

THE TEACHING METHODS OF BUDDHA

A dynamic vision of Buddhist hermeneutics

(Piya Tan)

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1. PREAMBLE

There are no synonyms, only ways of talking. Even the same word in the same context can mean differently to different people. For this reason, according to Buddhist tradition, there are 84,000 Dharma Doors or skilful means through which the unenlightened can open the doors to the Deathless. This is the case as long as we have an ego, and an ego always has an opinion, and every opinion contradicts itself. That is why the Buddha arose in our universe.

2. THE FINAL AUTHORITY

An examination of the traditional qualities of the Dhamma as found in the Pali Canon helps one have a better idea of what constitutes **spiritual authority** in early Buddhism. The traditional Pali formula for **the six “virtues of the Dhamma”** (*dhamma,guṇa*) is as follows:

- | | |
|---|--|
| (1) <i>svākkhāto (bhagavatā dhammo)</i> | Well proclaimed (is the Blessed One’s Dhamma), |
| (2) <i>sandiṭṭhiko</i> | visible for oneself here and now [experienceable immediately], |
| (3) <i>akāliko</i> | timeless [not bound by time], |
| (4) <i>ehi,passiko</i> | for one to “come and see” [inviting scrutiny] |
| (5) <i>opanayiko</i> | leading inward (to peace of mind), |
| (6) <i>paccattaṃ veditabbo viññūhi</i> | to be experienced by the wise for themselves. |
- (M 1:37, 265; A 3:285)

Virtue no. 1 in full is that the Dhamma is “good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end...altogether complete, altogether pure, both in the spirit and in the letter” (V 1:20). What is of special interest to us here is virtue no. 6: “to be experienced by the wise (*viññū*) for themselves”. “The wise” here refers to those with **insight** (Pali *ñāṇa*, Skt. *jñāna*) or **wisdom** (P. *paññā*, Skt. *prajñā*).

Since Buddhism began as an **oral tradition**, where teachings are received directly from a teacher, it is understandable that **listening** to the Dharma is the key to receiving a correct idea of the Noble Eight-fold Path. Spiritual wisdom, however, does not arise only through listening. The Pali Canon, in fact, mentions two sources or conditions for the arising of spiritual wisdom or Right View: **listening to another’s utterances**, literally “another’s voice” (*parato,ghoso*), and **skilful consideration** or analytical reflection (*yoniso manasikāra*) (M 1:294; A 1:87). [22(4)a]

These two sources of Right View can be expanded into **the three types of wisdom** (another canonical set) [22(4a)]: Wisdom arising from “listening” (*suta,maya paññā*), wisdom arising from reflection (*cinta,maya paññā*), and wisdom arising from mental cultivation (*bhāvanā,maya paññā*) (D 3:219; Vbh 324). **Skilful consideration** is an important early Buddhist term that refers to the last two kinds of wisdom listed here, that is, wisdom arising from reflection and cultivation. Skilful consideration leads to “wisdom arising from cultivation”, that is, spiritual realization.

Personal experience

The final authority that authenticates a text or doctrine is **one's own spiritual realization** or enlightenment. This is when one gains the same liberating knowledge as the Buddha did. This is the realization referred to later in the Commentaries as the third of the "true doctrines", that is, **the methods for gaining the three types of wisdom**:

- (1) The true doctrine of **study** (*pariyatti saddhamma*), that is, the sacred text or scripture.
- (2) The true doctrine of **practice** (*paṭipatti saddhamma*), that is, the spiritual practice or praxis.
- (3) The true doctrine of **penetration** (*paṭivedha saddhamma*), that is, realization or enlightenment.

(VA 225; AA 5:55)

The **Samādhi, nirmocana Śūtra** elaborates on the three wisdoms, thus:

Through a wisdom arisen from [**hearing**] the doctrine, Bodhisattvas base themselves upon the words [of the sutras], take the text literally, and do not yet understand the intention... Through a wisdom arisen from **thinking**, Bodhisattvas do not base themselves solely upon the words or take the meaning literally, and understand the intention... Through a wisdom arisen from **meditation**, Bodhisattvas either base themselves on the words or do not, either take the text literally or do not, but they understand the intention, manifested through the images which are the object of the *samādhi* that accords with the nature of things.

(Samādhi, nirmocana Śūtra, ed. Lamotte 1935:105; quoted by Lopez, Jr. 1993:10)

The 8 criteria of the Doctrine and Discipline

While at Vaiśālī, Mahā Prajāpatī Gautamī (shortly after her ordination) approached the Buddha and asked him to teach her "Dharma in brief" so that, after listening to the Buddha's Word, she might "dwell alone, secluded, earnest, zealous and resolute" (i.e. practise Dharma in a personal retreat). The Buddha taught her the 8 criteria of the Doctrine and Discipline, as recorded in **the Sankhitta Sutta** (A viii,53), quoted here in full

On one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling in the Pinnacled Hall in the Great Wood at Vaiśālī. Then, Mahā Prajāpatī Gautamī approached the Blessed One, paid homage to him, and stood at one side. Standing there at one side, she said to him:

It would be good, Lord, if the Blessed One would teach me the Dharma in brief, so that having heard the Dharma from the Blessed One, I might dwell alone, secluded, earnest, zealous and resolute.

"As to those things, Gautamī, of which you know lead not to passion, not to dispassion; to bondage, not to release; to accumulation of rebirth, not to its lessening; to wanting more, not to wanting little; to discontent, not to contentment; to society, not to solitude; to indolence, not to exertion; to luxury, not to frugality; be assured that they are not the Dharma, not the Vinaya, not the the Teacher's Teaching!

"As to those things, Gautamī, of which you know lead to **dispassion**, not to passion; to **release**, not to bondage; to **lessening** of rebirth, not to its accumulation; to wanting **little**, not to wanting more; to **contentment**, not to discontent; to **solitude**, not to society; to **exertion**, not to indolence; to **frugality**, not to luxury; be assured that they are the Dharma, the Vinaya and the Word of the Teacher!"

(V 2:259 = A 4:280; AA 4:137)

The Commentaries say that on account of this exhortation, Prajāpatī attained Arhantship (VA 1292; AA 4:137).

A similar teaching was given by the Buddha to Upāli so that he might "dwell alone, secluded, earnest, zealous and resolute", as recorded in the **Nibbidāya Sutta** the Aṅguttara Nikāya (A vii,79):

...as to those things do not lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, calm, higher knowledge, enlightenment and Nirvana—of such teachings you may be certain that they are not the Dharma, not the Vinaya, not the Teacher’s Teaching.

...as to those things that lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, calm, higher knowledge, enlightenment and Nirvana—of such teachings you may be certain that they are the Dharma, the Vinaya, the Teacher’s Teaching.

(A 4:143; stock phrase at D 1:189, 2:251; A 1:30, 3:83, 5:216; U 36, *passim*)

3. LIBERATION THROUGH THE BUDDHA

The Buddha is able to know anything should he so desire—he is **omniscient**. He converts those who with spiritual maturity (*upanissaya*) in one of three ways (called “miracles”, *pāṭihāriya*): by a show of psychic powers or “miracle”, by mind-reading, or by teaching a subject suitable to the audience’s character (D 1:211; A 1:170; Pm 2:227).

Liberating through seeing

On various occasions, the Buddha exhibits **psychic manifestations** (*iddhi, pāṭihāriya*) to break the negative mindset of his audience. Such a display is only a prelude to the message, like cleansing the wound before applying the medication. Usually, the mindset against which such a technique would be used is that of **pride or conceit** (*māna*). The reason is psychological: pride is more of an emotional state than an intellectual one. Once the emotional barrier is removed, it is easier to learn.

An example of the Buddha’s “psychic” teaching method is when he sends a ray of light or a holographic projection of himself from the Fragrant Chamber (*gandha, kuṭi*) to assist or counsel a monk (especially in meditation). There is the case of Vakkali whom the Buddha saves from suicide (Ap 2:465 f.; J 4:264 f.; AA 1:140 f.; DhA 4:188 f.; Miln 349). Those words spoken by the Buddha on such an occasion are known as “Light Verses” or “Holographic Stanzas” (*obhāsa, gāthā*, SnA 16, 265).

On one occasion, to subdue the pride of the Śākya, the Buddha projected a jewelled walk (*ratana-cankamaṇa*) in mid-air and then walked up and down on it (DhA 3:163 f). One psychic manifestation or “miracle” which only the Buddha could perform is the “**Twin Wonder**” or “Double Miracle” (*yamaka pāṭihāriya*) where thin jets of water and of fire would shoot out of the Buddha’s pores forming an awe-inspiring aura around him. On another occasion, he performed this miracle at the foot of Gaṇḍa’s mango tree (*gaṇḍ’amba*), at the gate of Śrāvastī, to answer the challenge of the Śrāvastī heretics (J 1:87; DhA 3:199 ff.; cf. Mahv 30:81).

Sometimes, the Buddha’s use of psychic display alone does not convert a person as in the case of Uruvilva Kaśyapa, who was himself endowed with psychic abilities. When Kaśyapa thought that the Buddha “is not an Arhant like me”, the Buddha finally converts him by revealing exactly what he is thinking! This is the miracle of **mind-reading** (*ādesanā, pāṭihāriya*). (Vin 1:24 ff; AA 1:165 ff; ThagA 1:434 ff)

The greatest miracle

In due course, the Buddha prohibited the public performance of psychic power by any Sangha member (V 2:109-111; DhA 2:201 ff; J 4:263), fearing that in time to come, when monks without psychic abilities would thereby be at a disadvantage in teaching the Dharma. Furthermore, this ruling also prevents the unenlightened from mistaking the finger for the moon. That is to say, there might be those who would be attracted to the perceived “power” of Buddhism rather than its true goal of spiritual liberation.

The Buddha and some Arhants possess the three “miraculous powers” of psychic manifestation, mind-reading and teaching (D 1:212, 3:220; A 1:170; Pm 2:227; Mvst 1:238, 3:137, 322; Abhk 215). Of these, the

Buddha declares that the greatest is the **miracle of teaching** (*anusāsanī, pāṭihāriya*), or miracle of education (A 1:170-172) [25]. Now let us examine this miracle of education in greater detail.

Liberation through hearing

Learning comes through listening. While the Buddha was alive, one only needed to **listen** to him. The early Commentaries understood *parato ghoso* as referring to the wisdom of one who hears Dharma in the presence of the Ariyas (that is, the Saints who are nearing enlightenment or already enlightened) (SnA 166). More likely than not, especially when one listens to an Ariya with an open mind, this mere act of receptive listening was sufficient to trigger liberating wisdom, if not enlightenment itself, in oneself. As such, it seems clear that Right View is gained upon **hearing the Dharma from the Buddha**:

When the Buddhas, the Light-bearers, arise in this world,
They announce this teaching that leads to the calming of unsatisfactoriness;
Those, hearing them, gain wisdom, regain their hearts (from the clutches of Māra).
They see the impermanent as impermanent, the unsatisfactory as unsatisfactory,
The not-self as not-self; and the foul as foul.
Through their gaining of Right View, they transcend all unsatisfactoriness.

(A 2:52)

Peter Masefield, in his study in this connection, entitled *Divine Revelation in Pali Buddhism* (1986), made a comprehensive list of the means by which the early disciples (as recorded in the early Pali texts) were “converted” (Table 4), most of whom gained entrance to the spiritual path, many of whom becoming Arhants (Tables 4-5). All these early converts, except for a small minority (where the means of conversion were not specified in the Canon), had gained some level of Right View **through hearing the Dharma**, and there was not even a single mention of meditation as we know it today.

4. THE DHARMA AS TEACHER

With the passing of the Buddha and the ever rare presence of Arhants and other saints, other means of spiritual conversion have to be employed. Today, we no more sit at the feet of the Buddha to listen to a doctrine specially intended to suit each of our personality and level of understanding. Now that the Buddha is gone, **the teaching is our teacher**.

Then the Blessed One addressed the Venerable Ānanda, “It may be, Ānanda, that some of you will think, ‘The word of the Teacher is gone; we have no more Teacher.’ But that, Ānanda, is not the correct view. The Doctrine and the Discipline, Ānanda, which I have taught and explained to you are to be your teacher.

(Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta, D 1:154)

This last instruction of the Buddha is an attempt to address the dilemma of a spiritual community upon the death of its founder. Important questions that arise are:

- (1) After the Buddha’s passing, where shall authority rest?
- (2) What, exactly, is his teaching and what does it mean for the teaching to be the teacher?
- (3) How does one know one is giving the true teaching in the correct way?
- (4) How is the teaching to be taught to the unenlightened?
- (5) How does one rectify wrong views and answer allegations against the Buddha’s teachings?

Attempts at answering such questions, in contemporary terms, can be called **Buddhist theology**, that is, *the rational inquiry into the nature of religion and spirituality*. Buddhist theology has three important areas in an ascending order of difficulty: homiletics, hermeneutics and apologetics. **Homiletics** is the art of teaching the Dharma as a subject of study, and covers question (4). **Hermeneutics** is the art of interpreting Buddhist

texts, and attempts to answer questions (1)-(3), as laid out in the *Peṭakopadesa* and the *Nettipakaraṇa*. **Apologetics** is the art of resolving theological problems (such as scriptural dilemmas as illustrated in the *Milindapañhā*) and answering challenges from outside.

Scholars of religions have made important contributions to giving new life to Buddhism as a religion. In 2001, for example, a group of academics discussed the notion of a Buddhist “theology” and published their thoughts in *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars* (ed. Roger T. Jackson & John J. Makransky, 2000).

Understandably, the concept of “theology” has broadened from being specifically “the study of the nature of God and religious truth” to a broader definition as “rational inquiry into religious questions”. Even before the advent of such helpful technical terms, Buddhist theology had existed in practice.

The Buddha’s instruction on the importance of distinguishing between teachings with “direct meaning” (*nīṭ’attha*) and those with “indirect meaning” (*neyy’attha*) (D 3:127 f; A 1:60) and the usage of conventional truth (*sammutti sacca*) and ultimate truth (*param’attha sacca*) (MA 1:138) all fall within the purview of commentarial literature or Buddhist **hermeneutics**, the discipline of interpreting the doctrines. [See also AA 2:118, cf. AA 1:94; KvuA:JPTS 1889: 34.]

[On a contemporary application of the two truths, see Charles Wei-hsun Fu, “From *Paramārtha-satya* to *Samvṛṭi-satya*” in Fu & Wawrytko, 1991: ch. 24.]

