripens to self-destruction.

165. By oneself alone is evil done, by oneself one becomes defiled.
Evil is undone by oneself, by oneself alone can one become cleansed.
Purity and impurity arise from oneself. No one can purify another.

166. Neglect not your own welfare for another's,
However great.
If you fully understood your own welfare,
You would pursue the true attainment.

Reflection

One of the Buddha's central teachings is that there is no permanent, absolute, eternal soul or *self* (*anattā*). This was in sharp contrast to the Brahmanism of his day, which sought to realize that the absolute self (*atman*) was in some way identified with *Brahman*, the ultimate reality. The Buddha taught that there was no self and no Brahman. Further, he taught that the very identification between the self and Brahman strengthened one's imprisonment in samsara, because it strengthened one's sense of an eternal, autonomous self. Liberation had everything to do with recognizing that there is no self at all.

Paradoxically, the Buddha also taught what was

most obvious: one's own self is most dear and most valuable. "I visited all quarters with my mind," the Buddha declared, "and I found none dearer than myself; self is likewise to every other dear; who loves himself will never harm another" (Ud 47). Our chapter even begins with this sentiment: "If one would know oneself as dear, one would keep oneself well-protected" (157) and "Truly oneself is one's own protector. What other protector could there be?" (160). Strangely, rather than protecting themselves, many people seem to put themselves in harm's way. We act as our own enemy (162), corrupting and harming ourselves (165), setting ourselves up for self-destruction (164). In fact, our very enemy is our ignorance: we do not understand the nature of happiness.

Is Buddhism somehow selfish then? One often encounters such claims, particularly directed at Theravada Buddhism. Even scholars regularly contrast Mahayana with Theravada on this score. Mahayana, with its emphasis on the bodhisattva vow to work to save all beings, is praised, while Theravada is derided as singularly absorbed in advancing one's own pursuit of Nibbāna. One might even imagine one of the verses in our chapter as support for this critique: "Neglect not your own welfare for another's, however great. If you fully understood your own welfare, you would pursue the true attainment" (166). Putting one's own needs before others? Wouldn't such behavior be egotistical and lack generosity?

Such interpretations mislead on a number of scores. One need only to look at the Buddha's life of great service to others to realize that the Dhamma should not be imagined a selfish enterprise. Moreover, we see in the Buddha's former lives (*Jātaka*) innumerable examples of heroic selflessness. In one case, reborn as a hare, he even offered his very life as food-alzzThe Buddhist focus on Nibbāna is nothing less than mindfulness, self-possession,

and the progressive freedom from lust, ill will, and delusion. This path has everything to do with compassionate care of others. As we saw earlier, sympathy, compassion, and true awareness are mutually interacting qualities. Until we free ourselves, however, our concern for others is compromised. When we are bound by our own cravings and delusions, what we take for compassion often has more to do with pity. What we imagine to be love has more to do with attachment. What we take for sympathy has more to do with comparing ourselves with others. Equanimity becomes some form of disengagement. Verses 158 and 159 emphasize the importance of first establishing oneself in the Dhamma before instructing or helping others. The Buddha once used the example of a person who, stuck in the mud, would not be able to pull another person also stuck. To assist another, one must first free oneself. Without being oneself free from defilements, one simply is not in a position to help others rid their own defilements (MN 8:16).

The charge that Buddhism is self-seeking is not new. The Buddha himself had to respond to the same charge. The brahmin Saṅgarāva challenges, "Let me tell you good Gotama, that Brahmins offer sacrifice and get others to do so. All these are following a course of merit, due to sacrifice, that benefits many people. But whoever from this or that family has gone forth from home into homelessness, he tames but one self, calms but one self, makes but one self attain final-Nibbāna. Thus, due to his going forth, he is following a course of merit that benefits only one person." The Buddha replied that his ministry, and the ministry of those who follow him, will save countless beings. This is anything but selfish (AN 3:60).

When we look at the Buddha's first Dhamma Talk, the talk in which he articulated the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, we can see that one couldn't possi-

bly follow the Eightfold Path—the path to enlightenment—without caring a great deal about the well-being of others and doing much to try to foster that well-being. For instance, Right Action, Right Intention, Right Effort, and Right Speech all involve exercising compassion, good-will, and generosity.

At this point, we find ourselves with a conundrum: What is the *self* that seeks liberation from any *self* in order to attain Nibbāna, that ultimate refuge for the ... *self*? Who am I, if not a self? Towards whom (or what) am I compassionate, if there are no selves? And why be compassionate at all? Theravada responds to such questions in a number of ways. The first is that we are no more and no less than five interrelated, impersonal aggregates. These being: *materiality*, which is our physical bodies and senses; *feeling*, which receives sense information; *perception*, which discriminates mental activities; *mental formations*, which involves our will and psychic dispositions; and *consciousness*, which puts all our experiences together. We delude ourselves if we imagine any of these elements, or the collection of all of them, as either having or being an enduring, autonomous, personal self. Collectively, they do comprise a full, bona fide, sentient being, but under scrutiny there is no unchanging, eternal *self* underneath. In a famous dialogue, the monk Nāgasena compares the self to a chariot. King Milinda describes the chariot as that which consists of an axle, wheels, a format, a yoke, and so on. Nāgasena pushes him to identify which of these parts represents the essence of the chariot, to which the king replies that it has no essence. Just so with the self, Nāgasena says. Conventionally, the term is useful, but there is nothing essential beyond the impersonal collection.

Still, why then be compassionate to an impersonal collection? Further, who or what exactly is expressing compassion? The Buddha would say that the collection is

very real. Humans are sentient beings who suffer, but being sentient does not necessarily entail an eternal self.

The issues surrounding the nature of the self are profound and touch on core Buddhist teaching. In Buddhism, doctrines have everything to do with negotiating the human condition. As we saw earlier, Buddhists do not typically embrace metaphysics for metaphysics' sake (recall the story of the person just pierced by the arrow—the only concern is the arrow's removal). Doctrines are solely intended to eliminate suffering and foster well-being in this life, and ultimately lead one to Nibbāna (SN 12:15). Further, his teachings are meant for the world we actually inhabit. They represent relative truths (*sammuti-sacca*), that is, truths relative to our conditioned existence. They do not represent the ultimate truth (*paramattha-sacca*) of Nibbāna, about which no one can speak. Nibbāna is beyond categories or reference points. In the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*, the Buddha uses two similes regarding doctrine. First, he likens holding doctrine to handling a water snake. One needs to grasp it firmly, but not tightly. "Those teachings, being rightly grasped by them, conduce to their own welfare." Second, he likens doctrine to a raft that transports us across the river. Once across, one would never continue to carry the raft; it has served its purpose of getting us to the other side. "The Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping" (MN 22.11–13).

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE WORLD

Loka-vagga

167. Do not follow an inferior teaching;
Do not live by negligence;
Do not embrace wrong views;
Do not be a world-enhancer.

168. Arise and be not negligent.
Follow the Dhamma, practice well.
Happy the one who dwells in Dhamma,
Both in this world and in the next.

169. Practice the Dhamma well, not poorly.
Happy the one who dwells in Dhamma,
Both in this world and in the next.

170. Look upon the world as a bubble;
Look upon the world as a mirage.
One who looks thus is unseen by the
king of Death.

171. Come, look at this world as an adorned king's chariot.
While fools sink down, the discriminating are free.

172. One who was once negligent but becomes diligent,
Illumines the world,
Like a moon released from a cloud.

173. One whose evil conduct is replaced by good,
Illumines the world,
Like a moon released from a cloud.

174. Blind is this world where few see clearly.
As birds who escape from the snare are few,
So too are those who go to a higher plane.

175. Geese travel by the path of the sun,
By power they move through the sky.
The wise are led from the world,
Having conquered Māra and his army.

176. Of the one who has transgressed the law,
Rejected the world beyond,
And speaks falsely:
There is no evil that he could not do.

177. Truly, the selfish do not enter the realm of the gods.
Fools do not praise generosity.
But the wise one, rejoicing in generosity,
Is thereby happy in the next world.

178. Over sole sovereignty of the earth,
Or going to a heaven,
Or lordship over all worlds,
The fruit of stream-winner is supreme.

Reflection

In many religions the term *world* is complicated. In some contexts, it simply refers to physical matter. It can also connote immorality, as it does when people speak of being *worldly*. Buddhism also understands the term variously. On the one hand, the world is simply the universe, neither good nor bad. On the other hand, being trapped in samsara is being trapped in and by *the world*. Thus, we need to be detached from the world and try to escape rebirth (175). We are also taught that the world is blind We are also taught that the world is blind (174). And yet,

the Buddha had compassion for the world and its inhabitants. According to his enlightenment story, Māra tempted him to enter final-Nibbāna immediately, but he chose instead to spend the next forty-five years teaching the Dhamma. He also encouraged his disciples to do the same: "[Teach] for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world..." (Vin I.20). The true disciple of the Buddha acts as a light for the world, "like a moon released from a cloud" (172, 173).

Fundamentally, the world is not bad, and having a human existence is surely good. The real issue is our relationship to our experiences in the world. To an unfree, conditioned mind, one reactive to its experience, the world is often a trap. We crave and cling to what seems pleasurable, and we repel what seems unpleasant. Some versions of lust, ill will, and delusion will always create suffering, as we heard in the very first verses: "If one speaks or acts from a corrupted mind, suffering follows as the cart-wheel follows the ox's foot.... If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows as an ever-present shadow (1, 2). This eternal law is reiterated in our current chapter: "Happy the one who dwells in Dhamma, both in this world and the next" (168, 169). Even as we are encouraged to seek Nibbāna and not be a *world-enhancer* (167), this chapter's meditation focuses on fostering an authentic relationship to the world. Where fools are caught, the wise walk in freedom—freedom that confuses and conquers Māra (170, 175).

Our meditation also draws us to the consequences of either walking with a pure mind or a corrupted one. As we have seen, like the laws of physics, the laws of kamma are impersonal. You reap what you sow not because you are rewarded or punished; it is simply that the kammic energy you generate affects your life and next lives. If there is anything to be particularly concerned about

regarding kamma, it is that we reap *exponentially* what we sow.

The Buddhist tradition highlights four factors that determine the kammic weight of actions. Let's consider giving, which is one of the main ways of creating good kamma or merit. The first factor in giving is intention, and this is necessary, since kammic energy is highly associated with the will. So there is no merit in doing something beneficial by happenstance or coincidence. The second factor is the nature of the gift itself. Is it small or large, easy to give or difficult to give? The third factor concerns one's relationship to the giving. Do I offer the gift happily or begrudgingly? Finally, there is the *field of giving*, which represents the worthiness of the person receiving the gift. To feed a monk creates some good kamma. To feed a monastery, however, creates an extraordinary amount of good kamma. Here one not only feeds a number of monks, one also supports the mission of the whole monastic community.

Negative kamma works the same way. In order for my action to generate bad kamma, I must intend that it bring about some harm (although habitual negligence or active greed is also sufficient to generate bad kamma). One looks at the weight of the deed, how one experiences it, and the field. One of the most egregious acts is that of killing one's parents. This deed is stunningly heavy. Interestingly, one would generate even worse kamma by causing dissension within the monastic community. This is because the *field* is so important. The Sangha is the premier custodian and witness to the Dhamma.

There's a fascinating alignment between Buddhist cosmology and Buddhist psychology. Buddhist cosmology identifies thirty-one realms of existence, and each realm corresponds to a particular state of mind. The thirty-one realms may be organized into three general

groupings. First, there are four *formless realms* (*arūpa-loka*) that correspond to the *arūpa-jhānas*. Second, there are sixteen *form-realms* (*rūpa-loka*), which represent various deva states associated with the four jhānas—seven for the fourth jhāna, and three each for the first three jhānas, each representing the depth of practice in that particular absorption. Finally, there are eleven *sensual-realms* (*kāma-loka*). Six of these eleven realms represent deva states, where some form of sensual enjoyment is experienced. The seventh realm corresponds with the human condition. The other sensual-realms (*kāma-loka*) include realms for titans, hungry ghosts, and animals, and finally, there are versions of hell, which are utterly gruesome. We should bear in mind that all of the thirty-one states, from the most blissful to the most miserable, are temporary.

Reflecting upon the lower realms—realms such as those of titans, hungry ghosts, animals, and hell-states—helps us understand how a person's rebirth may be an exaggerated expression of the kind of experience that dominated his or her life. Those who live lives that are contentious and angry are reborn as titans. These kinds of beings do not harm humans but are constantly in conflict with each other. Greedy or avaricious personality types return as hungry ghosts. These are creatures with extraordinarily large bodies and pinhole mouths; they are always eating and always hungry. Humans who live merely by base human instincts are reborn as animals. None of these states represent rebirths from people who are evil, but they do express the kammic consequences of lives that are lazy, self-absorbed, or uncaring. Hell states are for those who do decidedly evil acts, acts whose kammic weight is just too great to prevent an utterly miserable existence in the next life.

One might ask: How, if there is no *self*, can there be a rebirth? It would work like this: the consciousness

aggregate, informed by the other four aggregates and driven by one's craving, reemerges into a different life, a life that suits the character and quality reflected by one's former life or lives. There is really great continuity between one life and the next. Who we are and what we became continues on from one lifetime to another. It is only when one attains Nibbāna that there is no more kammic energy to drive the consciousness aggregate along. We must remember, all of these aggregates are ultimately empty. In verse 170 we read: "Look upon the world as a bubble; look upon the world as a mirage." We can also look upon our aggregates this very same way. The Buddha once likened the aggregates to foam on the Ganges, water bubbles, a mirage, a hollow heartwood, and a magic trick. In each case, careful observance shows them to be "empty, void, without substance" (SN 22:95).

To sum up, the term *world* is useful in many religions, Buddhism included. It can simply refer to the fact that we are physical beings in a physical existence. It can also direct us to the spiritual, mental, and moral bondage that undermines the holy life. Finally, though, it can represent possibilities for happiness in this life and escape from samsara after this life. Human existence is a rare opportunity, and this chapter above all asks us: What are you going to make of it?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE BUDDHA

Buddha-vagga

179. He whose victory cannot be undone,
A conquest no one in the world can pursue:
This is the Buddha, trackless in an endless field.
By what path would you guide him?

180. The one who has no snare,
No craving, no thirst to carry him anywhere:
This is the Buddha, trackless in an endless field.
By what path would you guide him?

181. The wise, intent on meditation,
Delighting in renunciation and calm,
Wholly awakened and mindful:
Even the gods envy them.

182. Difficult it is to gain a human birth;
Difficult is the life of mortals;
Difficult is the chance to hear the true Dhamma;
Difficult is the arising of Buddhas.

183. Doing no evil,
Undertaking the good,
Purifying one's mind:
This is the teaching of the Buddhas.

184. One who hurts another is no monk.
One who harms another is no renunciant.
Patience and endurance make the highest asceticism.
The Buddhas teach that Nibbāna is supreme.

185. Not disparaging or hurting others,
Restrained by the precepts, moderate in food,
Dwelling in solitude, pursuing high states of mind:
This is the teaching of the Buddhas.

186. Not even by a rain of coins would people have their fill of sense pleasures.
The wise one knows they satisfy little and cause pain.

187. He does not even delight in heavenly pleasures.
The disciple of the Wholly Awakened One is devoted to craving's destruction.

188. People driven by fear seek many refuges,
Whether mountains, forests, or shrine parks.

189. But such a refuge is not safe, surely not supreme.
Arriving at such a refuge, one is not free from all suffering.

190. But one who has gone for refuge to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha,
Sees, with true wisdom, the Four Noble Truths:

191. Suffering, the origin of suffering, the overcoming of suffering,
And the Eightfold Path leading to the cessation of suffering.

192. Truly, this refuge is safe, this refuge is supreme.
Having come to this refuge, one is truly freed from all suffering.

193. A remarkable man is hard to find;
He is not born everywhere.
Where such a wise one is born
His family happily flourishes.

194. Happy the birth of the Buddhas;
Happy the teaching of the true Dhamma;
Happy the harmony of the Sangha;
Happy the austere practice of those in harmony.

195. If one venerates those worthy of veneration,
Buddhas or their disciples,
Beings who have transcended proliferations
And passed beyond grief and sorrow,

196. Beings who are free and fear nothing—
If one venerates such beings, the merit cannot be measured.

Reflection

Buddha was Gotama's self-designation once he became enlightened. It means "awakened one." Though most of us think we know ourselves well and perceive the world fairly accurately, we in fact live in a kind of dream world. To attain Nibbāna is to wake up! *Tathāgata* is another term regularly applied to the Buddha, and one he himself used. It means *thus gone*, that is, one who has escaped samsara.

One could easily imagine that the Buddha's career began once he was enlightened under the bodhi tree and started preaching. Conventionally, this may be true, but it is not very accurate. The Bodhisattva who would become the Buddha began his mission four hundred eons previously when he was on the verge of enlightenment. At that point, he made a vow to spiritually develop himself so completely that he would return as a Buddha and guide as many others as possible. Over a great many lifetimes, this being practiced the ten perfections (*pāramitā*) to their superlative degree. We too might attend to them

on our own path. They are generosity, morality, renunciation, wisdom, energy, forbearance, truthfulness, resoluteness, loving-kindness, and equanimity. Each perfection exists on a continuum, from the more basic expressions to the superlative. For example, basic generosity would involve sharing one's possessions with the less fortunate. A more developed expression would be service to another at great cost to oneself. And the superlative expression would include offering one's very life, which, as we saw earlier, the Buddha-to-be did for an ascetic when he was a hare. Developing a spiritual practice to such a high degree makes a Buddha far superior to arahants who are also fully enlightened. Buddhas have supernormal powers that far exceed those of any mere arahant, such as seeing all causal connections, past, present, and future, knowing the reality of all worlds, and knowing the kammic consequences of all actions.

We see that our chapter references other Buddhas (183, 185, 195). This may be a surprise to most non-Buddhists, but the Buddhist tradition recognizes many of them. The *Khuddaka Nikāya* (Minor Collection) devotes an entire volume (*Buddhavaṃsa*) to the lives of past Buddhas. In the *Mahāpadāna Sutta* (DN 14), the Buddha himself describes some of his predecessors and their activities and even anticipates the next Buddha, named Metteyya. Many Buddhists cultivate the intention to be reborn during Metteyya's time, and for good reason. To live during a Buddha's lifetime is a rare, beautiful opportunity. As verse 182 tells us, "Difficult is the chance to hear the true Dhamma; difficult is the arising of Buddhas." When the Buddha spoke this verse, surely he intended to highlight how auspicious it is to be present when a Buddha emerges. Buddhas embody both perfect compassion and perfect wisdom; they know our hearts and read our minds. They know our kamma and the best way to help us attain

release. Verse 182 underscores an important truth: it is dauntingly hard to become a Buddha. Imagine being so developed that you are virtually enlightened, and then going through hundreds of eons of additional lifetimes to develop all the more to become a Buddha. Difficult indeed.

Our chapter encourages us to entrust ourselves in the refuges of the three jewels: The Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. "People driven by fear seek many refuges ... but one who has gone for refuge to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha ... is truly freed from all suffering" (188–192). It might seem odd that one would take refuge in the Buddha, since his final-Nibbāna makes him inaccessible, and indeed we are called to be self-reliant and islands unto ourselves (DN 16.2). The Buddha himself even taught that the Dhamma and practice alone would replace him (DN 16.6). As we will see in chapter twenty: "The effort must be done by you. The *tathāgatas* are only proclaimers" (276). So what is the utility in venerating or taking refuge in the Buddha? We should certainly resist any temptation to consider such veneration merely "popular religion." Rather, the three jewels are intimately interconnected and constitute a unified whole. The Dhamma represents the teaching for liberation, the Sangha profoundly embraces the practice of the Dhamma, and the Buddha embodies the path and its wisdom. His very life is part of the content of the Dhamma, a way of being and seeing things truly. Buddhists look to the Buddha to imagine how they might embrace the Dhamma in their own lives. We look at his values and graceful style, and we reflect upon his bottomless compassion, his virtue and skillfulness. In venerating him and meditating on his qualities, one becomes imbued with his life. He guides us still. Taking refuge in the Buddha does not undermine his command to be self-reliant. Rather, such refuge becomes the very means for our self-empowerment.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

HAPPINESS

Sukha-vagga

197. So very happily we live,
Without hostility among the hostile.
Among the hostile, we dwell peaceably.

198. So very happily we live,
Healthy among the ill.
Among the ill, we dwell in health.

199. So very happily we live,
Without ambition among the ambitious.
Among the ambitious, we dwell without ambition.

200. So very happily we live,
We who possess nothing.
We will feed on delight,
Like the radiant gods.

201. Victory gives birth to enmity.
The defeated lie in suffering.
Having renounced victory and defeat,
The calm one rests at ease.

202. There is no fire like passion.
There is no evil like ill will.
There is no suffering like the aggregates.
There is no happiness higher than peace.

203. Hunger is the greatest illness.
Conditioned things are the greatest suffering.

For the one who knows reality as it is,
Nibbāna is the supreme happiness.

204. Health is the finest possession.
Contentment is the greatest wealth.
Those trusted are the best relatives.
Nibbāna is the supreme happiness.

205. Having drunk the nectar of solitude and tranquility,
One becomes free of evil and fear,
Drinking the nectar of Dhamma delight.

206. Seeing the noble ones is good;
Their company is always pleasant.
Free from seeing fools,
One would be happy always.

207. By associating with fools one grieves a long time.
Living with fools is like living with an enemy;
always afflictive.
Living with the wise is like a gathering of relatives;
always a joy.

208. Therefore:
Follow the good, the intelligent,
One clever, wise, learned, committed in virtue,
well-practicing, and noble,
As the moon follows the path of stars.

Reflection

When I teach courses in world religions, many of my students initially view Buddhism as among the dourest of religious traditions. At first blush, students often get the impression that Buddhism focuses on suffering and little more; indeed the Four Noble Truths do concern suffering

and its eradication. Lacking a deep understanding of the Four Noble Truths, these students tend to think that, at best, Buddhism teaches people how to detach from the world, how to become expert at remaining aloof. Learning a little more might even exacerbate this misconception, since Buddhism teaches no-self and challenges all attachments. Most want to retain an ego identity, and they decidedly want to be attached to things that are particularly gratifying. Further, they simply disagree that life is most accurately characterized by suffering or *dukkha*. Some experiences are enjoyable, and they know this. Further, life contains much love, joy, and wonder. At this point, let's turn to the Four Noble Truths as the Buddha expressed them:

> This is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering, union with what is displeasing is suffering, separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in brief the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering. This is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: it is craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for non-existence. This is the noble truth for the cessation of suffering: it is the remainderless fading away and cessation of the same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it. This is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering: it is the noble eightfold path. (SN 56:11)

Phrased this way, many can readily see that we do suffer when things are unpleasant, when our desires are

thwarted or when something pleasurable is withdrawn. Is *everything* then actual suffering? It turns out that not all *dukkha* is the same. There are three kinds of *dukkha*. *Dukkha-dukkha* refers to any experience that truly registers as unpleasant, whether in our thoughts, emotions, or body. If you drop a hammer on your foot, that's *dukkha-dukkha*. A second kind of *dukkha* is known as *vipariṇāma-dukkha*, which refers to the condition produced by change. If we ourselves are always changing, then our experience of anything, pleasant or unpleasant, is going to be in flux. An intense pleasure may quickly lose its luster: the notes of ecstatic music soon fade and the taste of chocolate quickly leaves the mouth. Finally, there is *saṅkhāra-dukkha*, which refers to the thing being experienced. Since this too is impermanent, it cannot ultimately satisfy us. There's no refuge in something that is constantly changing.

Note that of all three types of *dukkha*, only *dukkha-dukkha* is actually experienced as suffering outright; instances of the other two types don't necessarily register as pain. For this reason, the word *dukkha* casts a much wider net than the word "suffering." Of course, the Buddha himself did not use the English word "suffering." *Dukkha* can also simply mean that something is not fully satisfying. So, something can be experienced wonderfully and wholesomely and yet the experience still suffers from some quality of *dukkha*.

I try to show my students that Buddhism is really about *sukha*, happiness. While *dukkha* points to what is uncomfortable, *sukha* refers to the experience of ease and joy. Buddhism represents a way of being happy in this life, in future lives, and ultimately in attaining Nibbāna. Interestingly, most of the verses of this chapter have to do with happiness in this life. The first three verses begin, "So very happily we live," and then, "Among the hostile, we dwell

peaceably;" "Among the ill, we dwell in health;" "Among the ambitious, we dwell without ambition" (197–199). As noted earlier, we might imagine the lotus flower that often blooms in muddy water. Its leaves and petals naturally shed the surrounding mud. Even in the dirtiest muck, it flourishes with great beauty; so too, a mature spirit in the world.

The final three verses are important for their common sense. Verses 206–208 tell us that the company of fools is painful, while the company of the noble and wise brings us great joy. As we have seen, one of the most fundamental facts about human beings is that we are social animals who are deeply affected by our environment. This is one of great values of the Sangha. Healthy practice includes associating with those who support, love, and challenge us. Among the slothful, we become less attentive as if by osmosis. Around complaining people, we tend to join in. The constant presence of negative or unskillful people can weaken our spiritual moorings. Granted, for those utterly spiritually mature, it matters not what their environment might be, whether skillful or not; they are simply unaffected. The rest of us, however, would do well to shore up our practice in every possible way.

The fourth verse recommends the monastic life, or perhaps a life of radical simplicity. Without possessions, the mature in faith feed on delight "like the radiant gods" (200). Buddhaghosa's Commentary gives us further insight into this verse, and this is important. According to the Commentary, the Buddha uttered this verse when entering the town of Pañcasāla. Some lay women there were on the verge of becoming *stream-winners*, assured of attaining Nibbāna soon, and the Buddha wanted to give them a chance to feed him and his monks. With such merit ensured, they would attain this noble state. Māra, seeing

the danger, put the town in a kind of confusing fog so that the monks could not be fed. He then taunted the Buddha for going hungry. The Buddha's response was that it didn't matter—the monks would be feeding on delight, like radiant gods. These gods represent a class of beings whose sustenance is fine materiality that is so sublime, it transcends any bodily pleasure. The Buddha was in effect telling Māra that they would meditate so deeply that their consciousness would advance to that supreme level and be fed there. We see here an expression of the extraordinarily gratifying quality of some meditations.