5. BUDDHIST HOMILETICS

Buddhist **homiletics** consists in the application of the Buddha’s gradual teaching method (*anupubbikathā*) (V 1:15, D 1:148, A 3:184), that is, the effective preaching of the Buddha Word, by which the Buddha prepares the mind of the disciple before speaking on the advanced teachings of the Four Noble Truths. The stock passages of the Nikāyas run as follows:

Then the Blessed One gave him a gradual instruction—that is to say, he spoke on **giving** (*dāna*), on **moral conduct** (*sīla*) and on **the heavens** (*sagga*); he explained the danger, the vanity and **the disadvantages of sensual pleasures** (*kām’ādīnava*); and **the advantages of renunciation** (*nekkhammā’nisaṃsa*). When the Blessed One perceived that the listener’s mind was prepared, pliant, free from obstacles, elevated and lucid, then he explained to him the teaching peculiar to the Buddhas (*buddhānaṃ sāmukkamsikā desanā*), that is to say: Unsatisfactoriness, its Cause, its Cessation, and the Path.

(V 1:15; D 1:148, etc.)

6. HERMENEUTICS

While for the enlightened there is no more need for spiritual learning, for the unenlightened, the task is still undone. The investigation of what constitutes the Buddha’s Teaching and explaining what it means for the teaching to be the teacher can be called **Buddhist hermeneutics** (Lopez, Jr. 1993:1). In simple terms, this means **the interpretation of a text**.

To learn is to interpret, at least, for the unenlightened person. For our purposes, we shall adopt a broad definition of hermeneutics, that is, one concerned with “establishing principles for the retrieval of meaning, especially from a text” (Lopez, Jr., 1993:1). This is necessary because just as a physician does not prescribe the same medication for every patient, the Buddha did not teach the same thing to everyone. Nāgārjuna phrases it poetically in *Ratnāvalī*:

Just as grammarians
Begin with reading the alphabet,

The Buddha teaches doctrines
That students can bear.

To some he teaches doctrines
For the reversal of evil;
To some, in order to win merit;
To some, doctrines based on duality.

To some, he teaches doctrines of non-duality.
To some, the profound, the frightening to the fearful,
Having an essence of emptiness and compassion,
The means of achieving highest enlightenment.

7. APOLOGETICS

As Buddhism grows, especially when encountering new cultures, new questions would arise in terms of the relevance and application of Buddhism to the new context. Even within the Buddhist tradition itself, questions often arise regarding apparent contradictions in teachings, such as Ānanda's asking the Buddha as to **why he remained silent to Vacchagotta's questions** on the nature of the soul (S 4:400 f.).

The classic work on Buddhist **apologetics** (the system of defence, proof and reconciliation of religious doctrines) is the **Milinda,pañha** (The Questions of King Milinda) which is regarded as canonical in the Burmese tradition. Another work which contains Buddhist apologetics is Vasubandhu's **Abhidharmakośa**, which comments on the Bodhisatta's conception myth. The Jātaka Commentary gives the famous story of **queen Māyā's dream** of the albino elephant:

It was as though the four guardians of the world...carried the queen to the Himalayas...to the Anotatta lake... At that time, the Bodhisatta, in the form of a magnificent albino elephant, was wandering about not far from there, where there was a golden mountain. Descending from the mountain, he climbed the silver mountain and, approaching from the north and plucking a white lotus flower with his trunk the colour of silver chain, he trumpeted loudly and entered the golden palace. Three times he walked round his mother's couch with his right side toward it; then he opened [his mother's] right side and seemed to enter her womb. Thus did he take conception under the descendent asterism of Āsālha. (JA 1:50-52)

Indian commentators like Vasubandhu (320?-400?) have discussed the possible meaning of this story of queen Māyā's dream of the Bodhisatta's entering her womb in the shape of an elephant and whether in fact he did assume such a shape. Here is the relevant excerpt of **Vasubandhu's comments** from his **Abhidharma,kośa**:

We know that the mother of the Bodhisattva saw in a dream a small white elephant enter her side. This was only an "omen" because for a long time, the Bodhisattva has been disengaged from animal rebirth... Furthermore, intermediate beings do not enter into the womb by splitting open the side, but rather by the door of birth... (Abhidharma,kośa 3:13a-b = Pruden 1988:390)

Vasubandhu's comments, notes Mizuno, represents a **demythologizing process** taking place over a 1,500 years ago in India. In that case, he continues, why was the myth of the white elephant created?

The mounting rain clouds of the monsoon season in India remind us of an elephant. Kālidāsa, the fourth- or fifth-century poet and dramatist, describes clouds being transformed into young elephants and falling down into the gardens of the mansions of the *yakṣas* [*Meghadūta* 2]. In this way, he may have been influenced by the Buddhist legend.

Elephants were close to the Indians; they were employed in both war and peace and were thought to give life to both human beings and animals by calling on the rain clouds and so bringing about a successful harvest.

(Mizuno, 2000:58)

Buddhism today still emphasizes a direct transmission of the Dharma through the **oral tradition** between teacher and pupil. However, the religion is even more popularly transmitted as a **written tradition** to people who either are new to Buddhism or do not wish to be identified by a Buddhist label. As such, it is vital to have a broad base of textual discipline so that Buddhism can benefit the greatest number of beings during our times.

8. CULTIVATING THE RICH FIELDS

Why should we teach the Dharma? Buddhism began as a **community of renunciates**, which as such depended on the laity for basic support. The laity, however, were also taught the Dharma, although priority was always given to the renunciates. In the **Desanā Sutta** (Saṃyutta bk 4, sutta 42), the Buddha gives the parable of the fields:

Now what do you think, headman? Suppose a farmer here has three fields, one excellent, one moderate, and one poor, hard, salty, of bad soil. Now what do you think, headman? When that farmer wants to sow his seeds, which field would he sow first, the excellent field, the moderate field, or the one that is poor...?

“The farmer, Lord, wishing to sow his seeds, would first sow the excellent field, and having done so he would sow the moderate one. Having done so, he might or might not sow the field that is poor.... Why so? Because in any case it might do for cattle-food.”

Well, headman, just like the excellent field are **my ordained disciples**, both men and women. I teach them Dharma that is good in its beginning, good in its middle and good in its ending, both in spirit and in letter. I make known to them the Holy Life, that is wholly perfect and pure. Why is that? Because, headman, these people abide with me for their island, with me for their cave and shelter, with me for stronghold, with me for their refuge.

Then, headman, just like that moderate field are **my lay disciples**, both men and women. I teach them Dharma that is lovely... I make known to them the Holy Life... Why is that? Because, headman, these people abide with me for their island... for their refuge.

Then, headman, just like that field that is poor, hard, salty, of bad soil, are **the wandering ascetics and brahmins** that hold other views than mine. To them also I teach Dharma that is good... I make known to them the Holy Life... Why so? Because **if it be that they understand but a single sentence of it, that would be their benefit and happiness for a long time to come.**

(S 4:315 f.)

9. THE 4 GREAT AUTHORITIES

In his last instructions before passing away, as recorded in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, the Buddha lays down **the 4 Great Authorities** (*mahāpadesa*) to authenticate a teaching when one is in doubt. The four Great Authorities are:

- (1) The Buddha as authority (*buddhāpadesa*).
- (2) The Order as authority (*saṅghāpadesa*).
- (3) A group of elders (less than 5) as authority (*sambahula-t,therāpadesa*).
- (4) An elder as authority (*eka,therāpadesa*).

(D 2:123 ff; A 2:167. For the Great Authorities on the Vinaya, see V 1:250)

The first authority, that of the Buddha himself, is explained as when a monk might declare, “I heard this before the Blessed One. I received this before him. This is the Doctrine, this is the Discipline, this is the Teacher’s Teaching.” This was the authority that **Pūrāṇā** appealed to when he turned down the invitation by some elder monks in Rājagṛha to attend the 1st Council by replying: “Venerable Sirs, well recited by the elders are the Doctrine and the Discipline, but in the way that I heard it in the Blessed One’s presence, that I received it in his presence, in that same way will I bear it in mind.” (V 2:289).

Although the first authority—that of the Buddha himself—no longer applies since the Buddha has attained final Nirvana, the reason for the early Buddhists (as exemplified by the Theravada) appealing to these four as authority is clear. It is based on **an oral tradition**, that is, the teaching is handed down directly from teacher to pupil, ensuring that “the Holy Life, altogether complete, altogether pure” is transmitted “both in the spirit and in the letter” (V 1:20).

10. THE DHARMA-ENDING AGE

Now that the Buddha has entered final Nirvana, who should teach the Dharma? This question is compounded by the fact that we are living in **the Dharma-ending age**. Not only is the Teacher dead, but the Teaching, too, is dying, as it were. Buddhists, in successive ages after the Buddha, have reinterpreted scripture and innovated doctrines in an attempt to extend the life of the Teaching and to postpone the Buddhist apocalypse. [A comprehensive survey and evaluation of the Dharma-ending age is given in Jan Nattier’s *Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist prophecy of decline*, 1991.]

What, then, is the Dharma-ending age? The earliest scriptural answer we have is probably found in the **Milinda,pañhā**:

[King Milinda:]

Venerable Nāgāsena, the Blessed One said: “Ānanda, the True Teaching will only last for 500 years” (V 2:256; A 4:278). But then at the Final Nirvana, the Blessed One, in answer to Subhadda, said: “If these monks were to live rightly (*sammā vihareyyum*), the True Teaching would not be empty of Arhants” (D 2:152)... These are contradictory statements (*ubhato koṭiko pañhā*).

[Nagasena:]

Great king, the Blessed One’s statement is different both in the spirit and the letter. One refers to the duration of the True Teaching and the other to the practice of the religious life—the two are widely distinct... In saying “five hundred years” he was stating **the limit of the Dispensation** (*sāsana,paricchedo*) but in speaking to Subhadda, he was declaring **what constitutes spiritual practice** (*paṭipatti,paridīpanā*).

If the sons of the Buddha were to exert themselves in **the five limbs of endeavour** (*pañcapadhāniyaṅga*, D 3:237; M 2:95, 128; A 3:65, 5:15); even more so, to diligently train themselves in **the three trainings** (*ti,sikkhā*) [of moral conduct, mental concentration, and wisdom] (D 3:220; S 3:83; A 1:229; Miln 237); and perfecting themselves in conduct and virtue; then the noble teaching of the Conqueror will long endure, and stand ever more steadfastly for a very long time... The Master’s Teaching, great king, has its roots in practice, practice is its essence, and **it stands as long as practice does not decline**.

(Miln 130-134)

The five limbs of endeavour are important in terms of spiritual practice and should be mentioned here in full. The *locus classicus* for them is found in the **Bodhi,rāja,kumāra Sutta**:

- (1) **Faith** in the Buddha’s enlightenment (by reflecting on his virtues).
- (2) **Good health**, stamina and “possessing a good digestion that is neither too cool nor too warm but medium” to withstand the difficulties of spiritual endeavour.

- (3) **Honesty**, sincerity and “showing himself as he actually is to the Teacher and his companions in the spiritual life”.
- (4) **Effort** and determination in abandoning unwholesome states and cultivating wholesome states.
- (5) **Wisdom**, that is, insight into “the rise and fall of things” that leads to the complete destruction of suffering.

(M 2:95)

The Dispensation (*sāsana*) began with the enlightenment of the Five Monks after listening to the Dhamma, cakka-pavattana Sutta, resulting in the formation of the *de facto* Sangha or Holy Community (V 1:9-12; S 5:420-425). Conversely, in a Dharma-ending age, it would be very difficult to find such a Holy Community of Saints. Understandably, the Buddha, in his wisdom and compassion, before passing away, declared: “The Doctrine and the Discipline, Ānanda, which I have taught and explained to you are to be your teacher.”(D 1:154).

In other words, even though this is the Dharma-ending age, we still have a teacher, that is, the Buddha Dharma. As such, the very fact that this is the Dharma-ending age should motivate anyone with some understanding of the Dharma to pass it on to others who know even less or nothing about Dharma. This may be the “Dharma-ending age”, but it is **not** the “**Dharma-ended**” age; in other words, the True Teaching is not totally gone, but lives in those who practise it.

11. IDEAL CONDITIONS FOR TEACHING DHARMA

Immediately following the Padhāna Sutta (A 5.53) that deals with the five limbs of striving [10], is a short but interesting discourse, the **Samaya Sutta** (A 5.54), where the Buddha lists out the “five wrong times for striving” (when one is old, when one is ill, when there is food shortage, when there is social instability, and when the Order is disunited), followed by the “five right times for striving” (A 3:66, details at A 3:103-105), that is, the ideal conditions for spiritual practice. **The Anāgata, bhaya Sutta II** (A 5.78) expands on the positive teachings of the Samaya Sutta, providing a beautiful reflection on the urgency of spiritual practice, and is here abridged with additional references:

- (1) **Youth**. A monk is young, a mere youth, black-haired and blessed with the beauty of youth, the prime of youth. The monk reflects: “I am now young...but time will come when **old age** will touch this body; then it would not be easy to turn to the Buddha Word, or the forest and woodlands, or the solitary dwelling. Before it comes to me, let me attain the unattained, so that I will dwell comforted (*phāsu*) even when I am old.”

The monk who, while still young,
Devotes himself to the Buddha’s Teaching,
Lights up this world
Like the moon freed from clouds.

*yo have daharo bhikkhu
yuñjati Buddha, sāsane
so imaṃ lokaṃ pabhāseti
abbhā mutto’ va candimā*

(Dh 382)

- (2) **Health**. A monk is healthy and well, has good digestion that is neither too cool nor too warm, but medium and suitable for effort (in the spiritual life). The monk reflects: “I am healthy...but the time will come when **sickness** will touch this body... Before it comes to me, let me attain the unattained, so that I will dwell comforted even when I am sick.”

Health is the highest gain,
Contentment is the greatest wealth.
The trusted are the best kinsmen.
Nirvana is the highest bliss.

*ārogya, paramā lābhā
santuṭṭhī paramaṃ dhaṇaṃ
vissāsa, paramā ñātī
nibbānaṃ paramaṃ sukhaṃ*

(Dh 204)

- (3) **Plenty.** There is no famine and crops are good, food is easy to get, and it is easy to keep oneself going because almsfood is easily gotten. It is difficult to practise when one is hungry, thirsty, or sick. The monks reflects: “Now there is no famine, and food is easy to get...but the time till come when **famine and difficulty in getting food** will arise. Before it comes to me, let me attain the unattained, so that I will dwell comforted even in time of famine and difficulty in getting food.”
- (4) **Social harmony.** People live together in fellowship, not quarrelling, mingling like milk and water, looking upon one another with kindly eyes. The monk reflects: “Now people dwell in **good fellowship**, like milk and water...but the time will come when fear will reign, when robbers abound, when the fear-stricken gather their things and flee looking for safety, and people will live in groups and communes. It is then not easy to turn to the Buddha Word, or the forest and woodlands, or the solitary dwelling. Before it comes to me, let me attain the unattained, so that I will dwell comforted even in time of fear.”