Nibbāna, of course, is the supreme happiness, for it is free from *saṅkhāra-dukkha*. This is the point of verses 203–204: Nibbāna is the supreme happiness, the ultimate refuge. This does not mean, however, that other states of meditation are devoid of happiness. Rather, they become a kind of foretaste of the supreme happiness. In Chapter Two, we saw that there are four levels of meditation, each level more gratifying and mentally wholesome than the one before. There are also four additional levels of mental absorption (*arūpa-jhāna*). Finally, there is "cessation" (*nirodha*), where one enters a state beyond all intellectual categories. *Nirodha* simulates Nibbāna itself. The Buddha taught it thusly: "Furthermore, there is the case where a monk, with the complete transcending of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception, enters and remains in the cessation of perception and feeling. And, having seen that with discernment, his mental fermentations are completely ended. So by this line of reasoning it may be known how Nibbāna is pleasant" (AN 9:34).

Buddhism isn't a religion focused on suffering at all. Highlighting the many ways *dukkha* is experienced helps us see ways to free ourselves from it, that we might live happily in this life and in future lives. Ultimately, *dukkha* helps us to strive for the Nibbāna, that perfect joy.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

WHAT IS DEAR

Piya-vagga

209. One who pursues what is not to be undertaken,
And practices what is not to be practiced,
Who clings to what is dear, having abandoned the goal:
Such a one envies those who apply themselves.

210. Never associate with those dear or abrasive.
For not seeing those dear and seeing the abrasive are both painful.

211. Therefore hold nothing dear,
For separation from what is dear is bad.
For one whom there is neither dear nor non-dear,
There are no bonds.

212. From affection grief is born.
From affection fear is born.
One free from affection is without grief;
From where would fear come?

213. From love grief is born.
From love fear is born.
One free from love is without grief;
From where would fear come?

214. From attachment grief is born.
From attachment fear is born.
One free from attachment is without grief;
From where would fear come?

215. From sensual craving grief is born.
From sensual craving fear is born.
One free from sensual craving is without grief;
From where would fear come?

216. From craving grief is born.
From craving fear is born.
One free from craving is without grief;
From where would fear come?

217. People hold dear the one endowed with virtue and insight,
Who speaks the truth and does the work that that is his,
Who is established in the Dhamma.

218. One with an expansive mind,
Who is intent on the Indescribable,
Whose heart is not bound with sensual craving,
is called *going upstream*.

219. Family, companions, and friends rejoice
When one, long absent, safely returns.

220. Just so, in going from this world to the next,
The good deeds receive the well-doer,
As relatives receive the return of their dear one.

Reflection

The title of our chapter is *piya*, which I translate as "dear." It could also be translated differently, such as "pleasant," "agreeable," or even "love" or "affection." It is nothing short of counter-intuitive to think of something dear to us as that which is bad for us. Are we to hold nothing with affection? Should nothing be dear to us? An

ascription of such negativity to what is dear certainly calls for careful attention to context. We should recall that well-ordered friendships are very important. Such friends are obviously among those one ought to hold authentically dear. And we've already seen how affection for and veneration to both the Buddha and arahants are particularly valuable. Verse 217 reminds us how important it is for a Sangha to hold its holy people dear, and, of course, verses 219–220 assume that one would have a natural affection for one's family. We might even note that the vast majority of Buddhists throughout Buddhism's history have been lay people who marry and surely bond to each other deeply.

Spiritual development is primarily a matter of learning about the mind's dispositions, tendencies, and potential, and quite frankly how it is imprisoned by reactivity. An unskillful, reactive mind clings to the pleasant and pushes away the unpleasant. Our relationship to our experience is often one of getting jerked around by the pleasure-pain principle. This chapter begins with the problem of clinging to the pleasant. Addiction to what is pleasant is tantamount to "having abandoned the goal" (209). Running from aversive experience works in the same way. Thus we see in verse 211 that "One for whom there is neither dear nor non-dear, there are no bonds." For the conditioned mind, there will always be a kind of imprisonment here.

Equanimity is the remedy for both clinging and aversion. As we have seen, equanimity is not uncaring or some kind of disengagement from the world. Indeed, compassion marks the true practitioner. What equanimity does is free us from our attachments, from the conditioned quality of our mind, so that we become free to engage the world wholesomely and with great energy.

Verses 213–216 obviously parallel each other. They differ only in subject: love, attachment, sensual craving, and general craving. The word for love here, *pema*, refers to the kind of love that seduces the spirit. In the *Pema Sutta* (AN 4:199), the Buddha refers to it as the experience of something *charming*. Consider the magical quality charms are supposed to have. Something with unwholesome charm is like a magical concoction that, when consumed, takes away one's freedom or at least one's ability to see straight. We can even say that we were *charmed* into doing something we would not otherwise do. In this same sutta, the Buddha teaches that being charmed is an impediment to deep jhāna-practice. So this kind of love impedes true inner calm and meditative depth. Worse still, it perpetuates a sense of self by way of attachment to one's experience.

We would be remiss if we failed to acknowledge the obvious. While Buddhism assumes a healthy, robust emotional life and meaningful relationships, it also assumes that the most skillful vocation is that of a monk or nun. Historically, Buddhism has placed greater value on monastic life than lay life. In the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, the Buddha explained the importance of the monastic life. He likened the difference between a lay life and a monastic life to the difference between a slave and a free person. He described a lay life as being "full of hindrances ... a path for the dust of passion," while monks "breathe freely." Finally, he claimed that it was simply a happier life and a more fruitful one for effecting a better rebirth and ultimately attaining Nibbāna (DN 2). While some might argue that the Buddha simply called for renouncing all forms of lust, ill will, and delusion, and indeed this could be accomplished in any lifestyle, it is all too clear in the teachings of the Buddha and the tradition itself, that the monastic life is the most conducive to such renunciation.

On the other hand, we must not imagine that a lay life cannot be holy or that a monastic life is necessarily better for everyone. This point is especially important to appreciate when we consider how the Buddhist tradition has evolved and how dramatically the Buddha's surroundings differ from our own. In the Buddha's day, a lay life often included a great deal of struggle to support a family while a monastic life was considered far simpler. Lay people in contemporary society (at least in first-world countries) tend to have much more leisure time available to them, and consequently much more time for spiritual practice, than their ancient-Indian counterparts. And, of course, views and insight about the very nature of marriage and family have evolved dramatically over the last 2,500 years. Today, many great Buddhist teachers and wisdom figures are married. Such teachers would suggest that their married lives give them a great deal of wholesome grist for the spiritual mill that they couldn't acquire in any other way. They might add that their spouses support their spiritual growth in ways that fellow monks or nuns could not. In any case, certainly both married life and monastic life have the potential to teach one a great deal about love and selflessness. The question of which type of life is the best instructor admits different answers for different persons.

In Buddhism, there isn't any set of mechanical rules upon which we can lean when making profound decisions about how to live. We never escape the need for careful practice and careful reflection. Each person must personally decide which patterns of life offer the greatest opportunity for spiritual growth, for development in love, wisdom, compassion, equanimity, freedom, and joy.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ANGER

Kodha-vagga

221. Abandon anger, give up pride,
Overcome every fetter.
For afflictions do not beset one who has nothing,
Who is unattached to mind and body.

222. The one who would restrain anger as it arises,
Like a careening chariot,
I proclaim a true charioteer,
While another just holds the reins.

223. Conquer anger with conciliation,
Evil with good,
Stinginess with giving,
And a liar with the truth.

224. Speak the truth,
Have no anger,
Give when asked, even from little.
By these three, would you enter the presence of the gods.

225. The wise do no harm,
Ever-restrained in body.
Having gone to the Unshakable State,
They grieve no more.

226. For those who are always awake,
Learning day and night,

Intent on Nibbāna,
The toxins disappear.

227. O Atula, this is not new but very old:
They criticize one who sits silently, they criticize one who talks much,
And they criticize one who speaks moderately.
No one in the world goes uncriticized.

228. There was not, is not, and never will be
A person wholly criticized or wholly praised.

229. Who is worthy to reprove the one
Whom the intelligent, having examined day after day, praise,

230. Whose conduct is faultless,
Who is intelligent, endowed with wisdom and virtue,
Who is like a coin of fine gold:
Even the gods praise him;
Even by Brahmā he is praised.

231. Guard yourself from violence;
In body, be restrained.
Having now renounced this physical misconduct,
Act properly with the body.

232. Guard yourself from angry speech;
In speech, be restrained.
Having now renounced this verbal misconduct,
Act properly with speech.

233. Guard yourself against an angry mind;
In mind, be restrained.
Having now renounced this mental misconduct,
Act properly with the mind.

234. The wise who are restrained in body, restrained in speech,
And restrained in mind, are indeed thoroughly restrained.

Reflection

Anger is perhaps the most toxic of all mental states. It literally eats one's consciousness away from the inside. Some religions distinguish between a disordered passion of anger and "righteous anger," one that might arise from seeing an injustice. One can even be encouraged to be angry at sin. This is not the Dhamma. Any form of anger harms the psyche. Of course, it would surely be better to be angry in seeing an innocent person harmed than to nurse anger over a personal insult. In this sense, experiencing anger might highlight when an injustice is done that needs to be addressed. Still, anger is never skillful. Consider anger as connected to ill will, the second quality of a conditioned or reactive mind.

Anger is such a strange affliction. It's easy to understand greed or sensuous clinging, because at least here the mind clings to what is pleasurable or to an imagined good. But anger makes us immediately miserable, and the fact that anger begets quick misery is obvious to us. Why then do we cultivate anger and cling to it when it makes us so clearly and immediately unhappy? Our first verse gives us a clue: "Abandon anger, give up pride" (221). Here's the big connection: pride. Consider this: go back in your mind to a time when you were quite angry about something someone did to you. Revisit the experience. Now ask yourself whether or not your ego has just become more inflated than it was moments ago. Almost certainly it has. That's the payoff: we get an enlarged

sense of self when we cultivate anger and resentment—He did that to *me*!—and on some level, that inflated sense of self feels satisfying.

Sometimes we revisit an old wound because we imagine that in so doing we will make peace with the experience. Of course, what happens is that we simply keep fueling the anger. We see this phenomenon addressed at the beginning of the Dhammapada: "He insulted me; he struck me; he defeated me; he robbed me. For those who dwell on such resentments, enmity never ceases" (3). And in the next verse, "For those who do not dwell on such resentments, enmity subsides" (4). The ego may indeed not even want enmity to subside. We feel inflated by our outrage, even given the tragic consequences we ourselves suffer. Think about it in this way: someone maliciously and seriously cuts your hand. A good friend advises that you put some salve on it and bandage the wound. But no, you insist on keeping it open so that you can show others what your enemy did to you, and it gets infected. All the better to show how tragically harmed you were by your enemy: "Now look at what he caused!" Say it gets even worse and turns gangrene and now your hand has to be cut off to keep the infection from spreading. All the better to show everyone what he did to me! Of course, this is insane behavior. Yet, on an emotional level, we do it all the time.

In our first verse, the Buddha reminds us, "For afflictions do not beset one who has nothing, who is unattached to mind and body" (221). That is, when we cease to identify with our experiences, when we let go of the delusion of a permanent self, the *big I*, then there is no clinging to our afflictions; they simply vanish like vapor. With no ego to advance or protect, who or what is ultimately insulted? What freedom!

In his sutta, *The Removal of Distracting Thoughts* (MN 20), the Buddha recommended five approaches to dealing with afflictive mental states, and we see most of these represented in this chapter. The first approach involves replacing afflictive mental states with their opposites. We cultivate honesty, kindness, and generosity (224). We are to "Conquer anger with conciliation, evil with good, stinginess with giving" (223). The second approach involves cultivating repugnance toward toxic states. This is not to say that we should stir up anger toward them. Rather, when we see their afflictive quality clearly, we see how ugly they really are. A third strategy is to simply refrain from feeding them. We can simply watch with equanimity as they arise and dissipate. They subside on their own. "For those who are always awake ... the toxins disappear" (226). This truth aligns with the Buddha's fourth strategy: investigate their source. Deep mindfulness sees not only their arising, but also where they come from and how the mind relates to them. The Buddha's fifth strategy has to do with those afflictive emotions that are unmanageable. Here, he says, we are to suppress them. If they are so strong that we cannot freely watch their arising and dissipation, we simply do not allow them freedom in our consciousness. Burying emotions exacts a price, and it is hardly ideal if the other strategies work. But if we can't address them at the time, if we are simply overwhelmed with afflictive thoughts, it's much better to keep them at bay than give them free range in our minds. All five of these strategies represent forms of authentic self-possession. The only alternative is to let ourselves be controlled by our anger. Verse 222 makes this most clear: "The one who would restrain anger as it arises, like a careening chariot, I proclaim a true charioteer, while another just holds the reins."