...here I see monks living in concord, with mutual appreciation, without disputing, blending like milk and water, **looking at each other with kindly eyes**. I do not see any other assembly elsewhere with such concord.

...here I see monks **smiling and cheerful**, sincerely joyful, plainly delighting, their faculties fresh, living at ease, unruffled, subsisting on what others give, abiding with mind [as aloof] as a wild deer’s... Surely, these venerable ones have certainly realized the great and full significance of the Blessed One’s teaching.

(King Pasenadī, Dhamma, cetiya Sutta, M 2:121)

- (5) **Harmony of the Sangha.** The Sangha live together in fellowship, finding comfort in one teaching (*ek’uddesu phāsu*); when there is harmony in the Order, then there is no reviling with one another, nor accusation made, nor quarrelling, nor arguing with one another, but there they of little faith find faith and the faith of the faithful increases. The monk reflects: “Now the Order dwell in **spiritual fellowship**, finding comfort in one teaching...but the time will come when the Order is divided. It is then not easy to turn to the Buddha Word, or the forest and woodlands, or the solitary dwelling. Before it comes to me, let me attain the unattained, so that I will dwell comforted even though the Order is divided.”

Happy is the birth of Buddhas.

Happy is the teaching of the sublime Dharma,

Happy is the unity of the Sangha,

Happy is the discipline of the united.

sukho buddhānaṃ uppādo

sukhā saddhamma, desanā

sukhā saṅghassa sāmaggī

sammaggānaṃ tapo sukho.

(Dh 194)

(A 3: 3:65-67, 103-105)

The technical term “one teaching” (*ek’uddesa*) here is interesting. The term *uddesa* usually refers to a “recitation”, especially the fortnightly recital of the Pāṭimokkha for the monks, in which case, the term *ek’uddesa* refers to **spiritual unity**.

The second and more important point regarding the term *ek’uddesa* is **the acceptance of the same teachings for study and practice** or, at least, a spirit of open tolerance and understanding that conduces to spiritual learning. And where there is learning, there is **interpreting**, a vital process of education that became more difficult after the Buddha’s passing since he was not around as the final spiritual authority. As such, the Dharma has to be taken as the final authority. To facilitate this turning to the Dharma as spiritual authority, that is, to correctly interpret the Buddha’s Teaching, the ancient teachers produced two important works on Buddhist exegesis: the Peṭakopadesa and the Netti-p, pakaraṇa.

12. MANUALS OF INTERPRETATION

There is uncertainty as to which of the two works was earlier. The **Netti-p,pakaraṇa**, also called *Netti.gandha* or simply *Netti*, however, is more systematic and complete, but the shorter of the two. It is a revision of the **Peṭakopadesa**, which also explains why the *Netti* has a commentary (by Dhammapāla), but not the *Peṭakopadesa*. However, scholars generally agree the two works were written around the 2nd century BCE, maybe earlier (Norman 1983:108), possibly earlier than the last two books of the *Abhidhamma* (Mrs. Rhys Davids, *JRAS* 1925:111 f.; Winternitz, 1972:183). The authorship of both works is attributed to “Mahā Kaccāna”, the Buddha’s disciple who was foremost in the interpretation of the Dharma (cf. *M* 1:114; also *Nett:Ñ* xii; Bond, 1980:17).

The influence of these two works, especially the *Netti-p,pakaraṇa*, on the early Buddhists was great. Since they are works on **the interpretation of the whole Teaching**, a guide for preachers and a “guide for commentators” (*Peṭk:Ñ* xliii), understandably, the early Pali commentators relied on them to compose their Commentaries. The *Netti*, for example, is concerned with all aspects of interpretation, including the paraphrasing of doctrine for teaching purposes. The *Peṭakopadesa*’s methodology operates at two levels, with reference to (1) the wording of the text and (2) its meaning (*Peṭk:Ñ* xxiii f.; Warder 1970: 316-319).

A note on **the use of language** should be made here, of which two kinds can be distinguished:

One extends to describing, gathering evidence, exploiting, commenting, drawing conclusions, and so on; it is oriented to the discovery of something new. The other seeks to exercise the ideas so discovered while at the same time preserving them intact and preventing their change and loss. It seeks consistency and is averted from what is new.
(*Ñānamoli*, *Nett:Ñ* viii)

The *Netti-p,pakaraṇa* belongs to the second category: “it deduces nothing and concludes nothing” (ib.). It simply draws from the suttas a total of 16 “modes of conveying” (*hārā*) or contexts, and 5 guidelines (*ṇayā*) expressing the sutta’s meaning or spirit (*attha*) (*Nett:Ñ* xxxvi-xliii, xlvii-liii).

The aim of the interpreter is to correlate the meaning and phrasing, the spirit and the letter, of any passage with the total meaning and phrasing of the Dharma. The *Netti*’s method not only requires the interpreter to tease out the meaning of the Dharma from the text (the letter or phrasing), but also to indicate how a text points to the goal of the Dharma (the spirit). These two main elements employed in the method of interpretation to accomplish this task are the *hārā* (dealing with phrasing or semantic meaning) and the *ṇayā* (dealing with the spirit or goal of the text) respectively. (Bond, 1980:19)

13. METHODS OF INTERPRETATION

[Much of the next few following sections are based on George D. Bond’s article, “The Gradual Path as a Hermeneutical Approach to the *Dhamma*” in Lopez, Jr., 1988:29-45, which is recommended to be read in full. See also Bond, 1980:16-28 on the *Nettipakaraṇa*.]

In this lecture, we shall focus on some basic aspects of **Buddhist hermeneutics**, the study of interpreting Buddhist texts, since we are dealing with the teaching methods of the Buddha. We shall attempt to appreciate some relevant sections of the *Peṭakopadesa* and the *Netti-p,pakaraṇa*, the first earliest texts dealing with Buddhist hermeneutics and also two of the most neglected Buddhist texts because they are not easy texts to understand.

One of the problems Buddhism has to address as it spreads across India and beyond is the validating or empowering the role of the person in the world, “of meeting the social or religious needs of nonrenouncers” (Bond, 1988:32). This apparent clash in spiritual ideals—between the renunciates and the laity—are clearly reflected in the **Netti-p,pakaraṇa** (The Guide, tr. *Ñānamoli*, 1962) and the **Peṭakopadesa** (*Piṭaka Disclosure*, tr. *Ñānamoli*, 1964), that attempt to explain the Dharma in relation to them.

The gradual path

To resolve this apparent clash of spiritual ideals, these two important Theravada manuals of interpreting the Buddha’s teachings present the **gradual path** as a key that unlocks the meaning of the Buddha Dharma. Traditionally, this refers to the **graduated discourse** (*anupubbī,kathā*) “on generosity, on moral conduct, on the heavens, showing the danger, degradation and corruption of sense-desires, and the benefit of renunciation” (V 1:15; D 1:148).

The Nettī-p, pakaraṇa describes the nature of the Dharma by citing a quotation by the Buddha:

I shall teach you the Dharma, good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the ending. Declare the Holy Life, altogether complete, altogether pure, both in the spirit and in the letter.

(Nett 5, M 3:280; cf. V 1:20)

The complexity of the Dharma is increased by the fact that the Buddha’s teaching was “unbounded” or “immeasurable” (*aparimāṇa*) (Nett 8), which points to its uniqueness: as the Buddha set it forth, **it was the supreme, unbounded truth with its own inherent structure and logic**. To comprehend the Dharma, an interpreter must penetrate this logic and grasp the spirit and the letter, the meaning and phrasing, of the Dharma properly. For, incorrectly interpreting the meaning and phrasing of the Dharma leads to the break-up and destruction of the Dharma (A 2:147).

Types of suttas

To explain the logic and structure of the gradual path to the Dharma and its integral nature, the Nettī-p, pakaraṇa and the Peṭakopadesa set forth **classifications of types of persons** to whom the Buddha addressed his teachings and **types of suttas** that the Buddha employed to reach these persons. These typologies are presented in the chapter in each text entitled *sāsana,paṭṭhāna*, “The Pattern of the Dispensation” (Nett ch. 4; Peṭk ch. 2), indicating the central importance that the Nettippakaraṇa and the Peṭakopadesa assign to them. An interpreter who approaches the Dharma without being aware of these distinctions cannot comprehend the Dharma, and will be in danger, the Peṭakopadesa declares, of “mixing up the suttas” (Peṭk 80).

14. TYPES OF PERSONS

In terms of spiritual development, the two texts divide persons into three types: the worldling (*puthujjana*), the learner or initiate (*sekha*) and the adept (*asekha*) (Nett 49; Peṭk 42), all of which refer to levels on the path, from unenlightened beginner to Arhant. **The worldling** is an unenlightened person, lay or monastic, but not yet a learner. [Bond (1988:34) errs here in his explanation of these two typologies by saying that “the first two types clearly represent men in the world and renunciators, respectively. See *Buddhist Dictionary*, under “*puthujjana*”.] **The learner or initiate** is a spiritually developing person, no more worldling, but not yet Arhant. The third category is that of **the adept**, that is, the spiritually developed individual, the Arhant.

Correlated with these types of persons, the Nettippakaraṇa and the Peṭakopadesa identify various types of suttas, that further indicates the nature of the gradual path in the Dharma. Both texts posit **four basic types of suttas** that represent “the foundation of the Dispensation” (Bond, 1988:34) [13]. The four types include suttas dealing with **defilement** (*saṅkilesa*), suttas dealing with **moral conduct** (*vāsanā*), suttas dealing with **penetration** (*nibbedha*) and suttas dealing with **the adept** (*asekha*) (Nett 128; Peṭk 23).

The types of persons are correlated to the basic types of suttas in this manner:

Worldling (<i>puthujjana</i>)	Defilements (<i>saṅkilesa, bhāgiya</i>)
Worldling	Moral conduct (<i>vāsanā, bhāgiya</i>)
Learner (<i>sekha</i>)	Penetration (<i>nibbedha, bhāgiya</i>)

Adept (*asekha*)

Adept (*asekha, bhāgiya*)

[But see Nett 48 where only **the middle two types** are mentioned as basic types. It is interesting to note that most of the verses quoted by the Netti are untraced, suggesting that they came from sources other than the Pali Canon. The Netti contains more than 200 traced and 65 untraced quotations. Ñāṇamoli thinks that some of the untraced quotations suggest that certain books or part of books were available to the Netti's compiler which are no longer so. The Peṭakopadesa has a large number of untraced quotations (17 verses and 27 prose) but of these only one verse and five prose are shared with Netti. Possibly, concludes Ñāṇamoli, the books quoted from were later rejected as uncanonical. (Nett:Ñ 1v).]

Verses and passages like Dhammapada verses 1 and 2 each deal with a specific factor (defilement and moral conduct respectively), but it is more common to find passages that deal with more than one factors. In fact, the Peṭakopadesa gives a list of 8 basic types of suttas, namely:

1. Sutta dealing with defilement.
2. Sutta dealing with moral conduct.
3. Sutta dealing with penetration.
4. Sutta dealing with the adept.
5. Sutta dealing with defilement and moral conduct.
6. Sutta dealing with defilement and penetration.
7. Sutta dealing with defilement, penetration and the adept.
8. Sutta dealing with moral conduct and penetration.

The Netti-p, pakaraṇa expanded this list to 16 (Nett:Ñ xxxvi-xli). We shall however only look at the some basic types of suttas.

15. SUTTA SAMPLES

1. Sutta dealing with defilement

The suttas dealing with **defilement** (*saṅkilesa*) describe the sufferings that persons endure from life to life because of unwholesome desires and unwholesome actions. Defilements here are of three kinds: defilement of craving, defilement of view, and defilement of misconduct. The defilement of craving is purified by calm through mental concentration (*samādhi*); the defilement of view is purified by insight (*paññā*); and the defilement of misconduct is purified by good conduct (*sīla*). (Peṭk 29; Nett 128)

The Nettippakaraṇa (Nett 129) illustrates the sutta dealing with defilement (dealing with the negative side of worldly life) with the first verse of the Dhammapada:

Mind precedes all mental states: mind is chief, mind-made are they.
If a person speaks or acts with an impure (*paduṭṭhena*) mind,
Suffering follows him just as a wheel follows the hoof (of an ox).

(Dh 1; Nett 129; cf Peṭk 165)

2. Sutta dealing with moral conduct

The positive side of worldly life is covered by the type of sutta dealing with **moral conduct** appropriate to one living in the world (*vāsanā*). These suttas deal with **merit** (*puññaṃ*) and the way to earn a favourable rebirth (Nett 48 f.). Under this category of sutta, the Nettippakaraṇa lists the traditional components of the merit-making ritual system in Theravada: giving (*dāna*), moral conduct (*sīla*), and heaven as a goal for rebirth (*sagga*).

The Netti-p, pakaraṇa defines a sutta dealing with moral conduct as “talk on giving, talk on virtue, talk on heaven and the disillusionment with sensual desires, and the benefits of renunciation” (M 1:379; Nett 49).

In short, suttas dealing with moral conduct do not provide instruction about the higher stages of the path but have to do with **virtue as restraint and the rewards of good karma** (Nett 49, 159).

Both the Nettippakaraṇa and the Peṭakopadesa use the second verse of the Dhammapada as an example for **moral conduct**:

Mind precedes all mental states: mind is chief, mind-made are they.
If a person speaks or acts with a pure (*pasannena*) mind,
Happiness accompanies him like a shadow, never departing.

(Dh 2; Nett 133; Peṭk 24)

3. Sutta dealing with penetration

The Netti defines a sutta dealing with penetration as “any displaying of the four Truths” (Nett 49), and quotes the **Bhaddekaratta Sutta**:

Let one not harp on the past,
Nor wonder what the future holds;
The past is gone
The future has not yet come.

But whoever the present state
Sees with insight as it arises,
Let the wise cultivate that insight
That is immovable, unshakable.

Exert yourself this very day!
Who knows death will come tomorrow!
For there is no bargaining
With Death’s great horde.

One who thus lives zealously,
Industrious night and day—
The peaceful Sage truly declares that person to be
“One who delights in auspicious solitude” (*bhadd’eka.ratta*).*

(M 3:187-202; Nett 148 f.)