While not the final verses of our chapter, 229–230 represent a kind of conclusion. The Buddha asks rhetorically if anyone is worthy to criticize the one who has taken the path seriously, whose virtue and wisdom are exemplary. No, he says, "Even the gods praise him; even by Brahmā he is praised" (230). All afflictive emotions are powerful, anger perhaps the most. They can overwhelm us and control us. They give us a kind of agitated energy, even as they drain us of wholesome energy. And they are dauntingly difficult to stem. The mature practitioner, one who has truly taken over the chariot's reins, is a rare spirit. Even Brahmā cannot help but admire such a one.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

IMPURITY

Mala-vagga

235. You are now like a yellowed leaf.
Even Yama's men have come for you.
You stand at the mouth of death,
With no provisions for the journey.

236. Make an island for yourself.
Strive quickly. Be wise.
Clear, with impurities removed,
You will enter the divine realm of the noble ones.

237. And now, with life almost finished,
You have entered into Yama's presence.
There is no place to rest in between;
There are no provisions for the journey.

238. Make an island for yourself.
Strive quickly. Be wise.
Clear, with impurities removed,
You will not come to birth and old age again.

239. Like a metal-smith who,
Little-by-little, moment-by-moment,
Cleanses dross from silver,
So too the wise one cleanses his impurities
gradually.

240. Just as rust eats the iron from which it has arisen,
So the monk who lives excessively
Is led by his own deeds into a woeful rebirth.

241. Sacred texts are profaned by non-recitation;
Houses are broken down by neglect;
Beauty is compromised by sloth;
And vigilance is undermined by negligence.

242. Bad conduct is the impurity of a woman.
Stinginess, the impurity of a giver.
Impurities are evil things,
In this world and in the next.

243. More impure than these is ignorance,
This is the supreme impurity.
Having renounced this impurity,
O monks, be pure.

244. Easy to live is the life of the shameless,
The unconscientious, offensive, pushy, reckless, and corrupt.

245. Hard to live is the life of one with conscience,
Who always strives to be pure,
Who is open, careful, perceptive, and clean-living.

246. Whoever kills a living being,
Speaks falsely,
Takes whatever in the world is not given,
Goes to another's wife,

247. And gives himself to drinking liquor,
Uproots himself in this very world.

248. Know this friend: evil things are reckless.
Let not greed and injustice subject you to long suffering.

249. People give according to their faith, according to their trust.
The one who is disconcerted by others' food and drink,

Will never attain *samādhi*, neither by day nor by night.

250. But one who has cut off, destroyed at the root,
And removed this consternation,
Will attain *samādhi*, day or night.

251. There is no fire like passion;
There is no fetter like ill will;
There is no snare like delusion;
There is no river like craving.

252. It is easy to see the faults of others,
But truly difficult to see one's own.
One sifts out the faults of others like chaff,
But conceals one's own,
As a deceitful gambler conceals a corrupt dice throw.

253. The one who finds faults with others,
Always watching and critical:
His toxins only grow ever-farther from their dissolution.

254. There are no tracks in the sky;
The renunciant is not outside;
People delight in impediments;
The Tathāgatas are without impediments.

255. There are no tracks in the sky;
The renunciant is not outside;
No conditioned things are eternal;
Unshaken are the Buddhas.

Reflection

Impurities harm us in so many ways: they immediately cause suffering, they compromise wholesome mental states (the kind of states that bring happiness and serenity), and they keep us from seeing ourselves and the world as it truly is. Further, any given impurity has a way of infecting every part of us. We saw this with anger. On the spot, we experience its pain. Additionally, anger tends to inflate our egos, make us judgmental, undermine our ability to feel compassion, and bind our hearts and minds, consuming the spaciousness we need to walk skillfully along the spiritual path.

The most critical toxins are those that primarily reflect the conditioned mind: lust, ill will, and delusion. Buddhaghosa teaches that such states "are so-called [stains] because they themselves are dirty like oil ... because they dirty other things" (Vism XXII.61). This image highlights how impurities tend to leave their marks all over our psyches. Verse 251 names these three characteristics: "There is no fire like passion; there is no fetter like ill will; there is no snare like delusion; there is no river like craving." The imagery strikes deeply: fire, bondage, trap, and torrent. These striking metaphors are clearly intended to give us a visceral feel for the power of impurities. Lust really does burn; anger really does make one tightly wound up; one really does get ensnared when trying to protect or advance one's ego; and we know that unskillful desires can literally carry us away in the moment, just like a torrent.

The Buddhist tradition is famous for its numbered lists. This is surely because the Buddha often taught with lists, these being easier to memorize. Buddhaghosa speaks of ten fetters, ten defilements, eight worldly states, five avarices, three perversions, four ties, four bad ways, four

cankers, five hindrances, seven inherent tendencies, three stains, ten unprofitable courses of action, and twelve unprofitable thought-arisings (Vism XXII.48–63). There is a lot of redundancy in these lists, and we need not imagine them hard and fast. Collectively, they help us see how many unskillful states there can be and how difficult it is to cleanse ourselves.

The path to wisdom and freedom is just that: a *path*. We progress step-by-step, and we can take solace in the fact that no one becomes holy in a day. Impatience at our slow progress can be another kind of clinging, a kind of self-judgment that has more pride to it than simple determination. Verse 239 reminds us: "Like a metal-smith who, little-by-little, moment-by-moment, cleanses dross from silver, so too the wise one cleanses his impurities gradually." Such teachings provide a kind of freedom, a spaciousness, to walk the path with a great deal of self-forgiveness and even humor. It is not, however, a license for sloth, as "vigilance is undermined by negligence" (241) and "Just as rust eats the iron from which it has arisen, so the monk who lives excessively is led by his own deeds into a woeful rebirth" (240). A lack of vigilance, slowly but surely, and usually unrecognizably, compromises us.

One of the most challenging habits to eradicate is our tendency to compare ourselves to others. Instead of seeking wisdom, our minds are often lost in wondering where we stand compared to others. Verse 249 references one who is "disconcerted by others' food and drink." Here it is easy to imagine a monk comparing his fare with that of his brothers. Of course, we can extrapolate this tendency to just about everything. We think: she has more friends; he seems more spiritually developed; she is smarter than I am, and so on. Ironically, while this habit is utterly ego-inflating (it's all about me!), it keeps us perpetually insecure. Further, engaging in competition

naturally leads us to minimize our own faults and exaggerate those of others. In verse 252 we are reminded of the obvious: "It is easy to see the faults of others, but truly difficult to see one's own."

Verse 243 teaches us that ignorance is the supreme impurity. To the Western mind, this seems counter-intuitive. How could simply being unaware be worse than malice? Yet, it must be ignorance, since that is the root of all impurities. Ignorance about our own nature conditions the very craving and clinging that perpetuates samsara, and ignorance about how our minds work creates the foundation for all impurities to arise and dominate our lives.

This chapter challenges us to recognize just how imperative it is to continue to practice. It begins by having us consider our own death: "You are now like a yellowed leaf. Even Yama's men have come for you. You stand at the mouth of death, with no provisions for the journey" (235). Yama is a fierce and wild god. While Māra personifies death and acts as the tempter, Yama represents death in another way. In many texts he is imagined to be the lord who judges our lives. Upon death, Yama's servants come and drag us to him. Without practice in the Dhamma we have "no provisions for the journey," that is, no merit for a happy rebirth. There is an urgency in this verse, as there is in 237: "You have entered into Yama's presence. There is no place to rest in between." Given the brevity of our lives and the golden opportunity for spiritual growth, we must realize that there is no time to lose.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ESTABLISHED IN THE DHAMMA

Dhammaṭṭha-vagga

256. One who hastily assesses what is good
Is not established in Dhamma.
The wise one investigates both good and bad,

257. And judges others thoughtfully, justly, and impartially.
This intelligent one, this protector of the Dhamma,
Is called *established in the Dhamma*.

258. One is not wise in virtue of speaking much.
One who is called *wise* is peaceful, friendly, and fearless.

259. One does not uphold the Dhamma simply by many words.
One upholds the Dhamma when it is not neglected;
When, having heard but a little, observes it with one's own body.

260. One is not an elder just by a gray head.
Ripe only in years, he is called *grown old in vain*.

261. But one in whom there is truth and Dhamma,
Non-violence, restraint, and moderation,
With impurities discarded,
This wise one is truly called *elder*.

262. Not by eloquence or lotus-like beauty,
does one who is envious, selfish, and deceitful,
become exemplary.

263. The wise one who has cut off, destroyed at the root,
and removed these;
Who has discarded ill will altogether;
This one is called *exemplary*.

264. Not by a bald head is one a renunciant—
One who does not observe the precepts, who lies.
What renunciant is possessed by longing and greed!

265. But one who subdues evil thoroughly, whether big or small,
Is by so doing truly called *renunciant*.

266. One is not a monk just by begging from another.
Having undertaken a foul tradition, one is not then a monk.

267. But the one who sets aside both merit and demerit,
who leads a holy life,
Who lives in the world perceptively,
This one is truly is called *monk*.

268. One deluded and ignorant is not a sage by silence.
But one who takes up the best as if holding a scale is wise.

269. One who avoids evils thereby is a sage.
One who knows both best and worst in the world is thereby called *sage*.

270. One is not a noble by hurting living beings.
One who is gentle to all beings is thereby called *noble*.

271. Neither by precept and virtue, nor by great learning;
Neither by attaining *samādhi*, nor inhabiting a solitary dwelling;

272. Nor by thinking, "I touch the happiness of renunciation, unknown to the ordinary,"
Do you, O monk, find contentment,
If you have not attained the dissolution of the toxins.

Reflection

One of the characteristics that separate the immature from the truly wise is the ability to distinguish between the superficial and the deeply true, the façade and the real, appearance from reality. We see substituting one for the other in politics, society, and even in religious communities. Scandals, in fact, often come to light when an institution is exposed for trying to protect its image at the expense of truth or justice. Distinguishing reality from appearance is actually not always an easy task. One may appear to be a wise seasoned monk, for example, but the Buddha reminds us, "One is not an elder just because his head is gray. Ripe only in years, he is called *grown old in vain*" (260). Elders who are well-established in the Dhamma are trustworthy, but those who have long been slothful and greedy live the evening of their lives more deluded than when in their prime.

The most challenging verses are the last two, where the Buddha lists seemingly commendable expressions of the Dhamma, such as engaging the precepts, exercising virtue, becoming highly learned, and even attaining *samādhi*, a highly concentrated state of meditation. But then he

declares that none of these will bring contentment without the dissolution of the toxins. The point of practice is inner transformation. Even though deep concentration is highly beneficial to a practitioner, it does not automatically eliminate toxins; if the toxins are tenacious, it just temporarily immobilizes them. Without deep practice in insight, as soon as one returns to a normal state of mind, these impurities re-emerge, and we are back to square one.

It is only through wisdom and insight that one learns how to penetrate the truth of one's environment and even oneself. Acquiring wisdom takes time and care. Buddhist spirituality has a measured quality to it. It is a posture of watchfulness, of not getting lost in the moment so that one can see clearly and act skillfully. So we begin the chapter with "One who hastily assesses what is good is not established in the Dhamma. The wise one investigates good and bad" (256). If we habitually rush from one thing to the next, rarely exercising mindfulness, then we're guaranteed to experience the world only on its most superficial level. This is not only rash, it's also just plain lazy. It is the lazy person who approves of another simply because he appears attractive, well-spoken, or pious (259, 262). The wise look more deeply. Interestingly, *investigation* is one of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment (along with mindfulness, effort, joy, centered mind and heart, concentration, and equanimity). The Buddha taught that the one who internalizes these seven factors "slants, slopes, and inclines toward Nibbāna" (SN 46:7).

A good deal of this chapter focuses on what can happen when one is *not* established in Dhamma. Some consequences are obvious: being envious, selfish, deceitful, breaking precepts, lying, being deluded, and being filled with greed and impurities (262, 264, 268, 272). In contrast, those established in the Dhamma are peaceful, friendly,

fearless, moderate, and focused on discarding impurities (258, 260–263, 265, 272). None of this is groundbreaking. The power in these verses lies in the way they highlight the contrast between ignorance and wisdom. Here the Dhammapada is both challenging and encouraging. We are not just to prune our impurities but to tear them out "at the root" (263). In verse 259 we see that the one who holds the Dhamma vigilantly "observes it with one's own body." The Pali term for "observes" is *passati*, which is usually rendered as "sees." I chose the translation "observes" because this word can refer to both seeing and practicing. Verse 259 could even be translated with the phrase, "experiences the Dhamma with his body." One *feels* the Dhamma. The Buddha likened experiencing the Dhamma to being immersed in water (SN 12:68; AN 9:45). He even said that an arahant could literally experience Nibbāna with the body (MN 95.20).

The deeper our practice goes, the more the truth of the Dhamma and even foretastes of Nibbāna can be palpably known. Being established in Dhamma is not only about diligent practice. It is also about integrating the Dhamma profoundly. It is about internalizing the Dhamma so that it becomes part of our very nature. In so doing, the Dhamma literally carries us along the path.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE PATH

Magga-vagga

273. Of paths, the eightfold is supreme;
Of truths, the four proclamations;
Of mental states, dispassion;
Of people, the truly perceptive.

274. Only this is the path;
There is no other for purity of vision.
Follow this, the path that bewilders Māra.

275. Following this path,
You will truly put an end to suffering.
This is the path I have proclaimed,
Having known the arrow's removal.

276. The effort must be done by you.
The *tathāgatas* are only proclaimers.
Following the path, those absorbed in meditation
Will be freed from Māra's bonds.

277. When one perceives with wisdom
That all conditioned things are impermanent,
Then one wearies of suffering.
This is the path to purity.

278. When one perceives with wisdom
That all conditioned things are suffering,
Then one wearies of suffering.
This is the path to purity.

279. When one perceives with wisdom
That all things are without self,
Then one wearies of suffering.
This is the path to purity.

280. The one who is inactive at a time for exertion,
Who though young and strong is slothful,
Who is lazy, lethargic,
Whose mind's resolves are exhausted;
Such a one will not find the path of wisdom.

281. Guarded in speech, restrained in mind and body,
Do nothing unwholesome.
Purify these three ways of action,
And complete the path proclaimed by the wise.

282. From practice wisdom arises;
From lack of practice wisdom is lost.
Having recognized this twofold path of development and decline,
Establish yourself so that wisdom grows.

283. Cut down the entire forest (of passion), not just one tree.
From the forest, fear is born.
Having cut down the forest and underbrush,
O monks, be deforested.

284. As long as the underbrush (of passion) is not cut down,
And even the smallest amount of sexual passion remains,
One's mind remains tethered,
Like a calf sucking milk from its mother.

285. Cut off affection for self,
As you would an autumn lotus with your hand.

Cultivate the path of tranquility,
To Nibbāna, taught by the Well-Gone One.

286. "Here I will stay during the rains,
Here for winter and summer," so thinks the fool.
He does not recognize the danger.

287. Death takes that man with mind attached,
Intoxicated by sons and cattle,
Like a great flood takes a sleeping village.

288. There are no sons for protection, or father or even kin,
There is no protection in relatives for one seized by death.

289. Knowing this, governed by virtue,
The wise should quickly clear the path leading to Nibbāna.

Reflection

In Chapter Five, we encountered Māluṅkyaputta, the monk who challenged the Buddha for not addressing important philosophical questions. Without an adequate accounting, he said that he would have to go to another teacher. He was particularly interested in determining whether the world was temporal or eternal, whether the world was finite or infinite, whether the soul was different from the body or the same, and whether one who had attained Nibbāna existed in final-Nibbāna. He framed the last question by listing every possible alternative: After death does one enlightened exist, not exist, both exist and not exist, or neither exist nor not exist? He also wondered why the Buddha never addressed these issues. The Buddha's response was that these questions not only do

not help, but they will positively harm you by distracting you from the task at hand. "Because it is unbeneficial, it does not belong to the fundamentals of the holy life, it does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna. That is why I have left it undeclared." As we saw in Chapter Five, the Buddha continued with a simile: "Suppose, Māluṅkyaputta, a man were wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison, and his friends and companions, his kinsmen and relatives, brought a surgeon to treat him. The man would say, 'I will not let the surgeon pull out this arrow until I know whether the man who wounded me was a noble or a brahmin or a merchant or a worker...'" And the wounded man continued in this vein, making further demands. For instance, he insisted on learning the archer's clan and caste, as well as all of the arrow's characteristics. The Buddha then concludes, "All this would still not be known to the man and meanwhile he would die!" (MN 63). The story's upshot is that esoteric metaphysical questions simply do not help one attain Nibbāna, and pursuing them wastes a precious life. The Buddha's Dhamma has great instrumental value: the eradication of suffering and the generation of deep fulfillment, happiness, and joy. We must keep our focus on this.

The theme of this chapter is the path, that is, the Eightfold Path. We begin: "Of paths, the eightfold is supreme" (273). In the Buddhist tradition, the Eightfold Path is not merely one skillful path among many, nor is it merely the best path among many. Rather, it is the only path that leads to liberation. This is what Prince Siddhattha realized during his six-year sojourn before attaining Nibbāna. He deeply engaged the best paths offered, those of profound meditation and extraordinary asceticism. Ultimately, they did not work. "Only this is

the path; there is no other for purity of vision" (274). The Buddha taught that the path is singular because it alone can provide the condition to free one from samsara. It is the only path that "bewilders Māra" (274). The Buddha assures us that "following this path, you will truly put an end to suffering" (275).

The Buddha's Dhamma is an assessment of conditioned human life. The Four Noble Truths teach us about suffering, its origin and its cure. The fourth Noble Truth is, of course, the Eightfold Path itself: Right View; Right Intention; Right Speech; Right Action; Right Livelihood; Right Effort; Right Mindfulness; and Right Concentration. Right View and Right Intention both concern the practice of wisdom. Right Intention is fundamentally about one's commitment to renunciation and equanimity. Right View represents a strategy to see all conditioned things as they are: impermanent, without a self, and *dukkha* (not ultimately satisfying). Right View (*sammā-diṭṭhi*) could even be translated as *proper view*, that is, seeing things in a way that leads to the eradication of clinging, craving, and ignorance. What makes for wrong view would be anything that is not helpful in attaining Nibbāna. This is what the Buddha was addressing with Māluṅkyaputta.

When we're mindful of the centrality of wisdom in Buddhist spirituality, verses 277–279 have all the more impact: "When one perceives with wisdom that all conditioned things are impermanent, then one wearies of suffering. This is the path to purity. When one perceives with wisdom that all conditioned things are suffering, then one wearies of suffering. This is the path of purity. When one perceives with wisdom that all things are without self, then one wearies of suffering. This is the path to purity." The repetition is intentional. It washes over us and imbues us with a way of being and seeing that recognizes reality as

impermanent, impersonal, and unsatisfying. It supports our releasing ourselves of the heavy burden that comes from clinging. We become like the alcoholic who has finally bottomed out and screams, "I simply cannot stand this addiction, this prison!" I have rendered the verses, "then one wearies of suffering." This clause could even be translated as, "then one gets *disgusted* with suffering."

The Dhammapada assures us that the Eightfold Path requires total commitment. It cannot merely be about curbing our attachments or delusions or making ourselves somewhat less unsightly. As we have seen earlier, one has to uproot the toxins. Verse 283 is provocative: "Cut down the entire forest (of passion), not just one tree. From the forest, fear is born. Having cut down the forest and underbrush, O monks, be deforested." In this verse, there are two wonderful instances of wordplay. The first involves the word *vana*, which can either mean "forest" or "lust." To "cut down the forest and underbrush" is to eradicate our toxins completely. Then the Buddha commands, "O monks, be deforested." The term for "without forest" is *nibbana*, which is a wordplay with the virtually identical *Nibbāna*. In the next verse (284), we find that the slightest clinging ties us down. In terms of Nibbāna, it doesn't matter if we are tied down by an iron chain or by a light cord if both bind us.

The path is not itself Nibbāna; it is a vehicle, a raft. On this side of the river, we only have the path that recognizes suffering and freedom from suffering. The Dhamma intends nothing other than this (MN 22.11–13).

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

MISCELLANEOUS

Pakiṇṇaka-vagga

290. If by renouncing a small happiness
One could see a great happiness,
Then, let the wise one, seeing the great happiness,
Renounce the small happiness.

291. One who, contaminated by anger,
Would seek happiness at the expense of another's affliction,
Is hostility's prisoner.

292. The toxins increase for the proud and negligent.
They reject what should be done
And do what should not be done.

293. But those who are well-resolved, ever-mindful of the body,
Who do not practice what should not be done,
But persevere in what should be done;
For those, mindful and knowing, the toxins dissipate.

294. Having slain mother, father,
And two warrior kings;
Having slain the kingdom and its subjects,
The brahmin, undisturbed, proceeds.

295. Having slain mother, father,
And two learned kings, with a tiger as fifth,
The brahmin, undisturbed, proceeds.

296. The disciples of Gotama,
They awaken well-awake,
As their mindfulness, day and night,
Is ever-directed to the Buddha.

297. The disciples of Gotama,
They awaken well-awake,
Their mindfulness, day and night,
Is ever-directed to the Dhamma.

298. The disciples of Gotama,
They awaken well-awake.
Their mindfulness, day and night,
Is ever-directed to the Sangha.

299. The disciples of Gotama,
They awaken well-awake.
Their mindfulness, day and night,
Is ever-directed to the body.

300. The disciples of Gotama,
They awaken well-awake.
Their mind, day and night,
Is ever-devoted to non-violence.

301. The disciples of Gotama,
They awaken well-awake.
Their mind, day and night,
Is ever-devoted to meditation.

302. Difficult it is to go forth, difficult to delight thus.
Difficult it is to inhabit households, which are afflictive.
Painful is the company of people so different.
Suffering afflicts a traveler.
So be neither a traveler nor befallen by suffering.

303. The one who is faithful, endowed in virtue,
Possessed of fame and wealth—
Wherever he goes, he is honored.

304. The good are seen from afar,
Like snowy mountains.
The bad are unseen here,
Like arrows shot into the night.

305. Sitting alone, resting alone,
Roaming alone, keenly attentive,
Mastering himself in solitude:
Such a one would delight in the forest.

Reflection

One of the most curious things about this chapter is that it is named "Miscellaneous" and yet it is one of the most coherent chapters. While *pakiṇṇaka* refers to the condition of something scattered about, the chapter actually rallies around the very first verse: "If by renouncing a small happiness one would see a great happiness, let the wise one, seeing the great happiness, renounce the small happiness" (290). This chapter is about happiness: imitation happiness, little happiness, great happiness, and the greatest happiness.

The next several verses reference actions and mental states that hardly look like happiness at all. Verse 291 focuses on the "happiness" that results from imposing suffering on another. Verses 292–293 contrast prideful people with those who are mindful: the proud increase their toxins, while the mindful see their toxins dissipate. How could oppressing another be happiness, and why would increasing one's toxins make one happy? Obviously, it wouldn't. Yet, the allure of authority or power

tempts many, and experiencing it can *feel* like a temporary happiness to the unmindful. Further, as I have noted earlier, many people like their attachments, even though by their very nature they cause suffering. To be constantly craving is to be constantly suffering. We might call these forms of pseudo-happiness.

Verse 294 frames the true brahmin as one who lives contentedly and with inner calm. This is one described as "having slain mother, father, the two warrior kings; having slain the kingdom and its subjects." Buddhaghosa's Commentary states that "mother" represents craving, "father" represents self-identity, the "two warrior kings" represent the two views of eternalism and nihilism, and the "kingdom and its subjects" represent any form of lust or sensual attachment.

The one who has left behind the pseudo-happiness is the one who has taken refuge in the three jewels of the Buddha (296), Dhamma (297), and Sangha (298). Verses 299–301 follow the same pattern, virtually word-for-word, except for the phrases, "directed to the body" (299), "devoted to non-violence" (300), and "devoted to meditation" (301). Being directed to the body refers to the essence of mindfulness found in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, or Foundations of Mindfulness (MN 10). In this teaching, the Buddha outlines the meditations that bring penetrating knowledge of one's body, one's feeling states, and one's consciousness. The Buddhist tradition places particular emphasis on mindfulness of the breath (*ānāpānasati*). This practice can be used for concentration even up to the fourth jhāna level. More importantly, it can be used for wisdom practice, since, through it, one sees clearly the impermanence that characterizes who we are. The Foundations of Mindfulness bring what nothing else can: Nibbāna. While deep concentration is indeed a high happiness, it cannot liberate one for the ultimate happiness. Every aspect of the Eightfold path

is important, and development of each involves the development of them all. Still, it is insight from mindfulness that liberates. Surely, verses 294–295 and 302 refer to this liberating highest happiness. This is the happiness for one who has completely cut off craving, self-identification, sensuality, and lust.

Thus far we have yet to actually address Nibbāna, the highest happiness. What is Nibbāna? The word literally means to "blow out," as you would the flame on a candle. To *blow out* can be taken in several ways, all of them related. When we achieve the utter dissolution of craving, we have blown out the conditioned quality of the mind, that thirsting mind on fire for gratification. *Dukkha* is over for one who has successfully "blown out" craving. When we are free from craving, we've also blown out the making of kamma, and thus we no longer wander through samsara. Finally, once the fire of craving is blown out, one becomes a *tathāgata*, one who is "thus gone," who leaves no more marks, and is traceless. This is one whose "field is empty" (92–93). Is Nibbāna then simply a reference to freedom? No, Nibbāna is something very real, something that can be apprehended. The problem is that Nibbāna is a *supramundane* reality, one distinct from the changing impermanence of the world.

Final-Nibbāna is perhaps even more enigmatic. What happened to the Buddha (or arahants) after death, known as final-Nibbāna? There is no good answer. Nibbāna is *atakkāvacara*, inaccessible to thought. It is, the Buddha taught, *avisayasmiṃ*, "beyond range." If both eternalism (the view that an autonomous, unchanging self persists after death) and nihilism (the view that we are annihilated at death) are both false, then what do we have? In the *Aggivacchagotta Sutta*, the Buddha illustrates the enigmatic quality of final-Nibbāna in his conversation with his disciple Vaccha (MN 72.19–20):

Buddha: What do you think, Vaccha? Suppose a fire were burning before you. Would you know: This fire is burning before me?