[On the term *bhadd’eka,ratta*, see Nett:Ñ 198 n821/3.]

4. Sutta dealing with the adept

The Adept (*asekha*) is the Arhant who has attained the fruition of Arhanthood (*arahatta,phala*), the last type of Saints, that is, “the noble individuals” (*ariya,puggala*) or “the eight individuals” (*aṭṭha-purisa,puggala*); the previous seven being the Learners (*sekha*). Here is a description of Nirvana, an example of a passage dealing with *the adept*:

Where water, earth, fire, wind, no foothold find,
There gleam no stars, nor shines the sun,
There glows no moon, yet no darkness reigns.
When a sage, a brahman, has come to know this
For himself through his own experience,
Then he is freed from form and formlessness,
Freed from pleasure and from pain.

(U 9; Nett 150)

5. Sutta dealing with defilement and moral conduct

Here we have an example of a **sutta dealing with defilement and moral conduct**:

It rains hard on what is covered .
It does not rain hard on the uncovered.
So open that which is covered—
Thus it will not rain hard on it.

(V 2:240 = Tha 447 = U 56= SnA 18 ff = Peṭk 25, 202; Nett 153; cf. Dh 14.)

Line ac deal with *defilement*.

Line bd deal with *moral conduct*.

Another example:

Monks, these four persons are found in the world. What four?

He who is in darkness and bound for darkness;
He who is in darkness but bound for light;
He who is in light but bound for darkness;
He who is in light and bound for light.

(S 1:93; A 2:85; Pug 51; Nett 153; Peṭk 25, 202)

Lines ab deal with *defilement*.

Lines cd deal with *moral conduct*.

6. Sutta dealing with defilement and penetration

A simple illustration of a sutta dealing with defilement and penetration is the **Vajirā Sutta**, the last sutta in the Bhikkhuṇī Saṃyutta, which relates Māra's attempt to confuse the nun Vajirā during her noonday meditation.

Sagāthā, vagga

[Māra:]

552 By whom has this being been created?
Where is the maker of the being?
Where has the being arisen?
Where does the being cease?

[Vajirā:]

553 Why now do you assume “a being”?
Māra, is that your speculative view?
This is a heap of mere formations:
Here no being is found.

554 Just as with an assemblage of parts
The word “chariot” is used,
So, when the aggregates exist,

There is the convention “a being”.

555 It’s only suffering that comes to be,
Suffering that stands and falls away.
Nothing but suffering comes to be,
Nothing but suffering ceases. (cf. Miln 27-28)
(S 1:296 f.)

Verses 552, 553ab deal with *defilement*.

Verses 553cd, 554, 555 deal with *penetration*.

7. Sutta dealing with defilement and the adept. (Nett 155)

The Samudda Sutta (abridged):

The eye is a person’s ocean, whose tide is form;
The ear is a person’s ocean, whose tide is sound;
The nose is a person’s ocean, whose tide is smell;
The tongue is a person’s ocean, whose tide is taste;
The body is a person’s ocean, whose tide is touch;
The mind is a person’s ocean, whose tide is thought.

One who has crossed this ocean [of the senses], so hard to cross,
With its dangers of sharks, monsters and waves,
The master of wisdom who has lived the Holy Life,
Reached the world’s end, is called one gone beyond.

(S 4:157)

The prose is *defilement*.

The verse is *the adept*.

8. Sutta dealing with defilement, penetration and the adept

The Dhaniya Sutta:

[Dhaniya:]

No small gain is this indeed,
We* who see the Blessed One:
To you as refuge, O Seeing One, we go,
Be our teacher, O mighty Sage! (Sn 31)

[*Dhaniya and his wife.]

Loyal to you, my wife and I,
In the Well-gone, the Holy Life we’ll fare,
Crossing over both birth and death,
We’ll make an end to paid. (Sn 32)

[Māra the Evil One:]

Those with sons, delight in them,
The herdsman delights in cows:
People rejoice in acquisitions;
Those without acquisitions do not rejoice. (Sn 33)

[The Blessed One:]

Those with sons, grieve over them,
The herdsman grieves over the cows:
People grieve over acquisitions;
Those without acquisitions do not grieve. (Sn 34)

Sn 31-32 deal with *penetration*.

Sn 33, 34abc deal with *defilement*.

Sn 34d deals with *the adept*.

9. Sutta dealing with moral conduct and penetration

Merit will grow for one who gives,
No risk is stored for one restrained.
One who is skilled abandons evil,
With exhaustion of lust, hate, delusion,
One is completely extinguished (of suffering). (U 85)

Lines ab are *moral conduct*.

Lines cde are *penetration*.

16. PERSON AND IDEA

The Nettippakaraṇa gives a further useful classification of the Buddha's method of teaching: teaching in terms of **persons** (*puggalādhiṭṭhāna*) and teaching in terms of **ideas** (*dhammādhiṭṭhāna*) (MA 1:24; PsA 449 (where 4 types are given); Nett 164 f.). A teaching in terms of **persons** is this Udāna verse:

I visited all the quarters with my mind
But found not any dearer than myself;
Likewise is self dear to everyone
Who loves himself will never harm another. (U 47)

Traditional examples of the direct use of **ideas** (ultimate or Dharma language) are found, for example, in the exposition of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path in the First Discourse, or in the verse spoken by Aśvajit to Śāriputra the first time they met. Often enough the Buddha would follow up with analogies and illustrations what he has expressed in the Dharma language (e.g. **Assu Sutta**, S 2:180).

The Assu Sutta (The Discourse on Tears)

At Sāvattī. “Monks, **this cycle of life and rebirth (*saṃsāra*) is without a discoverable beginning**. A first point is not discerned of beings roaming and wandering on hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving. What do you think, monks, which is more: the stream of tears that you have shed as you roamed and wandered in through this long course, weeping and wailing from being united with the disagreeable and separated from the agreeable—this or the waters in the four great oceans?”

“As we understand the Dharma taught by the Blessed One, Venerable Sir, the stream of tears we have shed as you roamed and wandered in through this long course, weeping and wailing from being united with the disagreeable and separated from the agreeable—this alone is more than the waters in the four great oceans.”

“Good, good, monks! It is good that you understand the Dharma taught by me in such a way. **This stream of tears...is more than the waters in the four great oceans**. For a long, monks, you have experienced the death of a mother,...the death of a father,...the death of a brother,...the death of a sister,...the death of a son,...the death of a daughter,...the loss of relatives,...the loss of wealth,...loss through illness; as you have experienced this, weeping and wailing because of being united with the

disagreeable and separated from the agreeable, the stream of tears that you have shed is more than the waters in the four great oceans.

“For what reason? Because, monks, this cycle of life and rebirth is without a discoverable beginning.... It is enough to experience revulsion towards all formations, enough to become dispassionate towards them, enough to be liberated from them.”

(S 2:180)

The Discourse on Tears is said to be presented in the **ultimate language** because the truth reference is a direct one, that is, the discourse relates personal experience as it is without the medium of any imagery or story.

In the **Kasī Bhāradvāja Sutta**, the Buddha meets a ploughman and presents the Dharma in terms of **ideas**, that is, agricultural terms:

Faith is the seed, discipline the rain,
Wisdom is my yoke and plough,
Moral shame the pole, the mind my yoke's tie,
Mindfulness the ploughshare and goad.

(Sn 77)

Such **metaphors** bridge conventional truth (*sammutti,sacca*) with ultimate truth (*param'attha,sacca*), allowing the listener to make a quantum leap from a lower reality of the world to the higher reality of the Dharma. Here is a more difficult example:

Monks, there are these four **bases for spiritual power** (*iddhi,pāda*), when developed, bring one beyond from the near shore to the far shore. What four?

Here, monks, a monk develops the basis for spiritual power that possesses concentration due to **zeal** (*chanda*) accompanied by effort of will (*samādhi,padhāna,sankhāra*).

He develops the basis for spiritual power that possesses concentration due to **energy** (*virīya*) accompanied by effort of will.

He develops the basis for spiritual power that possesses concentration due to **mind** (*citta*) accompanied by effort of will.

He develops the basis for spiritual power that possesses concentration due to **investigation** (*vimamsā*) accompanied by effort of will.

These four bases for spiritual power, when developed, bring one beyond from the near shore to the far shore.

(S 5:254, 268 f.)

Teaching in terms of persons and ideas

Having killed mother and father,
And two kings, and having slaughtered
A realm together with its governor—
The brahman wanders unafflicted (*anīgho*).

(Dh 294)

Lines abc are expressed in terms of *ideas*.

Line d is expressed in terms of *persons*.

This is a “**shock-allegory**”, the allegorical sense being expressed in terms of **ideas** (*dhammādhiṭṭhāna*). The Dhammapada and Nettī Commentaries explain the passage as follows:

“*mother*” = craving, which gives birth to beings in the 3 planes of existence;

- “*father*” = the conceit “I am”, which gives the egoist value to individuality;
“*two kings*” = the eternalist and the annihilationist views, that divide the world between them;
“*realm*” = the 6 pairs of sense-bases beginning with eye-and-form;
“*governor*” = the will and lust for those.

(NettA 212 f.)

[Ñāṇamoli discusses at length the controversy behind this verse at Nett:Ñ 218 n873/2.]

Mahā Pajāpati Gotamī Therī Apadāna

One of the most beautiful examples of the usage of the dichotomy of “worldly language” and “Dharma language” (which the Thai monk, Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, wrote about at length*) is found in **the Mahā Pajāpati Gotamī Therī Apadāna**, of which here is a selection:

[*Buddhadāsa, *Two Kinds of Language*. Tr. Bhikkhu Ariyananda. Repr. “Everyday Language and Dhamma Language” in Donald K. Swearer, 1971b. Bangkok: Sublime Life Mission, 1974.]

27. What I’ve long wished for, | today is fulfilled.
‘Tis time to beat the drum of joy. | What are your tears for, daughters?
28. If there is love for me; | if there is gratitude,
Let all work with firm effort | so that the True Teaching may stand.
29. When asked by me, | the Self-enlightened One gave women the going-forth.
Therefore, just as I rejoice, | so should you do the same.
30. Having thus admonished those women, | preceded by the nuns,
She approached and worshipped the Buddha, | and these words spoke:
31. O Well-gone One, I am your mother; | and you, O Wise Hero, are my father:
O giver of happiness of the True Teaching, | O refuge, I was given birth by you, O Gotama!
32. O Well-gone One, your physical body was nurtured by me;
My Dharma body, flawless, | was nurtured by you.
33. To satisfy a moment’s craving, | you had milk suckled by me.
But I, drinking the milk of Dharma from you, | Had peace without end.
34. For my raising you, | you owe me no debt, Great Sage!
For women desiring children, | may they have a child like you.*
[*To get a son like you | sates all desire for sons. (Walters, 1995:120).]
35. Mothers of kings like Mandhātā | drown in this sea of becoming,
But you, O Son! brought me | Across the ocean of becoming.
36. Queen mother, royal consort: | these names are easy for women to gain,
But “the mother of the Buddha”, this name | is the most difficult to obtain.

(Ap 531)

17. PUN [22(3F)]

A mild shock-allegory can be found in the **Antevāsika Sutta** (quoted at Nm 362, 469):

Monks, this holy life is lived without students and without a teacher (*anantevāsikaṃ idaṃ bhikkhave brahmacariyaṃ vussati anācariyakam*). A monk who has students and a teacher dwells in suffering, not in comfort. A monk who has no students and no teacher dwells happily, in comfort.

And how, monks, does **a monk who has students and a teacher** dwell in suffering, not in comfort? Here, monks, when a monk has seen **a form** with the eye, there arise in him evil unwholesome states, memories and intentions connected with the mental fetters [S 5:61; A 5:13; Vbh 377]. *They dwell within him (antovasanti)*. Since those evil unwholesome states dwell within him, he is called “one who has students” (*santevāsiko*). *They assail him (te naṃ samudācaranti)*. Since evil unwholesome states assail him, he is called “one who has a teacher” (*sācariyako*).

Further, when a monk has heard **a sound** with the ear...smelled **an odour** with the nose...tasted **a taste** with the tongue...felt **a touch** with the body....cognized **a mental state** with the mind.... Since evil unwholesome states assail him, he is called “one who has a teacher”.

It is in this way that a monk who has students and a teacher dwells in suffering, not in comfort.

And how, monks, does **a monk who has no students and no teacher** dwell happily, in comfort? Here, monks, when a monk has seen **a form** with the eye, there do not arise in him any evil unwholesome state, memory or intention connected with the mental fetters. *They do not dwell within him (na antovasanti)*. Since those evil unwholesome states do not dwell within him, he is called “one who has no students” (*anantevāsiko*). *They do not assail him (te na naṃ samudācaranti)*. Since evil unwholesome states do not assail him, he is called “one who has no teacher” (*anācariyako*).

Further, when a monk has heard **a sound** with the ear...smelled **an odour** with the nose...tasted **a taste** with the tongue...felt **a touch** with the body....cognized **a mental state** with the mind.... Since evil unwholesome states do not assail him, he is called “one who has no teacher”.

It is in this way that a monk who has no students and no teacher dwells happily, in comfort.

Monks, this holy life is lived without students and without a teacher. A monk who has students and a teacher dwells in suffering, not in comfort. A monk who has no students and no teacher dwells happily, in comfort.

(S 4:136 f.)

There is a pun on two Pali words in this sutta. A “student” (*antevāsi*) is literally “one who dwells within”; thus one for whom defilements do not dwell within (*na antovasanti*) is said to be “without students”. The word “teacher” (*ācariya*) is here playfully connected with the verb to assail (*samudācarati*); thus one unassailed by defilements is said to be “without a teacher”. The Commentary here glosses *anantāvesikaṃ* (one who has no students) with *anto vasana, kilesa, virahitaṃ* (devoid of defilements dwelling within), and *anācariyakam* with *ācaraṇa, kilesa, virahitaṃ* (devoid of the “assailing” defilements).

18. INTENTIONAL LANGUAGE

Intentional language (*saṃdhā, bhāṣā*; Tib. dgongs-pa) or *saṃdhyā, bhāṣā* (lit. “twilight language”) is not only a protection against the profanation of the sacred through intellectual curiosity, and misuse of yogic

methods and psychic forces by the ignorant and the uninitiated, but has its origin mainly in the fact that everyday language is incapable of expressing the highest experiences of the spirit (which could at best be hinted at through similes and paradoxes) (Govinda 1960:53, 102).

Intentional language is neither symbolic in the conventional sense (for then even a non-Buddhist intellectual could “translate” it) nor is it ultimate (insofar as it has been written down and therefore subject to mere intellectual interpretation). It is a “third” language, a *tertium quid*, between the conventional expression and the ultimate understanding of the Dharma.

A verse in the Dhammapada makes an interesting use of intentional language in a very dramatic situation. It was spoken by the Buddha in connection with Uggasena, an acrobat, while he was precariously poised on his head on top of a high pole:

Let go of the front. Let go of the back.	<i>muñca pure muñca pacchato</i>
Let go of the middle. Crossing to the far shore,	<i>majjhe muñca bhavassa pāragu</i>
With the mind released from everything,	<i>sabbattha vimutta, manāso</i>
Do not again undergo birth and decay.	<i>na puna jāti, jaraṃ upehisi.</i>

(Dh 348)

Conceptual language

The Dharma language, however, is at best “conceptual” to the uninitiated or unenlightened, especially the intellectually-inclined. Indeed, when the Buddha teaches using Dharma language, it sounds the same to all his listeners but means different a thing to each of them!

In a remarkable case, the Buddha uses intentional language to communicate with **a weaver’s daughter of Ālavī** (DhA 3:170 ff). When the Buddha gazed at her, she knew that he wanted her to approach him. The following dialogue—called the **the Four Questions**—ensued before the congregation:

Buddha: Where do you come from, young girl?
 Girl: I know not, Bhante.
 Buddha: Where are you going?
 Girl: I know not, Bhante.
 Buddha: Do you not know?
 Girl: I know, Bhante.
 Buddha: Do you know?
 Girl: I know not, Bhante.

(DhA 3:170 ff.)

The four questions mean respectively:

“Where were you before you were reborn here?”
 “Where will you be reborn?”
 “Do you know that you will surely die?” and
 “When will you die?”

(DhA 3:172 f).

No one in the crowd who “listened” to the Buddha only conceptually understood his words—but the weaver’s daughter understood him intuitively, answered the questions correctly and gained the Eye of Wisdom (*prajñā, cakṣu*) that sees things on the ultimate (*paramârtha*) level.

19. TEMPERAMENT AND ABILITY

In addition to the three levels of persons [14], the Peṭakopadesa and the Netti-p, pakaraṇa also classify persons according to their nature or **temperaments** (*carita*) and their **abilities**. In terms of temperament

(*carita*) and abilities, the *Netti-papakaraṇa* and the *Peṭakopadesa* divide persons into two basic groups: persons of **desire-temperament** (*tanhā, carita*) and persons of **view-temperament** (*diṭṭhi, carita*), or more simply, the lustful type and the intellectual type (Nett 109). This classification scheme assumes that persons at each level of the path may have varying spiritual needs, propensities and abilities.

A person's temperament determines what kind of defilements that person will have. For example, the view-temperament person will have ignorance as a defilement (Nett 109). Temperament also determines how people seek release unsuccessfully—for example, by asceticism in the case of the view-temperament person, and by the pursuit of sensual pleasures in the case of a person of desire-temperament (Peṭk 242).

Another important classification scheme, a more elaborate one, posits **three types**: lusting temperament (*rāga, carita*), hating temperament (*dosa, carita*) and deluded temperament (*moha, carita*) (Nett 190). The *Niddesa* and *Visuddhi, magga*, building on these threefold typology, present **six types** of persons:

- (1) Lustful temperament (*rāga, carita*).
- (2) Hating temperament (*dosa, carita*).
- (3) Deluded temperament (*moha, carita*).
- (4) Faithful temperament (*saddhā, carita*).
- (5) Intellectual temperament (*buddhi, carita*).
- (6) Speculative temperament (*vitakka, carita*).

(Nm 359, 453; Nc 138; Vism 101)

In terms of **learning ability**, the *Nettipakaraṇa* employs a classification system dividing persons into three types, a system also found in the *Aṅguttara* and the *Puggala, paññatti*:

- (1) The intuitive learner or those who learn from a condensed or brief teaching (*ugghaṭitaññū*).
- (2) The intellectual or those who learn from a teaching that is expanded (*vipañcitaññū*).
- (3) The guidable or those who learn through guidance (*neyya*).
- (4) The rote learner or those who merely master the letter of the text [without knowing its meaning] (*pada, parama*).

(A 2:135; Pug 41; Nett 7, 125)

Interestingly, the fourth—the rote learner (one who masters only the letter of the text)—is not mentioned in the *Nettipakaraṇa* list. This is probably because the *Netti* sees the necessity of mastering both the letter and the spirit of the text.

20. SPIRITUAL PENETRATION

Through accumulating enough merit and through mental absorption (*jhāna*), a practitioner gains entry into the stream leading to supramundane states. He loses his defilements but retains their distinctive characters. The person of desire-temperament becomes a **faith-follower** (*saddhānusāri*) and the view-temperament person becomes a **dhamma-follower** (*dhammānusāri*) (Peṭk 243; Nett 112). These attainments further shape his rebirth and development on the path.

At the **penetration stage**, the dhamma-follower becomes one who gains knowledge by a condensed teaching (*ugghaṭitaññū*), and the faith-follower becomes one who is merely guidable (*neyya*). The one who learns from an expanded teaching (*vipañcitaññū*), results when the two previous knowledge types are divided further according to whether they possess dull or keen faculties. The ones who learn from a condensed teaching and have dull faculties and those who are guidable with keen faculties constitute the third or “expanded” teaching type (Peṭk 30).

These three knowledges further decide what kind of **stream-winner** the person becomes. The condensed teaching person becomes a **single-seeder** (*eka, bījī*), the most advanced of stream-winners. The guidable

person becomes a **clan-to-clan** (*kolaṅkola*), and the learner by expanded teaching becomes a **seven-at-most** (*satta-k,khattum,parama*), a stream-winner who requires the maximum time to complete the path. (A 1:233, 4:380, 5:120; Pug 3, 16, 74). Similarly, on higher levels, there are various grades of non-returners (*anāgami*) and Arhants. (Bond, 1988:39 f.).

[See *Buddhist Dictionary*, under “Ariyapuggala”.]

21. EARLY BUDDHISM AND MAHAYANA

Theravada, as a descendent of early **Nikāya Buddhism**, has a definite and common corpus of sacred literature, the **Pali Canon**, orally handed down since the 1st Council, as the final authority. The difference amongst the various orders of the Theravada—that is, between the Mahānikāya and the Thammayut in Thailand, or between the Sudhamma and the Shwegon in Burma, or amongst the various nikāyas in Sri Lanka—are their interpretation of the **Vinaya**, not of the Dharma.

The Mahayana, on the other hand, is a **scribal tradition**: they rely on written texts, but not all the texts have equal authority since each school within the Mahayana rely on a particular text or group of texts. Candrakīrti looks to the Akṣaya,mati Nirdeśa Sūtra; for Tiantai it is the Lotus Sutra; for the Huayan, the Avataṃsaka Sūtra; for the Yogācāra, the Saṃdhi,nirmocana; and Kukai’s Shingon school centres around Tantric texts. What keeps these schools apart, in theory at least, is **their interpretation of the Dharma**, and in many cases, the Vinaya, too.

As such, in contrast to the Four Great Authorities of Nikāya Buddhism that relies on **personal authority**, the Mahayana relies on **scriptural authority**, as found in such guides as the **Catuḥpratisaraṇa Sūtra**:

Rely on the teaching, not the teacher.

Rely on the meaning, not the letter.

Rely on the definitive meaning (*nīṭārtha*), not the interpretive meaning (*neyārtha*).

Rely on insight (*jñāna*), not on sense-consciousness (*vijñāna*).

(Catuḥpratisaraṇa Sūtra)

22. THE FOUR REFUGES

[In this section I have mainly relied on Lamotte’s classic and useful essay, “The Assessment of Textual Interpretation in Buddhism” (1988), giving additional notes where appropriate.]

The spirit of the Dharma

In order to understand what the Buddha has taught, **we need to interpret his teachings**, by way of personal scrutiny (*ehi,passiko*). For the Mahayana, the tools for this scrutiny are **the Four Refuges** (*catuḥ pratisaraṇa*), the four rules for textual interpretation, as given in the *Catuḥpratisaraṇa Sūtra* [21]. The purpose of this sutra is to ensure “the subordination of human authority to **the spirit of the dharma**, the letter to the spirit, the sūtra of provisional meaning to the sūtra of precise meaning, and discursive consciousness to direct knowledge” (Lamotte, 1988:12).

(1) The doctrine (Dharma) is the refuge, not the person (*purusa*).

This rule not only summarizes the criteria of the Mahāpadesa Sutta [9], but since the Buddha has attained final Nirvana, he cannot be consulted; still, it is insufficient to call upon the authority of the Sangha, or of a group of monks, much less, a single elder. For a text to be accepted as the “word of the Buddha”, **it must also be found in the Sūtra (*sūtra’vatarati*), appear in the Vinaya (*vinaya saṃdṛśyate*), and not contradict the nature of things (*dharmatāṃ ca na vilomayati*).**

In other words, **the validity of any text or doctrine cannot depend on any human authority, no matter how respectable** or, as the Kesaputtiya Sutta puts it, “do not accept anything merely out of respect for the recluse (who teaches it) (*mā samaṇo no garū ti*, A 1:190). Experience shows that human evidence is contradictory and changeable.

Adherence to a truth should be based on **personal reasoning** (*yukti*), on what one has oneself **known** (*jñāta*), **seen** (*dr̥ṣṭa*) and **understood** (*vidita*) (cf. *nanu bhikkhave yad eva tumhākaṃ sāmaṇ ñātaṃ sāmaṇ diṭṭhaṃ sāmaṇ viditaṃ tad eva vadethā ti*, Do you not, monks, speak only of what you have known, seen and understood for yourself? M 1:265). On the other hand, says the Bodhisattva, bhūmi,

[The beginner] merely holds on to the profound texts which his intelligence cannot fathom. He tells himself these are truths within the reach of the Buddha and not within the reach of our intelligence, and he refrains from rejecting them. In this way, he is protected from any fault.”

(Bodhisattva ,bhūmi 108).

If one cannot understand it, it is only then that **one should at least provisionally hold on to it with faith**, since “by holding on the Holy Dharma, one does not perish” (Sūtrālaṃkāra 138).

(2) The spirit (*artha*) is the refuge, not the letter (*vyañjana*).

The spirit is one, but the letter is many; the meaning is single but the words are multiple and variable. The Four Noble Truths taught by the Buddha have **only one acceptable meaning, but they can be explained in an infinite number of ways** (S 5:430). Although the spirit takes precedence, the Teaching is good and perfect in its spirit (*sātthaṃ*) and its letter (*sa, vyañjanaṃ*) (V 1:20). The Sūtrālaṃkāra explains that the meaning is good because it applies to conventional truth and to absolute truth, and that its letter is good because the phrases and syllables are intelligible (Sūtrālaṃkāra 82).

The early texts praise the good monk “**who correctly understands the meaning and correctly applies the words**”, and his colleagues consider it profitable and advantageous to have a fellow-monk who is an expert in the spirit and the letter of the teaching (D 3:129). **A good speaker does not mistake over either the spirit or the letter** (A 2:139).

There are some foolish persons who learn the Dhamma, Sutta, Geyya, and so on by heart but once they have learned them by heart **they do not examine the meaning** in order to understand the texts. Those texts, the meaning of which they have not examined in order to understand them, do not please them and the only advantage they gain from their memorization is to be able to contradict others and to give quotations. All the same, they do not reach the goal for the sake of which they memorized the Dhamma. Those texts which they do not understand will, for a long time, earn them much sorrow and suffering. Why? Because those texts have not been understood.

(Alagaddūpama Sutta, M 1:133)

However, those with an impeccable parrot-like memory can at least gain **the merit of being able to transmit the text materially just as it is**. There is a problem here should there be textual errors; then, such a monk would be one of those who “memorize texts which have not been understood and the phrases and syllables of which are wrongly arranged” (A 2:147, 3:178). Such monastics and laypeople conduce to the confusion and destruction of the True Dharma (ib.). For: **“If the phrases and syllables are wrongly arranged, the meaning in turn is impossible to discover”** (Nett 21).

That **the spirit should have priority over the letter**—that the letter is dispensable—is confirmed by the famous meeting between Śāriputra and Aśvajit, one of the Buddha’s first five disciples:

As he was standing at a respectful distance, the wanderer Sāriputta spoke thus to the venerable Assaji: “Venerable Sir, your faculties are quite pure, your complexion is very bright, very clear. On account of whom, Venerable Sir, have you gone forth, or who is your teacher, or whose Dhamma do you profess?”

“There is, friend, a great recluse, a son of the Sakyans...this Lord is my teacher and I profess this Lord’s Dhamma.”

“But what is the doctrine...?”

“Now, friend, I am new, not long gone forth, fresh to this Doctrine and Discipline. I am not able to teach you Dhamma in full, but I can tell you its spirit (*attha*) briefly.”

Then the wanderer Sāriputta spoke thus to the venerable Assaji: “So be it, Venerable Sir, tell me little or tell me much, but in any case explain to me its spirit. I want just its spirit. So why should you be preoccupied with the letter?”

Then the venerable Assaji uttered this formula (*pariyāya*) of Dhamma to the wanderer Sāriputta:

***Those things which arise from a cause, their cause the Tathāgata has told,
And their cessation, too—thus spoke the Great Sage.***

When the wanderer Sāriputta had heard this formula of Dhamma, there arose in him the Dhamma-eye, dustfree, stainless, that “Whatever is of the nature to arise, all that is of the nature to cease.” [Sāriputta became a Stream-winner.]

(V 1:40)

The letter indicates the spirit just as a fingertip indicates an object or destination, but since the spirit is alien to syllables (*akṣara, varjita*), the letter is unable to express it in full. A purely academic or literal exegesis would clearly fail. The Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra states this at great length, of which the essence is this:

O Mahāmati, the son or daughter of good family should not interpret the spirit according to the letter (*yathārutārthābhīniveśa*) since reality is not connected with syllables (*nīrakṣaratvāt tattvasya*). One should not act like those who look at the finger (*aṅguliprekṣaka*): it is as if someone pointed out something with his finger to someone else and the latter persisted in staring at the fingertip... The spirit alone (*vivikta*) is a cause of Nirvana, while the letter, which is bound up with discrimination (*vikalpa, sambaddha*) favours samsara.

(Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra 196)

(3) The sūtra of direct meaning (*nītārtha*) is the refuge, not the sūtra of indirect meaning (*neyārtha*).