Vaccha: I would, Master Gotama.

Buddha: If someone were to ask you, Vaccha: What does the fire burning before you burn in dependence on?—being asked thus, what would you answer?

Vaccha: Being asked thus, Master Gotama, I would answer: This fire burning before me burns in dependence on grass and sticks.

Buddha: If that fire before you were to be extinguished, would you know: This fire before me has been extinguished?

Vaccha: I would, Master Gotama.

Buddha: If someone were to ask you, Vaccha: When that fire before you was extinguished, to which direction did it go: to the east, the west, the north, or the south?—being asked thus, what would you answer?

Vaccha: That does not apply, Master Gotama. The fire burned in dependence on its fuel of grass and sticks. When that is used up, if it does not get any more fuel, being without fuel, it is reckoned as extinguished.

Buddha: So too, Vaccha, the *Tathāgata* has abandoned that material form by which one describing the *Tathāgata* might describe him; he is cut it off at the root, made it like a palm stump, done away with it so that it is no longer subject to future arising. The *Tathāgata* is liberated from reckoning in terms of material form, Vaccha, he is profound, immeasurable, unfathomable like the ocean. The term *reappears* does not apply, the term *does not reappear* does not apply, the

> term *both reappears and does not reappear* does not apply, the term *neither reappears nor does not reappear* does not apply.

What does one do when no concepts or thought apply, when from a linear perspective no logical option is embraced? Buddhist wisdom responds: Let go of this neurotic need to conceptualize what transcends concepts, let go of what makes you stumble, and continue to follow the path.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

HELL

Niraya-vagga

306. One who claims what is not so goes to hell;
So also one having done something who says, "I did not do this."
Both do base deeds, and both are equal after death in the other world.

307. Many in saffron robes are unrestrained with evil character.
By evil deeds these wicked ones are reborn in hell.

308. Better to eat an iron ball, hot like a fire's point,
Than if one, immoral and unrestrained,
Would eat the country's alms food.

309. The negligent man, who pursues the wife of another,
Encounters four conditions: accumulation of demerit,
An unpleasant bed, reproach, and finally hell.

310. So, a man ought not resort to another's wife,
Accumulating demerit, a bad destination, and the king's harsh punishment.
Little is the delight of a fearful man with a fearful woman.

311. Just as wrongly grasped kusa grass cuts the hand,
So the renunciant life, wrongly handled, pulls toward hell.

312. A lax action, an impure observance,
A dubious *holy life*:
This is hardly fruitful.

313. Do what ought to be done,
Undertake it firmly.
The lax religious life simply scatters more dust.

314. An evil deed is better not done.
Such a deed torments one later.
A good deed is better done,
Which, when done, does not cause regret.

315. Just as a border city is protected inside and out,
So you ought to guard yourself.
Let not a moment escape.
They who let the moment pass grieve
When consigned to hell.

316. Ashamed of what is not shameful,
And not ashamed of what is shameful;
Those undertaking wrong view
Go to a miserable destination.

317. Being afraid of what is not frightful,
And being unafraid of the frightful,
Those undertaking wrong view
Go to a miserable destination.

318. Imagining fault in the faultless,
And perceiving no fault in the sinful,
Those undertaking wrong view
Go to a miserable existence.

319. Having known fault as fault
And faultless as faultless,
Those undertaking right view
Go to a favorable destination.

Reflection

In Chapter Thirteen, we saw that kamma bears its fruit exponentially in our next rebirth. Given this teaching, Buddhism might seem to lack a good sense of proportion. On the other hand, when Buddhism is set beside mainline Western religions, it's the latter traditions that seem to lack proportion. Compared to Nibbāna, attaining heaven seems comparatively easy, and it becomes a permanent state. More seriously, nothing justifies an eternity of hell, since the punishment infinitely surpasses any possible crime. Buddhist wisdom knows only one absolute unbounded state; that is final-Nibbāna. Until this is attained, we will be forever working through various kinds of existence.

One of the most famous *tankhas* or Tibetan Buddhist icons is an image of Yama, the Lord of the underworld and judge of our lives. He holds a series of concentric circles, themselves divided up in different rebirths. The idea is that we go from life-to-life, from sensuous to torturous to god-like to animal, and so on, with Yama overseeing it all. Yama is usually imaged as wild-eyed, with claws and fangs that drip blood, and with a lace of skulls around his neck. It is before Yama that we go in the instant between life-times. Here we listen to witnesses of our lives, while Yama decides what rebirth we deserve. We already encountered mention of Yama in verses 235 and 237. The Theravadin tradition sees Yama as essentially mythic. There is no need of a judge, since the laws of kamma are impersonal. Still, the image of Yama as judge is one that pierces the heart about the consequences of one's life. Before Yama one could not use euphemisms such as, "mistakes were made," or "there were errors of judgment." Rather, we will face our intentions and the deeds that follow head on and enjoy or suffer the kammic consequences.

Given the inflationary character of kamma, meditating on these verses can be unnerving, and ought to be: "One who claims what is not so goes to hell" (306). Let us hope that this verse is reserved for pathological liars, or at least habitual ones. Monks are challenged the most for not embracing their vocation diligently, so that a lax or impure monastic life merits hell (311–113). In addition, more serious patterns of unrestrained evil consign one to hell (307–310). Verse 310 is particularly enlightening. The adulterous person, even as he receives punishments in both this life and the next, is recognized as not even fully enjoying his evil deed at the time: "Little is the delight of the fearful man with a fearful woman." The very nature of an evil deed, particularly one premeditated, creates such a toxic psyche that its sensual gratification is compromised—indeed, so compromised that it isn't all that enjoyable even in the moment. Add to this the stunning regret with which evil deeds torture us, we see most clearly how deluded we are when we act unskillfully.

There is a paradox to immorality. It pains us, even at the time, and yet we continue to practice it. It is as though we are *committed* to acting in ways that harm us. Habitually, one becomes a very different person than another committed to the spiritual life. Both good and evil actions change our very perceptions of reality: "Ashamed of what is not shameful, and not ashamed of what is shameful.... Being afraid of what is not frightful, and being unafraid of the frightful.... Imagining fault in the faultless, and perceiving no fault in the sinful" (316–318). It is one thing to be weak and act unskillfully, but wholly another to become so habituated in unskillful acts that one loses one's moral grounding completely. Such a life of delusion can so undermine one's moral and even intellectual sensibilities that one can become intent on committing evil.

Again in this chapter we encounter just how precious and rare a human existence is. We humans have the potential to be extraordinarily generous and loving. A standard list of good kammic activity, in order of importance, would be the following: giving; engaging in moral behavior; meditating; offering merit to others; rejoicing in another's merit; giving service; showing respect; teaching the Dhamma; listening to the Dhamma; and holding right beliefs.

There are four mediations that are especially fruitful and even central to Buddhist spirituality. These are known as the divine abodes or *brahma-vihāras*. They are loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*). Taken together, they provide an ideal of spiritual maturity. The Buddha promised that those who practiced them sleep and arise gently, are loved and protected by animals and even devas, are serene of heart, and exude radiance (AN 11:16). *Mettā* is the unrestricted desire for the well-being of all sentient beings. *Karuṇā* enters the suffering of others without getting caught in it. *Muditā* delights in the flourishing of others. *Upekkhā* balances the other three, keeping one from getting attached or lost in another's kammic situation. This is a spacious mind and heart that allows us to be fully present to whatever unfolds.

The Buddhist tradition also often addresses "near and far enemies" of each of the *brahma-vihāras*. Far enemies are easy to recognize: ill will is the far enemy of loving-kindness, cruelty is the far enemy of compassion, jealousy is the far enemy of sympathetic joy, and attachment is equanimity's far enemy. More subtly, the near enemies are counterfeits that resemble, and can be confused with, the *brahma-vihāras*. For loving-kindness, the near enemy is attachment or a love that places demands on another. For compassion, it is pity, which looks down on the other, and

secretly fears the other's suffering. Sympathetic joy can easily be confused with simply comparing oneself to others. Finally, the near enemy of equanimity is indifference. True equanimity gives us the freedom to enter the experiences of others without getting lost in them, while indifference is the refusal to enter into them at all. Equanimity is never aloof.

This chapter on hell (*niraya*) is really about raising our consciousness to how we engage life in general. If we engage it with greed or malice, then our kammic fruit will be a miserable state, here and in the next life. If we engage it with generosity and skillful meditation, then our kammic fruit will lead to a wholesome state, here and in the next life. Do you want to live in a *brahma-vihāra* or a *niraya-vihāra*, a heavenly state or a hell state? The good news is, it's up to you. Heaven is always accessible, and the path to its gates is made of joy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE ELEPHANT

Nāga-vagga

320. As an elephant in battle endures arrows shot from bows,
So shall I endure insult.
Truly, the masses are immoral.

321. It is the tamed one they lead into the crowd.
It is the tamed one that the king mounts.
Among humans, best is the tamed one
Who endures insult.

322. Excellent are tamed mules,
Thoroughbred horses of Sindh, and great elephants, tuskers.
More excellent than these is the one who tames himself.

323. For not by these mounts could one go to the unreached region,
As one tamed goes well-tamed.

324. A tusker named Dhanapālaka,
Bound, difficult to restrain, and rutting,
Does not eat even a morsel;
He longs for the elephant grove.

325. The sluggish and gluttonous,
The sleeper, who lies rolling around,
Being dull like a great boar nourished on fodder,
Undergoes rebirth again and again.

326. Formerly, this mind went wandering as it wished,
According to its desire and pleasure.
Today, I will restrain it thoroughly,
As an elephant driver subdues a rutting elephant.

327. Be devoted to vigilance;
Guard your mind.
Raise yourself from the bad path,
Like a tusker sunk in mud.

328. If you should find an intelligent companion,
A fellow-traveler who is wise and virtuous,
You should journey together, joyful and mindful,
Overcoming all dangers.

329. If you should not find an intelligent companion,
A fellow-traveler who is wise and virtuous,
Then journey alone,
Like a king who has abandoned a conquered kingdom,
Like the elephant in the Mātaṅga forest.

330. It is better to travel alone; there is no companionship with a fool.
Go alone, wanting little, and doing no wrong,
Like the elephant in the Mātaṅga forest.

331. Happy are friends when need arises.
Happy is contentment in whatever is.
Happy is a meritorious deed at the end of life.
Happy is the abandonment of suffering altogether.

332. Happy in this world is reverence toward one's mother,
And reverence for one's father as well.
Happy in this world is reverence toward a renunciant.
Happy is respect for the brahmin.

333. Happy is virtue through old age.
Happy is a firmly established faith.
Happy is the attainment of wisdom.
Happy is doing no wrong.

Reflection

An elephant is a wonderful metaphor for a spiritual aspirant. In much of this chapter, elephants symbolize strength, resolve, and the kind of grace and resilience that comes from a well-trained mind. The Buddha described an untrained elephant as the king's greatest liability, while a trained one "counts as a very limb of the king" (AN 5:139–140). A well-trained elephant is, above all, restrained. An elephant endures, is unmoved, and enters full ahead in battle (Th 3.8). In our opening verse we find, "As an elephant in battle endures arrows shot from bows, so shall I endure insult" (320). In the next verse we learn that "Among humans, best is the tamed one, who endures insult" (321). The quality of restraint is not merely one of patient endurance or mere tolerance. Rather, restraint involves being tamed: "It is the tamed one that the king mounts" (321). The posture of restraint is one of cultivated calm, of equanimity. In the *Chappana Sutta*, the Buddha teaches that restraint is the developed posture that reacts neither to pleasure (grasping) nor to discomfort (aversion). This is how the cultivated mind becomes free from its conditioned existence. The Buddha calls restraint our true refuge (AN 3:52).

Elephants also symbolize resolve—even stubborn resolve—and this can be skillful when the resolve is in the Dhamma. Verse 327 challenges us to break free from our fetters with the same resolve an elephant marshals in escaping a mud trap. Consider verse 324: "A tusker

named Dhanapālaka, bound, difficult to restrain, and rutting, does not eat even a morsel; he longs for the elephant grove." On the surface, the verse seems to be describing an unrestrained elephant—hardly a positive example, but the context is important. Dhanapālaka was an elephant who was caught and taken from his family that lived in the elephant grove. A brahmin family bound him and made him captive. Unwilling to accept his captivity, he single-mindedly sought to break free from all fetters and return home. In the *Laṭukikopama Sutta*, the Buddha challenged his followers to have the same resolve in breaking the chains of samsara as do great elephants their chains of iron (MN 66.10).

The final verses seem out of place in that they do not reference elephants at all. Rather, they look to ways of being happy. They do fit though: if one lives calmly, roaming free from all fetters, with supportive friends and a healthy family life, then one flourishes like an elephant in a peaceful grove. What does it mean to be well-tamed, to have a mind of restraint, to have a pure conscience, and know the wisdom of the Dhamma? Happiness and joy. This is what the Dhamma promises.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

CRAVING

Taṇhā-vagga

334. The craving of the careless one grows like a creeper.
The craver jumps from existence to existence,
Like a monkey seeking fruit in the forest.

335. One who is conquered by this miserable craving,
This clinging in the world:
His sorrows grow like *bīraṇa* grass after rain.

336. But one who conquers this miserable craving,
So difficult to overcome in the world:
His sorrows fall away, like drops of water from a lotus.

337. I say to you: Good fortune to all assembled here!
Uproot the root of craving,
As one would who desires the fragrant root of the *bīraṇa* grass.
Let not Māra crush you, as a torrent crushes a reed,
Again and again and again.

338. Just as a tree cut down will grow again
When the root remains healthy and strong,
So this suffering arises again and again
When dormant craving is not destroyed.

339. The wrong-viewed person,
The one in whom the thirty-six streams of craving flow mightily,
Is carried away by these currents,
These thoughts dependent on passion.

340. Streams flow everywhere.
The creeper, having sprung up, establishes itself.
Seeing that the creeper has emerged,
Use wisdom to cut it off at the root.

341. Delights, flowing along and filled with lust, arise in people.
Surely, those intent on enjoyment, seeking pleasure,
Undergo birth and old age.

342. Encircled by craving,
People run around like ensnared hares.
Bound by the fetters of attachment.
They undergo long suffering again and again.

343. Encircled by craving,
People run around like ensnared hares.
Therefore, one who desires dispassion
Should dispel craving.

344. Who, for the sake of being free from the forest (of craving),
Is resolved upon the forest (of solitude),
And then runs back to the forest (of craving);
Come and see one freed who runs back into bondage!

345. The fetter made of iron, of wood, or of *babbaja* grass,
Is not so strong, say the wise.
But infatuation with jewels and ornaments,
Or longing for sons and wives,

346. That is a strong bond, say the wise,
Loose, yet difficult to be freed from.
When the bond is cut, they go about,
Free from longing,
Having abandoned sensual pleasure.

347. Those excited by passion fall into the current,
As a spider caught in its self-made web.
Having cut off this passion, the wise set forth,
Free from longing,
Having abandoned all suffering.

348. Let go of the past, let go of the future, let go of the present.
Gone to the other shore of existence,
With mind everywhere emancipated,
You will not again come to birth and old age.

349. For the one with disturbed thoughts and intense passion,
Who is focused on pleasant things,
Craving only grows stronger.
Indeed, craving fortifies the fetter.

350. For the one devoted to calming thoughts, always mindful,
Who meditates on what is foul:
That one will make an end and cut off Māra's bond.

351. One who has attained perfection,
Who is pure, without craving or fear:
This one has destroyed the arrows of becoming;
His present body, the last.

352. One who is without craving, free of grasping,
Skilled in the scriptures, who would know their arrangement;
Such a one is truly called *great person*;
Such a one possesses great wisdom;
Such a one is living his final life.

353. I know all; I overcome all.
Free of stain in all conditions,
Abandoning everything,

Emancipated by the dissolution of craving,
I have understood everything on my own.
To whom should I point (as teacher)?

354. The gift of Dhamma overwhelms all gifts.
The taste of Dhamma overwhelms all tastes.
The delight of Dhamma overwhelms all delights.
The dissolution of craving overwhelms all suffering.

355. Wealth wounds those lacking wisdom,
Not those seeking the other shore.
Craving wealth, those who lack wisdom
Destroy others, even as themselves.

356. Fields are ruined by weeds;
Humanity is ruined by passions.
But indeed what is given to those whose passions are gone
Bears great fruit.

357. Fields are ruined by weeds;
Humanity is ruined by ill will.
But indeed what is given to those whose ill will is gone
Bears great fruit.

358. Fields are ruined by weeds;
Humanity is ruined by delusion.
But indeed what is given to those whose delusion is gone
Bears great fruit.

359. Fields are ruined by weeds;
Humanity is ruined by longing.
Truly, what is given to those whose longing is gone
Bears great fruit.

Reflection

As we have seen, Buddhist morality traditionally centers around restraint, which when properly understood is grounded in mindfulness and equanimity. It characterizes a person who is happy, free, and filled with life. The opposite of restraint is not liberty but the bondage and suffering of a craving soul. The Buddha highlights this insight in articulating the Second Noble Truth: the cause of our suffering is craving (*taṇhā*). The more we crave, the more agitated, empty, and enslaved we become.

Craving is intimately related to delusion or ignorance. If we realized that clinging never truly satisfies, and that indeed no permanent, unchanging self exists to cling in the first place, then we wouldn't be trapped in craving. Until we attain Nibbāna and completely internalize the key truths about the nature of finite things, we simply cannot help but to crave on some level, even if it be subtle. Further, the very experience of craving reinforces our ignorance. Of course, with intentional, wise practice we can reduce its fever and live quite happily. Short of Nibbāna we would, however, be deluded to think we've eliminated it. Craving is so powerful and pervasive that you cannot merely prune it; you must "cut it off at the root" (340). Without such radical surgery, craving emerges again and again.

One of the most interesting verses in this chapter is 344: "Who, for the sake of being free from the forest (of craving), is resolved upon the forest (of solitude), and then runs back to the forest (of craving); come and see one freed who runs back into bondage!" As we saw in Chapter Twenty, *vana* can either be translated as *lust* or *forest*, so the forest is often used as a metaphor for craving. The forest is also a useful image of leaving the attachments of culture so as to engage in intensive spiritual practice. This

verse highlights both, and the fact that one can succeed in dramatically reducing craving's hold and yet is still vulnerable to returning right back into bondage. This chapter is filled with expressions of the experience of Nibbāna, that absolute freedom. In contrast to the painful, imprisoning life of craving, Nibbāna offers great fruit, delight, freedom from longing and suffering, and the experience of seeing one's sorrows fall like water from a lotus (354, 356, 347, 336).

Craving is powerful. As we saw earlier, craving creates kamma and conditions our perpetuation through the rebirths of samsara. Craving, in this sense, both creates the energy for rebirths and constitutes the glue that bonds us to that energy. Craving is also like a fire. Recall that Nibbāna literally refers to something that is blown out, like a candle. This image is helpful in so many ways. We can think of how we *burn* with desire, whether that be for gratification of our senses or inflation of our egos. One can see now why the Buddha used fire to reference the experience of samsara and the necessity of Nibbāna—blowing out that flame. It also gives greater texture to the Buddha's famous *Fire Sermon*:

> All things, O monks, are on fire ... The eye is on fire ... forms are on fire ... eye-consciousness is on fire ... impressions received by the eye are on fire ... The ear is on fire ... the nose is on fire ... the tongue is on fire ... the body is on fire ... the mind is on fire ... And with what are these on fire? With the fire of lust, with the fire of ill will, with the fire of infatuation; with birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, and despair are they on fire. (SN 35:28)

We saw in Chapter Twenty-One that the Buddha could not describe Nibbāna to his disciple Vaccha. He

simply said that the fire ceases when there is no more fuel to which it may cling. As the fire clings to its nourishment of wood, craving binds us to the object or experience we crave. So we see throughout this chapter images of craving as bondage: one caught in the throes of craving is confined by bonds stronger than iron bars (345), like an ensnared hare (342, 343) or spider caught in its own web (347). The chapter also offers the image of a rushing torrent that sweeps us away (347). We even see how Māra uses craving to crush us "as a torrent crushes a reed" (337). So we see that craving is both a fire that burns us and a flood that sweeps us away. These two very distinct, seemingly contrary images point to two different parts of craving's dynamic. Craving, like fire, burns and agitates. Nibbāna represents the cool, dispassionate, meditative mind dwelling in equanimity, peace, and harmony. On the other hand, the more we crave the less self-possession we have and the more we are carried away. It is literally the case that the more we indulge our craving mind, the less freedom will we have. Craving then is a flood that becomes harder and harder to resist.

On the most fundamental level, every intention will have some form of self-identification behind it and thus some kind of clinging. This need not mean, though, that we're destined to be forever lost in the thicket. Fortunately, we can take the negative energy that would have been used to crave unwholesome gratifications or toxic mental states and direct that energy toward enlightenment. In this way, craving (*taṇhā*) can be transformed into useful vigor or energy (*viriya*).

Surely, early in the spiritual journey, our desire for Nibbāna may be framed quite deludedly, even narcissistically. So Nibbāna might unwittingly be imagined to be some sort of badge of honor one's psyche can cling to as a matter of pride. As one progresses on the path, such

delusions evaporate. The Dhamma works in and through us, transforming us, so that desires for honor, reputation, or any sort of ego-possession vanish. We are left with pure, wholesome desires, such as the desire to truly know ourselves and the desire that all beings be saved. Though such desires won't be fully satisfied prior to Nibbāna, still, they are pure spring waters that wash our toxins away.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE MONK

Bhikkhu-vagga

360. Restraint of the eye is good.
Good is restraint of the ear.
Restraint of the nose is good.
Good is restraint of the tongue.

361. Restraint of the body is good.
Good is restraint of speech.
Restraint of the mind is good.
Good is restraint everywhere.
The monk, restrained in every way,
Is released from all suffering.

362. The one restrained in hand, foot, and speech
the fully restrained—
Who is composed, solitary, and contented,
Who delights within:
This one is truly proclaimed a monk

363. Sweet is the speech of the humble monk,
Who restrains his mouth, recites the sacred texts,
And illuminates the Dhamma and its meaning.

364. The monk, delighting in the Dhamma,
Devoted to the Dhamma,
Pondering the Dhamma, and
Remembering the Dhamma,
Does not fall from the true Dhamma.

365. Scorn not what you have obtained,
Nor be envious of others.
The jealous monk does not attain *samādhi*.

366. The monk who never scorns what he has obtained,
Even if little,
Who is unwearied and lives the pure life,
Is praised, even by the gods.

367. The one who is not fond of *mine*,
Of anything of name-and-form;
Who does not grieve for what is not:
Truly, he is called *monk*.

368. The monk abiding in loving-kindness and
Pleased in the Buddha's teaching,
Acquires the peaceful state,
The quieting of all conditioned things:
Happiness.

369. O monk, bail out this boat!
Emptied, it will go quickly for you.
Having destroyed passion and ill will,
You will go to Nibbāna.

370. Five (gross fetters) one should cut off.[2]
Five (subtle fetters) one should abandon.[3]

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2. The five *gross* or *lower* fetters (*pañca orambhāgiya-saṃyojana*) to cut off are: (1) belief in a permanent personality (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*); (2) skeptical doubt (*vicikicchā*); (3) clinging to rules and rituals (*sīlabbata-parāmāsa*); (4) sensuous craving (*kāma-rāga*); and (5) ill-will (*vyāpāda*). These are said to lead to a rebirth in a sensuous realm.

3. The five *subtle* or *higher* fetters (*pañca uddhaṃbhāgiya-saṃyojana*) to be abandoned are: (1) craving for fine-material existence (*rūpa-rāga*); (2) craving for immaterial existence (*arūpa-rāga*); (3) conceit (*māna*); (4) restlessness (*uddhacca*); and (5) ignorance (*avijjā*). These are said to lead to a rebirth in the world of the gods.

And further five (faculties) one should develop.[4]
The monk who has overcome the five attachments[5]
Is called *one who has crossed over the torrent*.

371. Meditate O monk! Do not be negligent!
Do not let your mind whirl in sensual pleasure;
Do not, being negligent, swallow the molten ball;
Do not, while burning, cry out, "This is suffering!"

372. There is no meditative depth for the one without discernment,
And no discernment for the one who does not practice meditation.
But one with both wisdom and concentration
Is indeed close to Nibbāna.

373. For the monk who enters solitude,
With mind at peace,
Penetrating the Dhamma thoroughly,
There is heavenly delight.

374. When one penetrates the arising and dissipation of the aggregates,
One obtains joy and delight.
For those who know,
This is the Deathless.

375. For the wise monk, here is the beginning:
Guarding one's senses, contentment,
Restraint by the monastic precepts,

4. The five *faculties* (*pañca indriyāni*) to be developed are: (1) confidence (*saddhā*); (2) mindfulness (*sati*); (3) effort (*viriya*); (4) concentration (*samādhi*); and (5) wisdom (*paññā*).

5. The five attachments are: (1) passion or lust (*rāga*); (2) ill will (*dosa*); (3) delusion or ignorance (*moha*); (4) conceit (*māna*); and (5) views (*diṭṭhi*).

Association with virtuous friends
Whose way of life is pure and unwearied.

376. Be friendly and of good will;
Be skillful in conduct.
Thus would you end suffering
And be filled with joy.

377. Just as the jasmine sheds its withered flowers,
So, O monks, you should shed passion and ill will.

378. The monk who is calm in body and speech,
Tranquil and centered,
Caring not for worldly gain:
He is called *at peace*.

379. You yourself ought to exhort yourself.
You yourself ought to scrutinize yourself.
The monk who is self-guarded and mindful
Will dwell happily.

380. You are your own protector;
You are your own guide.
Therefore, restrain yourself,
Like a merchant a fine horse.

381. The monk, full of joy, pleased in the Buddha's teaching,
Acquires the peaceful state,
The quieting of all conditioned things:
Happiness.