In the Pali Canon, the two kinds of suttas are the ***nīt’attha*** (Skt. *nītārtha*) [$\sqrt{\text{ni}}$, to infer + *artha/attha* = meaning], “those of direct meaning”, and the ***neyy’attha*** (Skt. *neyārtha*), “those of indirect meaning” (D 3:127 f.; A 1:60).

[See *Abhidharma,kośa* ch. 9, Poussin vol. 9, p. 247 = Pruden 1324 & n43; *Vyākhyā ad* 3:28.]

The Pali Commentaries illustrate the two kinds of suttas, thus: “A sutta of the form ‘There is a person, O monks’, ‘There are two persons, O monks’, ‘There are three persons, O monks’... etc., is a sutta of **indirect meaning**. Here although the Perfectly Enlightened One speaks of ‘There is one person, O monks’, etc., its sense has to be inferred since there is no person in the absolute sense (*param’atthato*)... One should speak of a sutta of **direct meaning** (as of the form), ‘This is impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self.’...” (AA 2:118; also AA 1:94, KvuA:JPTS 1889: 34).

(3a) Flexible exegesis

Occasionally, various teachings appear to contradict each other. For example, the Bimbisāra Sūtra states: “Foolish worldlings (*bāla,prthagjana*) who have not learned (*aśrutavat*) take the self for their self and are attached to the self. But there is not self (*ātman*) or anything pertaining to the self (*ātmīya*); the self is empty and anything pertaining to the self is empty” (Zhong ahan jing T no. 26, 11.498b10). This passage, which denies the soul, seems to contradict another canonical passage, where it is stated in connection with the birth of the Buddha: “An individual (*eka,puggala*) born in the world is born for the welfare of many” (A 1:22).

As such, for fear of misrepresenting the Buddha, the Sarvāstivādins, followed by the Mahayana scholars, preferred to accept **that certain sutras should be taken literally while others should be interpreted.** As such, it is clear that the Buddha and his enlightened disciples uttered words which were not in accordance with meaning (*ayārtha*), that sutras spoken by the Buddha himself were not all direct in meaning (*nītārtha*) and that the Buddha himself said that certain sutras were indirect in meaning (*anītārtha*) (Vasumitra & Bhavya, theses 49 & 50 of the Sarvāstivāda).

[Cf. Jiryō Masuda, “Origin and Doctrine of Early Indian Buddhist Schools” in *Asia Major* 2 1925:1-78, the Eng. tr with nn of the Samaya,bhedoparacana,cakra, an account of Nikāya sects and their tenets. M. Walleser, *Die Sekten des alten Buddhismus* [The Sects of Early Buddhism], Heidelberg, 1927.]

The need for a **flexible and fluid exegesis** is clearly stated by Nāgārjuna in his Mahā,prajñā,pāramitā Śāstra:

The Dharma of the Buddha is immense, like the ocean. Depending on the aptitude of beings, it is expounded in various ways: sometimes it speaks of existence and sometimes of nonexistence, eternity or impermanence, suffering or happiness, the self or not-self; sometimes it teaches the diligent practice of the threefold activity [of body, speech and mind] which includes all good states (*dharmā*), and sometimes it teaches that all dharmas are intrinsically inactive.

Such are the manifold and diverse teachings. An ignorant person who hears them considers them to be perversions, but the wise man who penetrates the threefold teaching [Sūtra, Abhidharma, Emptiness] of the Dharma knows that all the words of the Buddha are the true Dharma and do not contradict each other...

Whoever has not grasped the rule of the Perfection of Wisdom (*prajñā,pāramitā*) [will encounter numerous contradiction in the interpretation of the Dharma]: if he takes up the teaching of the Abhidharma, he will lapse into nihilism; if he takes up the teaching of the [Sūtra-]Piṭaka, he will [sometimes] lapse into realism and [sometimes] into nihilism.

(Lamotte tr. 1949:1074, 1095)

The Buddha introduced the distinction between sutras of direct meaning (*nītārtha*) and sutras of indirect meaning (*neyārtha*) (D 3:127 f.; A 1:60) to facilitate the needs of exegesis or textual explanation. **A nītārtha sutra is one whose meaning is direct and clear** (*vibhaktārtha*; cf. Abhk 3:75). When taught without any ulterior motive (*niḥparyāya,deśita*), it can and should be taken literally.

In contrast, a **neyārtha sutra is one of which the meaning is indirect and needs to be teased out** (*yassa attho netabbo*, AA 2:118), because it is intentional (*ābhiprāyika*) and derives from a motivation (*paryāya.deśita*). The *neyārtha* sutras constitute the *saṃdhā,vacana* or *sandhya,vacana*, the intentional teachings of the Buddha.

(3b) Direct and indirect sutras

Lamotte (1988:17) raises **three questions** in connection with the *neyārtha* sutras: Should they be accepted? How can they be distinguished from *nītārtha* sutras? How should they be correctly interpreted?

1. The *neyārtha* sutras are just as much the word of the Buddha as the *nītārtha* sutras. They should therefore be accepted, and to reject them is to create karmic impediment to spiritual development (*saddharma, pratikṣepa, karm'āvaraṇa*). To reject the *neyārtha* sutras is to reject the Three Jewels (Sarva-dharma, vaipulya, saṃgraha Sūtra, quoted in the Śikṣā, samuccaya, 95).

2. The ancient authorities are silent on the differences between the *nītārtha* and *neyārtha* sutras. As such, it is clear that the distinction is based on purely subjective criteria, which explains why, quite frequently, the scholars are not in agreement. Nāgārjuna (Mpps 1:539-540), for example, considers sutras to be of direct meaning when the allegation are obvious and easily understood, and indirect sutras are those which through skillful means (*upāya*) say things which at first seem to be incorrect and which demand an explanation.

For example, the Dānānisamsa Sutta on the five advantages of giving is a *nītārtha* sutra because **it is obvious that giving is meritorious.**

He is beloved and pleasant to the people. The wise and good enjoy his company. His good name spreads around. He strays not from the householder's discipline. On the breaking up of the body after death, he is reborn in a happy heavenly state.

(A 3:41)

In contrast, another sutra, which attributes the same advantages of giving to teaching, is *neyārtha* because it is less clear than teaching, which cannot be translated by material giving, is as meritorious as almsgiving. However, after due reflection, the teacher has the same merit as the donor since, by praising almsgiving in all manner, he is combating his own avarice and that of others.

For Buddhaghosa, the sutra of indirect meaning is usually expounded in terms of **persons** (*puggalā-dhiṭṭhāna desanā*) while the sutra of direct meaning is always expounded in terms of **ideas** (*dhammādhiṭṭhāna desanā*) (MA 1:24; PsA 449). The sutras of the Eka, puggala Vagga (A 1:20), for example, involving individuals are *neyārtha* because “in the absolute sense (*param'atthato*) no individual exists” (MA 2:118).

In contrast, **sutras which deal with impermanence, suffering and non-self (e.g. the Uppāda Sutta) are *nītārtha*,** since “whether or not the Tathagatas appear in the world, it remains a fact, a fixed and necessary condition of existence, that all conditioned things are impermanent...that all conditioned things are subject to suffering...that all things are not-self.” (A 1:286).

The **Samādhirāja Sūtra** echoes a similar idea: “Whoever knows the value of texts with a direct meaning knows the way in which emptiness has been taught by the Sugata [Well-gone One]. However, wherever there is a matter of an individual, being or person, he knows that all those texts are to be taken as having an indirect meaning.” (Samādhirāja Sūtra 2:78).

3. The Mahayana attaches the greatest importance to sutras of indirect meaning and which constitute the intentional teaching of the Buddha. The expression “intentional teaching” is rendered in Pali as *sandhāya bhāsita* (M 1:503; J 1:203, 274, 2; 177; PvA 87, 89, 110) that enables us to “discover the profound intentions of the Buddha” (*gambhīrārtha, saṃdhi, nirmocanā*, Bodhisattva, bhūmi 303).

In his Mahā,prajñā,pāramitā Śāstra, Nāgārjuna (Mpps 1:26-46) lists **four points of view** (*siddhānta*), only the last of which is **absolute** (*paramārthika*); the other three pertain to **conventional** (*saṃvṛti*) truth. In the Poṭṭhapāda Sutta, the Buddha declares to the householder Citta that he uses words, terms and language as a skilful means:

Citta, these are merely names, expressions, turns of speech, designations in common use in the world, which the Tathāgata uses without misapprehending them.

(D 1:202)

This is an important reference to **the two truths** referred to in the Dīgha Commentary as “**conventional speech**” (*sammuti,kathā*) and “**ultimately true speech**” (*param’attha,kathā*). It is important to correctly discern the level of truth at which any statement is made. The Majjhima Commentary on the Anaṅgana Sutta (M 5) gives the following untraced verse:

Two truths the Buddha, best of speakers, declared:
Conventional and ultimate—no third can be found.
Terms agreed are true by usage of the world;
Words of ultimate significance are true
In terms of mental states (*dhammānaṃ*).
Thus the Lord, the Teacher,
Skilled in the world’s speech, can use it, and not lie.

(MA 1:138)

[See also Maurice Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, Kandy: BPS, 1995: 31 f.]

(3c) The Buddha’s expedience

The Buddha did not allow conventional language to limit him in reaching out to his audience. The Buddha’s expedience in teaching others is shown in the following ways:

1. From the worldly point of view (*laukika siddhānta*). The Buddha often adopts the current idiom and does not hesitate to speak in terms of beings (*sattva*) who die and are reborn in the five destinies [*pañca,gati*: the hells, the animal kingdom, the hungry ghost realm, the human world, and the heavenly world] (e.g. D 1:82). He extols the role of the individual (*eka,puggala*) who is born into the world for the joy, happiness and benefit of the many (A 1:22).

2. From the personal point of view (*prātipauruṣika siddhānta*). The Buddha often tries to adapt his teaching to the intellectual and moral disposition (*āśaya*) of his listeners. To those who do not believe in the afterlife but that everything ends at death (i.e. the materialists), he discourses on immortality and karma that come to fruition in other worlds and in a future time (the Nidāna Suttas, A 1:132). To Moliya Phagguna, who believes in the eternity of the self, he teaches the non-existence of a person as a thinking being conditioned by “food” (Phagguna Sutta, S 2:13). Such is the Buddha’s skillful means (*upaya*).

3. From the remedial point of view (*prātipākṣika siddhānta*). The Buddha is the healer of universal suffering who gives his remedies according to the disease: to the sensual (*rāga,carita*), he teaches the contemplation of the impurities of a decomposing corpse (*aśubha,bhāvanā*); to those hate-filled (*dveṣacarita*), he prescribes thoughts of lovingkindness (*maitrī,citta*), thinking of near and dear ones; to the deluded (*mohacarita*), he advises reflection on interdependent origination (*pratītya,samutpāda*).

(3e) Intentions & motivations

Mahayana scholars have attempted to classify the intentions and motivations which guided the Buddha in his teachings (Mahāvyyutpatti nos. 1666-1675; Sūtrālamkāra 82-84; Mahāyāna,saṅgraha (Lamotte) 2:

129-132). They counted a total of **four intentions** (*abhiprāya*) and **four motivations** (*abhisam̐dhi*). Since the two lists overlap, it is best to review them together for the ease of explanation:

1. Someone who might be tempted to scorn the Buddha (*buddhe 'vajñā*) is informed by the latter that, long ago, he was the fully self-enlightened Buddha Vipāśyin (*aham eva sa tena kālena Vipāśyi samyak, sambuddha 'bhūvam*). Obviously, the present Buddha Śākyamuni is not the Buddha Vipāśyin of the past, but he resembles him in all points because both the Buddhas participate in the same body of doctrine (*dharma, kāya*). By expressing himself in that way, the Buddha meant to point out **the similarity** (*samatā-bhiprayā*).

2. The literal interpretations of the texts (*yathārutārtha, grāha*) does not lead to a comprehension of the Dharma but, in fact, is equal to scorning the Dharma (*dharme 'vajñā*). The Buddha therefore teaches that one should have served Buddhas as numerous as the grains of sand in the Ganges in order to arrive at an understanding of the Mahayana (*iyato gaṅga, nadīva, lukāsamanā, buddhān paryupāśya mahāyāne 'vabodha utpadyate*). This is a **hyperbole** since, in order to understand the Mahayana, it is not necessary to have served an infinite number of Buddhas. Nevertheless, prolonged effort is required. Hence, the intention of the Buddha is to speak of another thing (*arthāntarābhiprāya*).

3. The lazy (*kusīda*) who do not resolutely practise the means of deliverance are told by the Buddha that those who make an aspiration with a view to the Happy Realm state will be reborn there (*ye sukhāvatyāṃ praṇidhānaṃ kariṣyati te tatropapatsyante*). In reality, matters are more complicated but every effort, however minimal, will have its fruition in due course. Here, the Buddha is referring to **another time** (*kālāntarābhiprāya*).

4. A virtuous action which is praiseworthy in a beginner appears insufficient on the part of a disciple who is more advanced in perfection. In order to combat satisfaction (*alpa, samtuṣṭi*), it happens that the Buddha scorns a virtue in one person which he has just praised in another (*yat tad eva kuśalamūlaṃ kasyacid praśamsate kasyacid vigarhate*). Here, he is taking into account **the disposition of each individual** (*pudgal 'āśayābhiprāya*).

In order to cure **the sensual** (*rāga, carita*), the Buddha depicts the splendour of the Buddha-fields to them. To discomfit **the proud** (*māna, carita*), he describes the supreme perfection of the Buddhas. He encourages those who are **tortured by remorse** (*kaukr̥tya*) by telling them that those who have committed offences against the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas will indeed end by going to the heavens (*ye buddha, -bodhisattveṣvapakāraṃ kariṣyanti te sarve svargopagā bhaviṣyanti*). Such declarations should obviously not be taken seriously, but interpreted as is appropriate in the light of the sutras of direct meaning.

(3f) Word play

Furthermore, the Buddha sometimes uses **paradox and word plays**. All this goes to show that conventional language, because of its limiting nature, should at times be taken lightly, but **never to be taken literally**. Some examples taken from the **Mahāyāna, saṃgraha** (2:224-231) are sufficient to illustrate these stylistic methods:

“*The Bodhisattva practises almsgiving extensively when he does not give anything.*” It should be understood that the Bodhisattva does not give anything, because he identifies himself mentally with all those who give (by the mental state of altruistic joy, *muditā*), because he has already given away everything he possessed and, finally, because he practises the threefold pure giving, in which no distinction is made between the donor, the beneficiary and the gift.

“*The Bodhisattva is the supreme slayer of living beings (prāṇātīpātīn).*” A fanciful etymology informs us that the Bodhisattva is a *prāṇātīpātīn* insofar as *prāṇ[inaḥ saṃsārato] 'tīpātīyati*, that is, he “cuts beings off from the rounds of rebirth” by ensuring their Nirvana.

Pun. The best known of word plays is the **pun** [17], that is, a play on words, sounds and meanings that are similar. It is useful as a point of reference which the Buddha uses to correct a wrong view of his audience. Here is a delightful example from the Nikāyas of how the Buddha puns on various negative words giving them a positive turn.

Once in the town of Verañjā, a Brahmin named **Verañja** went to the Buddha and accused him of various improprieties. [He was called Verañja because he was born and lived in Verañjā. His real name, according to Buddhaghosa, was Udaya.]

After scolding the Buddha for not showing respect to old Brahmins, Verañja, made the following accusations:

That the Buddha lacked **taste**:

Buddha: *Yes, the recluse Gotama lacks taste. He has abandoned all tastes for forms, sounds, perfumes, tastes, and tangible things...*

That the Buddha lacked **class** (*nibbhoga*, i.e. social status) [pun on *bhoga* = property, wealth]:

Buddha: *Yes, the recluse Gotama lacks class. All class in terms of forms, sounds, perfumes, tastes, and tangible things, he has abandoned.*

That the Buddha affirmed **the theory of inaction** (*akiriya.vāda*):

Buddha: *Yes, Brahmin, I proclaim inaction in respect of misconduct of body, speech and mind; I proclaim inaction in respect to all evil and bad things.*

That the Buddha was **an annihilationist** (*uccheda.vāda*):

Buddha: *Yes, I proclaim the annihilation (cutting off) of lust, hatred, and ignorance, annihilation of all kind of evil and bad things.*

That the Buddha was one who **loathes** (*jegucchī*)...

That the Buddha was **an abolitionist** (*venayika*), a nihilist...

That the Buddha was **an ascetic practicing mortification** (*tapassī*)...

That the Buddha was **against rebirth** (*apagabbha*)...

Buddha: *Yes, the recluse Gotama is against rebirth. He has abandoned all conditions for future birth and rebirths.*

(A 4:172 ff.)

A Śāstra of the Tantric tradition dares to claim that **the profound attributes of the Buddha correlate with craving (*rāga*), hatred (*dveṣa*) and delusion (*moha*)**. With right understanding, this is not slighting the Buddha, but a profound truth, since all beings, involved as they are with passion, are basically identical to the Buddha and destined to win enlightenment.

(4) Direct knowledge (*jñāna*) is the refuge, not discursive consciousness (*vijñāna*).

This last exegetical principle, which summarizes the previous three, shows that sound hermeneutics is based not on a literal (as such, theoretical) understanding of the Noble Truths, but on **direct knowledge**. The **Bodhisattva, bhūmi** gives very good commentary on this point:

The Bodhisattva attaches great importance to the knowledge of the **direct comprehension** [of the Truths], and not to mere discursive consciousness of the letter of the meaning, which [consciousness] arises from listening and reflecting. Understanding that what should be known through **knowledge arising from meditation** (*bhāvanā*) cannot be recognized only through discursive consciousness arising from listening and reflecting, he abstains from rejecting or denying the teachings given by the Tathāgata, profound as they are.

(Bodhisattva, bhūmi 257)

(4a) Three kinds of wisdom [2]

The Buddhist truths which the disciple seeks to penetrate can be the object of the **threefold wisdom** (*prajñā*) arising from listening (*śruta, mayī*), reflecting (*cintā, ayī*) or meditation (*bhāvanā, mayī*) (D 3:219; Vbh 324). The first two are **worldly (*laukika*) and defiled (*s'āsrava*) discursive consciousnesses (*viññāna*)**, since in the ultimate analysis, they remain defiled by craving, hatred and delusion.

Wisdom through listening (*śruta, mayī prajñā*), that is, rote, book study or academic learning, arises from the oral teachings, written texts and digital files which one accepts on faith and is founded on confidence in the word of the Buddha. This is the wisdom and faith that caused **General Sīha** to say: “That almsgiving bears fruit here below I do not believe, I know;...but that the giver is reborn in heaven, **I believe from the Buddha.**” (A 4:82). The object of that wisdom is **the word (*nāman*) of the letter**, such as it is expounded by the Buddha.

Wisdom through reflecting (*cintā, mayī prajñā*), which follows the preceding, is a personal and reasoned understanding of the Truths and meaning (*artha*) of which it grasps and not knowing just the letter. Basing themselves on reflection, the monks, as recorded in the **Mahā Taṇhā, saṅkhaya Sutta**, declare: “If we can speak this or that, it is not through respect for the Master, but because **we ourselves have recognized, seen and understood it.**” (M 1:265) [2].

The first two types of wisdom are **dialectical** (purely logical and argumentative) in nature, that as such remained blemished by delusion. They are useful only as **a preparatory exercise** (*prayoga*) by worldlings (*prthagjana*) who are not yet committed to the path of Nirvana. They are of only provisional value and are meant to be rejected after use.

In this connection, the Nikāyas give **the parable of the raft**. Once you have been rid of the self-notion, you do not even need the notion of not-self. After all, they are all notions. The purpose of the teaching of nonself is to get rid of the self-notion. It is a skilful means used by the Buddha as declared in the famous parable of the raft given in the Alagaddūpama Sutta (M 22) and the Mahā, taṇhā, saṅkhaya Sutta (M 38)::

Monks, I shall show you how the Dharma is similar to **a raft**, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping.

(M 1:134, 260)

This famous parable continues the same argument against the misuse of learning. One who is preoccupied with using the Dharma to stir up controversy and win debates carries the Dharma around on his head instead of using it to cross the flood.

The **Mahā, vibhāṣā** (T no. 1545, 42.217c-81.420a) and the Abhidharma, kośa (6:143) compare the first kind of wisdom (through listening) to **a swimming aid** that is constantly gripped by a person who does not know how to swim. The second is like a swimming aid which the poor swimmer sometimes resorts to, sometimes not. One who possesses the wisdom from meditation (*bhāvanā, mayī prajñā*) is like a strong swimmer who has crossed the river, and as such, has no more need for the support.

Wisdom from meditation is not discursive consciousness (*vijñāna*), but penetrating insight (*jñāna*), a direct comprehension of the truths (*satyābhisamaya*). Being free from any delusion, it is transcendental (*lokottara*) and undefiled (*anāsrava*). Its realization marks the entry into the stream that flows to Nirvana and transforms the disciple into a “holy one” (*ārya*). Such a holy one, during the stage of training (*śaikṣa*) which continues through the path of cultivation (*bhāvanā, marga*), successfully eliminates all the categories of passions which can still coexist with undefiled wisdom. However, it will finally lead him to Arhantship where the holy one, having nothing more in which to train (*aśaikṣa*), realizes Nirvana here on earth itself because he knows that his impurities have been destroyed (*āsrava, kṣaya, jñāna*) and that rebirth is destroyed (*anupāda, jñāna*).

23. THE FAITH TO DOUBT

Buddha began with a simple question with cosmic consequences: **why suffering?** When we ask questions, it means we are seeking answers. The correct and true answers only come **when the question is correctly put**. “Good questions, good answers” as someone put it.

All this means that we all have doubts for the simple reason that we were born in ignorance. But different religions have different ways of handling doubts. Some say: “Do not ask any question! Here is the answer, just believe”. But what is the question in the first place.

There is a growing concern of the spirit of the Dharma going on right now, even as we speak. The thinking mind, the meditating mind, is expanding and deepening, and discovering things undreamt of before, things which words cannot describe and wonders which baffle the intelligence.

For this reason, we find spiritual thinkers speaking and writing in apparently contradicting terms. We have books like *Being Alone with Others* (Stephen Batchelor, 1983), *The Faith to Doubt* (Stephen Batchelor, 1990), *On Being Mindless* (Paul J. Griffiths, 1986) and *The Selfless Mind* (Peter Harvey, 1995), and many other such titles. Yet, these are books that matter. For they ask questions, and invite us to think for ourselves. This is the same invitation extended to us by the Buddha over 2500 years ago, and the invitation is still open.

24. HOW SHOULD I READ A SUTTA? (JOHN BULLITT)

[<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/sutta101.html>]

To get the most from your sutta studies, it can be helpful to consider a few general principles before you actually begin reading and, once you have begun reading a sutta, to bear in mind a few questions as you read. Here, John Bullitt offers some general principles:

(1) There is no such thing as a “definitive” translation.

Do not forget that the Pali Canon was recorded in Pali, not in English. Not once in his career did the Buddha speak of “suffering” or “enlightenment”; he spoke instead of such things as *dukkha* and *nibbāna*. Keep in mind, too, that every English translation has been filtered and processed by a translator—someone inextricably embedded within his or her culture at a particular moment in time, and whose experience and understanding inevitably color the translation. (British translations of the suttas from the late 19th and early 20th century often sound dreary and leaden to us today; a hundred years from now, the translations that we enjoy today will, no doubt, sound equally archaic.) Translation, like the cartographer’s attempts to project the round Earth onto a flat sheet of paper, is an imperfect art.

It is probably best not to let yourself get too comfortable with any one particular translation, whether of a word or of an entire sutta. Just because, for example, one translator equates “suffering” with *dukkha* or “Unbinding” with *nibbāna*, does not mean that you should accept those translations as truth. Try them on for size, and see how they work for you.

Allow plenty of room for your understanding to change and mature, and cultivate a willingness to consider alternate translations. Perhaps, over time, your own preferences will change (you may, for example, come to find “stress” and “quenching” more helpful). Remember that **any translation is just a convenient—but provisional—crutch** that you must use until you can come to your own first-hand understanding of the ideas it describes.

If you are really serious about understanding what the suttas are about, you will just have to bite the bullet and **learn some Pali**. But, there is an even better way: read the translations and put the teachings they contain into practice until you get the results promised by the Buddha. Mastery of Pali is, thankfully, not a prerequisite for Awakening.

(2) No one sutta contains all the teachings.

To reap the greatest reward from the Canon, explore many different suttas, not just a select few. The teachings on mindfulness, for example, although valuable, represent just a small sliver of the entirety of the Buddha's teachings. Rule of thumb: whenever you think you understand what the Buddha's teachings are all about, it is a good sign **you need to dig a little deeper**.

(3) Test the dish by tasting it.

Do not worry about whether or not a sutta contains the actual words uttered by the historical Buddha. There is no way to prove it. Just read the suttas, put the teachings into practice as best you can, and see what happens. You have nothing to lose.

(4) If you like a sutta, read it again.

Sometimes you will come across a sutta that just grabs you in some way when you first read it. Trust this reaction and read it again. It means both that the sutta has something valuable to teach you and that you are ripe to receive the teaching it offers. From time to time re-read the suttas you remember having liked months or years ago. You may discover in them some nuances now that you missed earlier.

(5) If you dislike a sutta, read it again.

Sometimes you will come across a sutta that is just plain irritating. Trust this reaction; it means that **the sutta has something valuable to teach you**, although you may not be quite ready for it yet. Put a bookmark there and put the sutta aside for now. Pick it up a few weeks, months, or years later, and try again. Perhaps someday you will connect with it.

(6) If a sutta is boring, confusing, or unhelpful, just put it aside.

Depending on your current interests and depth of practice, you may find that a given sutta just does not make sense or seems utterly tedious and boring. Just put that one aside for now and try another one. Keep trying until you find one that makes a direct, personal connection.

(7) A good sutta is one that inspires you to stop reading it.

The whole point of reading suttas is to **inspire you to develop right view**, live an upright life, and meditate correctly. So if, as you are reading, you feel a growing urge to put down the book, go sit in a quiet spot, close your eyes, and attend to the breath, do it! The sutta will have then fulfilled its purpose. It will still be there when you come back to it later.

(8) Read the sutta aloud, from beginning to end.

This helps on several levels: it encourages you to read every single word of the sutta, it gives your mouth some practice with right speech, and it gives your ears some experience listening to Dhamma.

(9) Listen for teachings at different levels.

Many suttas offer teachings on **several levels simultaneously**, and it is good to develop an ear for that. For example, when the Buddha explains to a disciple the finer points of right speech, notice how the Buddha himself uses speech (e.g. M no. 58). Is the Buddha “practising what he preaches”?

(10) Do not ignore the repetitions.

Many suttas contain repetitive passages. Read the sutta as you would a piece of music: when you sing or listen to a song, you do not skip over each chorus; likewise, when you read a sutta, you should not skip over the refrains. As in music, **the refrains in the suttas often contain slightly unexpected—and important—variations** that you do not want to miss.

(11) Discuss the sutta with a friend or two.

By sharing your observations and reactions with a friend, both of you can deepen your understanding of the sutta. Consider forming an informal sutta study group. If you have lingering questions about a sutta, ask an experienced and trusted teacher for guidance. Consult with elder monks and nuns, as their unique perspective on the teachings can often help you break through your bottlenecks of confusion.

(12) Learn a little Pali.

Once you have read a few suttas, or a few different translations of the same sutta, you may find yourself puzzled by particular choices of words. For example, why does this translator use the word “foundations of mindfulness” while that one uses “frames of reference”? What are these phrases really getting at? Turning to **a Pali-English dictionary** and looking up the word *satipaṭṭhāna* (and its component elements) can help shed new light on this word, paving the way to an even more rewarding study of the suttas.

(13) Read what others have said about the sutta.

It is always helpful to read what **commentators**—both contemporary and ancient—have to say about the suttas. Some people find the classical Tipitaka commentaries—particularly those by the medieval writer Buddhaghosa—to be helpful. A few of these are available in English translation from the Pali Text Society and the Buddhist Publication Society.

Some people prefer more **contemporary commentators**, such as those who have written in the Wheel Publications of the Buddhist Publication Society. Many outstanding booklets and articles have been written by authors such as Vens. Bodhi, Khantipalo, Ñāṇamoli, Narada, Nyanaponika, Soma, and Thanissaro. You may also enjoy reading the excellent introductions and endnotes to Bhikkhu Bodhi’s *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom, 1995) or his *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha* (Wisdom, 2000), and Maurice Walshe’s *The Long Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom, 1987).

You should also read from the masters in the Thai forest traditions, as they offer refreshing and unique perspectives on the suttas that are based on deep meditative experience. This is **the scholarship of insight**.

(14) Give the sutta time to ripen.