382. Engaged in the Buddha's teaching,
Even a novice monk illumines this world,
Like the moon released from a cloud.

Reflection

Buddhism is decidedly a universal message of liberation. The Dhamma speaks to all about the cause of suffering and the path to the cessation of suffering. Thus, the Dhamma can be embraced by anyone regardless of gender, caste, class, or education. Anyone is capable of living a holy life and attaining Nibbāna if they wholly embrace the Dhamma. On the other hand, traditionally Buddhism has strongly held that the monastic life is the one that facilitates progress along the path most quickly. The Dhammapada is pervaded by the assumption that a householder's life is challenging and fraught with difficulty. We saw this already in Chapter Sixteen. Interestingly, when Buddhaghosa lists ten impediments to deep meditation, three of them are intrinsically part of the householder's life: a dwelling, family, and relatives (Vism III.29ff).

What then is the advantage in being a monk or a nun? As we find here and throughout the Dhammapada the advantage concerns the virtue of restraint. So important is this virtue that Buddhaghosa defines virtue as restraint itself (Vism I.21–22). In a word, the monastic life cultivates restraint. Our chapter begins: "Restraint of the eye is good. Good is restraint of the ear. Restraint of the nose is good. Good is restraint of the tongue. Restraint of the mind is good. Good is restraint everywhere. The monk, restrained in every way, is released from all suffering" (360–361). Consider verse 375: "For the wise monk, here is the beginning: Guarding one's senses, contentment, restraint by the monastic precepts..." These basic monastic precepts include those embraced by all Buddhists, along with restraint from eating after noon, dancing or singing, using adornments, using high or luxurious seats or beds, and handling money. These, however, are just the beginning.

Monastics take on literally hundreds of additional rules. To embrace such rules is not to attempt to escape the world, but to confront and eliminate the deep roots of suffering. Thus, we also see that the monastic life, freer from the causes of suffering, is one of delight and contentment (362, 374), a life of peace and happiness (368, 378–379, 381). A monk or nun's meditational life can be so developed that it provides an experience of a heavenly existence right here in this life (373).

While a monastic life is most auspicious for meditation, its greatest asset is that it facilitates freedom from attachments. Monastic life challenges monks and nuns to stop identifying with anything, with "mine" or "name-and-form" (367), from gain (378), and from passion or ill will (369, 371, 377). Of course, this is the challenge for all Buddhists, yet a householder's lifestyle can make such a challenge all the more difficult.

Lay people offer monks *dāna*, generosity that supports their lives. Giving *dāna* is highly meritorious, of course. Monks give *dhamma-dāna*, the gift of the Dhamma, which is much more valuable. This is the essence of verse 363: "Sweet is the speech of the humble monk, who restrains his mouth, recites the sacred texts, and illuminates the Dhamma and its meaning." The gift of the Dhamma can be genuinely given only by those who have deeply internalized it. The Dhamma is not merely a set of doctrines to be accepted or memorized; it is truth to be known. This is the one who, "Engaged in the Buddha's teaching ... illumines this world, like the moon released from a cloud" (382).

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE BRAHMIN

Brāhmaṇa-vagga

383. Strive, cut off the stream, O brahmin,
And drive out sensual craving.
Knowing the dissolution of conditioned things,
You, O brahmin, are a knower of the Uncreated.

384. When the brahmin has gone to the other shore
By the twofold practice (of serenity and insight),
Then that sage's every fetter falls away.

385. The one who is untroubled and beyond fear,
For whom there exists neither this nor the other shore,
Nor both this and the other shore:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

386. The pure one who sits absorbed in meditation,
Who has done what ought to be done,
Who is without toxins, having obtained the highest attainment:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

387. The sun shines by day, the moon by night;
In armor shines the warrior, in meditation the brahmin.
But all day and night the Buddha shines in splendor.

388. One who has warded off evil is a brahmin.
One who lives in tranquility is a renunciant.

One who has driven out one's own impurities
Is called *gone forth*.

389. Strike not a brahmin,
Nor should a brahmin give way to anger.
Shame on those who would strike a brahmin,
And greater shame on the brahmin who gives way to anger.

390. For the brahmin, there is nothing better
Than restraining his mind from what it cherishes.
Whenever he turns away from the desire to harm,
He thereby appeases suffering.

391. The one who does no wrong in body, speech, and mind,
Who is restrained in these three ways:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

392. You should venerate your teacher by whom
You learned the true Dhamma,
Taught by the Perfectly Awakened One,
Like a brahmin venerates the sacrificial fire.

393. Neither by matted hair, nor ancestry, nor birth is one a brahmin.
The brahmin is the one with whom there is the truth, purity, and the Dhamma.

394. What of your matted hair, O fool?
What of your deerskin clothes?
You are a tangled thicket within,
Yet you groom the exterior!

395. The one wearing rags from a dust heap,
Emaciated, with veins exposed,
Alone in the forest, absorbed in meditation:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

396. I do not proclaim a brahmin
Simply by being born of the womb, sprung from a mother.
If he possesses something he is only called *self-important*.
The one who has nothing, who is free from clinging:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

397. The one who has overcome clinging and cut off every fetter,
Who has overcome clinging and trembles not;
One unbound:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

398. The one awakened,
Having cut off strap and thong,
The cord together with the bridle,
Having lifted the crossbar:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

399. The one who endures insult, binding and beating without anger,
Whose strength is forbearance, an army's strength:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

400. The one who is free of anger, who observes the practice,
Who is virtuous, restrained, and humble,
Who is in the final body:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

401. The one who is unsmeared by sensual craving,
Like water on a lotus leaf,
The one who is like a mustard seed on the point of an awl:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

402. The one who realizes the dissolution of suffering,
Who has laid down the burden,
Who is unbound:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

403. The one endowed with intelligence and deep knowledge,
Who knows what is and is not the path,
Who has attained the highest goal:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

404. The one who is not given to society with householders or monks,
Who is homeless and wants little:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

405. The one who has set down the rod
Toward both the trembling and the firm,
Who does not kill or cause another to kill:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

406. The one unhindered among the obstructed,
Cool among those who take up the rod,
Free from clinging among the attached:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

407. The one who has made passion, ill will,
Conceit, and hypocrisy all fall away,
The one who is like a mustard seed on the point of an awl:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

408. The one who would utter words that are true,
Instructive, and gentle;
Words that would anger no one:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

409. The one who does not take what is not given here
in the world,
Be it long or short, small or large, beautiful or ugly:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

410. The one whose hopes are found
Neither in this world nor the next,
Who is independent, unyoked:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

411. The one without attachments,
Who by knowing is without doubts,
Who has attained immersion into the Deathless:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

412. The one who clings not to merit or demerit,
Who is free from sorrow, is dustless and pure:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

413. The one who is like the moon,
Spotless, pure, unsullied, perfectly clear,
For whom the delight for becoming is exhausted:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

414. The one who has transcended this mire,
This bad road, this wandering, and delusion,
Who has crossed to the other shore, emancipated,
Who meditates, free from craving, clinging, and
doubt:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

415. The one, having renounced sensual desires,
Would wander about homeless,
His passions and becoming destroyed:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

416. The one, having renounced craving,
Would wander about homeless,

His craving and becoming destroyed:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

417. The one who, having abandoned the human bond
And transcended the divine one,
Who is indeed released from all bonds:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

418. One who, having left behind attraction and aversion,
Being tranquil, without attachments,
A hero, overcoming the whole world:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

419. The one who has realized the dissipation and arising of beings,
Who is unattached, well-gone, awakened:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

420. The one whose course gods, divine musicians,
And humans do not know,
Whose toxins are destroyed, an arahant:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

421. The one for whom there is nothing in front,
Behind, and in between,
Who, having nothing, is free from clinging:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

422. The excellent one who is a bull, a hero,
A great sage, a conqueror, free of craving,
The one who has taken the (ritual) bath,
Who is now awake:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

423. The one who knows his former lives,
And sees the heavens and hells,
Who has attained the end of birth,

And obtained the higher knowledge,
The sage who has achieved all accomplishments:
That one I proclaim a brahmin.

Thus ends the Dhammapada

Reflection

In the Buddha's religious context, brahmins represented the highest caste in society, as they were the priests necessary for providing sacrifices to the gods. They also took on the role of penetrating and explaining the holy truths of the Vedas. So important were brahmins that foreign kings sometimes imported brahmins to their own countries to heighten their royal status and act as spiritual intermediaries for the throne.

While the Buddha held brahmins in respect as a point of cultural propriety, he challenged the very premises that made them special. He rejected the caste system that assumed spiritual maturity or expertise was aligned with birth or social status. He also challenged the importance of sacrifices. As we saw in Chapter Eight, "Better than offering a thousand sacrifices ... is one moment's homage to one who has developed himself" (106). Finally, and most importantly, the Buddha argued that brahmanical religiosity simply did not have the spiritual weight it claimed. The true brahmin was anyone "in whom there is truth, purity, and the Dhamma" (393).

What an appropriate conclusion to the Dhammapada. The Buddha relocates holiness and the vision of the ideal holy person from caste status to one who fully embraces the Dhamma. The Dhamma has three mutually interpreting and interdependent references. First, the Dhamma is the authoritative teaching (*pariyatti*) of the Buddha. *Pariyatti* points to what should be taken up,

reflected on, and mastered. Dhamma also refers to practice (*paṭipatti*). To engage Dhamma, then, is not merely to give conceptual assent. One must also actively internalize these truths and apply them to one's life. Finally, Dhamma is penetration (*paṭivedha*). What we find in this final chapter is a series of reflections pointing to the true sage who has taken up, mastered, and penetrated the Buddha's liberating truth.

One could experience this chapter as a bit long and tedious. There is indeed a great deal of repetition. But if we approach the text as a meditation, we can sink into its ballad-like character and enjoy the variations on the theme of being a true brahmin, letting the chapter convey a tangible feel for the holiness of one who has drunk deeply of the Dhamma. In addition to its lyrical gifts, this chapter provides a summary and capstone of the whole Dhammapada. Those who aspire to be true brahmins should seek to thoroughly internalize the teachings, values, and practices upon which we've reflected—these insights and patterns should be utterly integrated into daily life. This imperative applies both negatively, in that it concerns what we should avoid, and positively, in that it concerns what we ought to embrace.

The real brahmin is restrained on every level of body, speech, and mind (391), restrained from conflict and all reactiveness (389, 405, 406), and from anything likely to cause attachments (390). The brahmin does not cling, because all fetters and impurities have been cut off (384, 388, 396, 397, 401, 404, 415, 420). This frees the true brahmin, who becomes advanced in absorption and meditative insight (384), who is pure in body and speech (393, 408, 413), and thus who is filled with all wisdom and knowledge (403, 419, 423); the true brahmin is "a hero, a great sage, a conqueror" (422).

True brahmins do not negotiate between the realm of the gods and the realm of humans. Rather, they witnesses to the ultimate truth of Nibbāna. This is one who has achieved the highest attainment (403, 411), who knows the Uncreated (383), who has gone to the other shore (384, 414), and who is Unbound (402, 410, 417). Verse 420 tells us that the true brahmin has not gone to the highest heaven, or even to a heaven beyond the heavens, but to something supramundane, unspeakable, indescribable, and is thus unknown even to the gods.

We see in verses 385 and 421 that the true brahmin cannot even locate himself. The Dhammapada, and other canonical texts, often employ the image of our taking a raft from one shore (samsara) to the other shore (Nibbāna). Such imagery may give us a sense that Nibbāna is a place or perhaps a quality of existence. However, we find that for the true brahmin who has realized Nibbāna, "there exists neither this nor the other shore, nor both this and the other" (385). In verse 421 we find that for the brahmin, "there is nothing in front, behind, and in between." Nibbāna is not merely a quality of existence, nor is it a place one goes to. The tradition is clear: Nibbāna really references something, but that something is *atakkāvacara*, inaccessible to thought, even for one who has attained it, even for the Buddha himself (SN 35:23). Whatever Nibbāna involves is impossible to localize, and for the same reason: it is beyond discussion, thought, conceptualization, everything. Once one has transcended the conditioned world, one has transcended time and space. Thus, there are no reference points to anchor concepts, images, or fantasies.

Sometimes it is said that the arahant who is fully enlightened is beyond good and evil. It is also the case, however, that an arahant would never do anything harmful or immoral. So if the arahant is incapable of doing

something evil, what could it possibly mean to be beyond good and evil? What is being addressed here is the very nature of Nibbāna. The true brahmin or arahant's frame of reference is beyond the conditioned, dualistic world where we would locate such terms. Having attained enlightenment, they are beyond truth and falsehood, good and evil, self and no-self. From the point of view of Nibbāna, these terms and the conditioned world in which they make sense, simply do not apply. The true brahmin, the arahant, intends things of course, but there is no clinging, no *self*-identification or attachment with what is intended. It is as though the wisdom of the Dhamma itself is working through them. With all things perfectly accomplished and all bondage removed, they simply act with pure compassion, skill, and wisdom. Their freedom is grounded in their own complete unification with what is ultimate and unconditioned.

Thus, the Dhammapada leaves us with the deeply inspirational picture of the true brahmin, that mysterious, enlightened one who transcends any reference: Such a one!

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