Whatever helpful message you found in the sutta, whatever satisfying taste it left behind, let that grow and develop in the course of your meditation practice and in your life. Do not try to solve or “do” a sutta as if it were a crossword puzzle. **Give it time to simmer in the back of your mind.** Over time, the ideas, impressions, and attitudes conveyed by the sutta will gradually percolate into your consciousness, informing the way you view the world. One day you may even find yourself in the middle of an otherwise ordinary everyday experience when suddenly the recollection of a sutta you read long ago will spring to mind, bringing with it a powerful Dhamma teaching that is exactly appropriate for this moment.

To facilitate this slow ripening process, **allow yourself plenty of room for the suttas.** Do not cram your sutta reading in among all your other activities and do not read too many suttas all at once. Make sutta study **a special, contemplative activity.** It should also be **a pleasant experience.** If you find that it is becoming dry and irritating, put it all aside and try again in a few days, weeks, or months. After you finish reading a sutta, do not just plunge back into your busy activities; take some time out afterwards for a little **breath meditation**, to give the heart a chance to cool down so that it can more thoroughly absorb the teachings.

25. HOW TO TEACH DHARMA

Analytical skills

The Buddha’s “miracle of education” comprises **the four Analytical Skills** (*paṭisambhidā*): that of meaning and purpose, of thought and causes, of language, and of wit (A 2:160; Pm 1:119; Vbh 294). These four are further ramified into **the 8 qualities of an excellent person** (*sappurisa, dhamma*) which he has knowledge of the causes of things, knowledge of meaning and purpose, self-knowledge, skill in moderation, knowledge of the right time, knowledge of the nature of a crowd and that of the individual. (D 3:252, 283; A 4:113)

The Vibhaṅga mentions 6 ways in which the Buddha transmits the Dharma: the Buddha “discourses, defines, establishes, reveals, analyses, clarifies” (*deseti paññāpeti paṭṭhapeti vivarati vibhajati uttānikaroti*, Vbh 259; SA 3:40; VbhA 371). In the ultimate analysis, all these approaches are synonymous and leads to the same goal. [See Piyasilo, *The Total Buddhist Work*, 1983: ch. 8.]

Six steps of teaching Dharma

A succinct set of instruction on how to teach the Dharma is found in **the Ānanda Sutta**. The setting of the discourse is interesting because it is Ānanda who instructs Śāriputra on the latter’s invitation:

- 1 ...*bhikkhu dhammaṃ pariyaṇuṇāti suttaṃ geyyaṃ veyyākaraṇaṃ gāthaṃ udānaṃ iti, vuttakaṃ jātaṃ abbhuta, dhammaṃ vedallaṃ;*
2. *yathā, suttaṃ yathā, pariyaṇuṇāti dhammaṃ vitthārena paresaṃ deseti;*
3. *yathā, suttaṃ yathā, pariyaṇuṇāti dhammaṃ vitthārena paresaṃ vāceti;*
4. *yathā, suttaṃ yathā, pariyaṇuṇāti dhammaṃ vitthārena paresaṃ sajjhāyaṃ karoti,*
5. *yathā, suttaṃ yathā, pariyaṇuṇāti dhammaṃ cetasā anuvitakketi anuvicarati manasānupekkhati;*
6. *yasmim āvāse therā bhikkhū viharanti bahussutā āgatāgamā dhammadharā vinayadharā māṅgikādhārā, tasmim āvāse vassaṃ upeti, te kālena kālaṃ upasaṅkamitvā paripucchati paripaṇḥhati: idaṃ bhante kathaṃ, imassa kv’attho’ti; tassa te āyasmanto avivataṃ c’eva vivaranti, anuttānikataṃ ca uttānikaronti, anekavihitesu ca kaṅkhaṅṭhānīyesu dhammesu kaṅkhaṃ paṭivinodenti—
ettāvatā kho āvuso sariputta bhikkhu assutaṃ c’eva dhammaṃ suṇāti, sutā c’assa dhammā na sammosaṃ gacchanti, ye c’assa dhammā pubbe cetasā samphuṭṭha pubbā, te ca samudācaranti, aviññataṃ ca vijānāti ti.*

(A 3:361-362)

1. A monk who **masters** (*pariyāpuṇāti*) the Dharma¹—the Sūtras (*sutta*), Recitations (*geyya*), Expositions (*veyyākaraṇa*), Verses (*gāthā*), Inspired Verses (*udāna*), Thus Saids (*iti, vuttaka*), Birth Stories (*jātaka*), Marvels (*abbhuta, dhamma*), and Analyses (*vedalla*)—just as he has learnt them, just as he has mastered them;
2. He **teaches** (*deseti*) others Dharma in detail;
3. He **makes others say** (*vāceti*) the Dharma in detail;
4. He **makes other repeat** (*sajjhāyaṃ karoti*) the Dharma in detail;
5. He **applies and investigates it in his mind, mentally examines it** (in his meditation) (*cetasā anuvitakketi anuvicarati manasānupekkhati*) [he meditates on the Dharma];
6. Where elder monks reside, those learned in the Texts (*āgama*)², Dharma experts, Vinaya experts, Rules experts (*māṭikā, dhara*), there he spends his rains retreat; and visiting them from time to time, **questions and inquires** (*paripucchati paripaṇḥati*) of them: “This talk, venerable sir, what is its meaning?” And the venerable ones disclose the undisclosed, clarify what has not been clarified, and dispel doubt concerning various doubtful things—
In this way, Sāriputta, a monk may learn what is not heard before, and things learned remain unconfused, and things that touched his mind before, remain there, and he understands what has not been understood (before).

Notes:

1. **Dharma**, that is, *nav’āṅgasatthu, sāsana*, “the Teacher’s ninefold teaching” (V 3:8; M 1:133; A 2:5, 3:86). In his Commentary on the Vinaya (Samantā, pāsādikā), Buddhaghosa explains them as follows:
Herein, the two fold Vibhaṅga, the Niddesas, the Khandhaka, the Parivāra, Maṅgala, Ratana, Nālaka, and Tuvatāka Suttas of the Sutta Nipāta and other sayings of the Tathāgata bearing the name **sutta** should be known as **Sutta** (discourses).
All the suttas containing stanzas should be known as **Geyya** (Recitation), particularly the entire Sagātha-vagga (Chapter with Stanzas) in the Saṃyutta.³
The whole of the Abhidhamma Piṭṭaka, suttas which contain no stanzas and any other (sayings from the) word of the Buddha not included in the other eight Aṅgas should be known as **Veyyākaraṇa** (Expositions).
The Dhammapada, Theragāthā, Therīgāthā, and sections entirely in verse in the Sutta Nipāta which are not designated as suttas should be known as **Gāthā** (Stanzas).
The eighty-two suttantas containing stanzas which were prompted by an awareness of joy should be known as **Udāna** (Utterances of Joy).
The 112 suttantas which have been handed down prefixed with the statement, “For this has been said by the Exalted One,” should be known as **Itivuttaka** (Thus Said).
The 550 Birth Stories commencing with Appaṇṇaka should be known as **Jātaka** (Birth Stories).
All the Suttantas connected with wonderful and marvelous phenomena handed down with words to such effect as, “O monks, these four wonderful and marvelous qualities are seen in Ānanda,” should be known as **Abbhuta-dhamma** (Marvellous Phenomena).
All the suttantas requested to be preached as a result of repeated attainment of wisdom and delight, such as Cullavedalla, Mahāvedalla, Sammādiṭṭhi, Sakkapaṇḥa, Saṅkhārabhājanīya, and Mahāpuṇṇama Suttas and others should be known as **Vedalla** (Analyses).

(VA 28 f; VA:J 25 f & nn31 101 f.)

In his *Pali Literature*, KR. Norman remarks: “It is clear that all Buddhaghosa knew about some of these terms was the fact that there were in his time a number of texts which happened to have the same name as an *āṅga*. Despite the fact that books called Jātaka, Udāna and Itivuttaka actually exist in Pali, it is probable that the list of nine *āṅgas* did not originally refer to specific works in the canon, but was a **description of various types of text**.

(Norman, 1983 :15-17; emphasis mine.)

2. *āgatāgamā*, “those who have mastered the Texts”, that is, experts in texts that would in due course be canonized as the 5 Nikāyas.

3. In his *Inception of the Discipline* (tr. of the Introduction to the Samantā, pāsādikā), N.A. Jayawickrama notes that “the phrase, ‘not included in the other eight Aṅgas,’ further points to the Commentator’s lack of familiarity with this nine-fold classification”. (VA:J 101 n31.3)

26. FOUR WAYS OF ANSWERING A QUESTION

The Saṅgīti Sutta lists the four ways of answering a question (*pañhā, vyākaraṇa*), which is repeated in the Aṅguttara Nikāya as the **Pañha Sutta** (A 2:46):

Now, monks, there are those **four basic ways of answering a question**. What four?

1. There is the question which requires a direct answer;
2. That which requires an explanation (or analysis);
3. That which requires a counter-question; and
4. That which requires to be rejected (as wrongly put).

(D 3:229; A 1:197, 2:46; Miln 144; cf. Watanabe 1983:1.10 ff.)

The **Milinda,pañha** (Miln 144 f.) provides examples for each of the four basic ways of answering a question, thus:

- 1. There is the question which requires a direct answer**, that is, a categorical reply, or direct affirmation or negation;

Is form...feeling...perception...mental formation...consciousness impermanent? (S 3:21 etc.).

- 2. That which requires an explanation or analysis**, that is, a discriminating reply or analytical reply:

But if form...feeling...perception...mental formation...consciousness is impermanent...?

- 3. That which requires a counter-question:**

But not, is everything discriminated by the eye? [untraced quote]

See the Ambaṭṭha Sutta (D no. 3) where the Buddha counter-questions Ambaṭṭha who arrogantly questions if the Buddha was a “great man” (*mahā, purisa*).

- 4. That which requires to be rejected (as wrongly put)**, that is, waiving the question as being wrongly put, or keeping silent:

These are the **10 unanswered or indeterminate propositions** (*avyākata*) or questions set aside (*thapanīya*) by the Buddha. These propositions are listed in several suttas: Poṭṭhapāda Sutta (D 9), Pāsādikā Sutta (D 29), Māluṅkyaputta Sutta (M 63), Vacchagotta Sutta (M 72), the Vacchagotta Saṃyutta (S 3:257 ff); Abyākata,saṃyutta (S 4:374-403); etc.

The traditional 10 unanswered propositions as given in the Pali sutras are as follows:

The world

1. Is the world is eternal (*sassato loko*)?
2. Is the world is not eternal (*asassato loko*)?
3. Is the world is finite (*antavā loko*)?
4. Is the world is infinite (*anantavā loko*)?

The soul

5. Is the soul is identical with the body (*taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīraṃ*)?
6. Is the soul is different from the body (*aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīraṃ*)?

The Tathāgata

7. Does the Tathāgata exist after death (*hoti tathāgato param maraṇā*)?
8. Does the Tathāgata not exist after death (*na hoti tathāgato param maraṇā*)?
9. Does the Tathāgata both exist and not exist after death (*hoti ca na ca hoti tathāgato param maraṇā*)?
10. Does the Tathāgata neither exist nor not exist after death (*n'eva hoti na na hoti tathāgato param maraṇā*)?

These propositions are divided into 3 parts as shown: the first dealing with the world or universe; the second with the soul; and the third with the Tathāgata.

27. ELEVEN DEFECTS TO AVOID

The four ways of answering a question are also given in the **Kathā,vatthu Sutta** (A 1:197), where additional instructions are given on how to apply them.

In the Kathā,vatthu Sutta (which also contains the fourfold problem analysis), the Buddha says that a person with the following **defects** is not fit to have discussion with:

- (1) Who does not abide by a conclusion, right or wrong;
- (2) Who does not abide by an assumption;
- (3) Who does not abide by recognized arguments;
- (4) Who does not abide by (the right) procedure;
- (5) Who evades a question by asking another; [cf. counter-question, previous section (Pañhā Sutta.)
- (6) Who digresses or diverts from the point;
- (7) Who shows anger, illwill or sulkiness;
- (8) Who abuses the questioner;
- (9) Who beats down the questioner;
- (10) Who laughs him to scorn;
- (11) Who catches him up when he falters.

(A 1:197 f; cf. D 1:178; M 2:22)

One who masters the four analytical skills and the fourfold method of problem solving, and avoids the eleven defects of discussion is ready to perform the “greatest miracle”—that of education (A 1:171).

28. QUALITIES OF A DHARMA SPEAKER

The mind to teach Dharma

The **Udayī Sutta**, the Buddha provides important guidelines on how to teach Dharma to others:

Indeed, Ananda, not easy it is to **teach Dharma to others**. In teaching others Dharma, Ananda, establish within yourself five things, then teach others Dharma. What five?

1. Teach others Dharma, thinking: “I will give instruction that is regulated and gradually advanced.”
2. Teach others Dharma, thinking, “I will instruct using reasoning.”
3. Teach others Dharma, thinking, “I will instruct out of lovingkindness.”
4. Teach others Dharma, thinking, “I will instruct not for worldly gain.”
5. Teach others Dharma, thinking, “I will instruct in a way which does not hurt myself nor others.”

(A 3:184)

The ideal Dharma speaker

In the **Alam Sutta**, the Buddha lists the qualities of **the ideal Dharma speaker**:

Monks, possessed of six qualities a monk is **enough (*alam*) for himself and for others**.
What six?

Here -

1. One is quick to grasp the wholesome doctrines (*kusala, dhamma*).
2. One remembers the Dharma one has learned.
3. One reflects on the meanings remembered.
4. Knowing **both the letter and the spirit**, one practises Dharma in accordance with Dharma.
5. One has a pleasant voice, a speaker of good, refined in speech, clear, free from hoarseness and enlightening.
6. One **instructs, inspires, rouses and gladdens** one's colleagues in the Holy Life. [29]

Possessed of these six qualities a monk is enough for himself and for others.

(A 4:296-299)

These, in summary, are **the six ideal qualifications of a Dharma speaker**, that is to say:

1. A Dharma speaker should be **intelligent** and quick to learn (which comes with showing great interest in the Buddha Dharma for its own sake, that is, for personal development)., this area is called **analytical skill or perspicuity** (*paṭisambhidā*), of which there are four, namely:
 - (1) The analytical skill in meanings (*attha, paṭisambhidā*), that is, the ability to understand and express the **meaning**, purpose and result of a teaching.
 - (2) The analytical skill in the Dhamma (*dhamma, paṭisambhidā*), that is, an understanding of causes and **conditionality**, the law of cause and effect that governs all conditioned things (including language).
 - (3) The analytical skill in language (*nirutti, paṭisambhidā*), especially the nature of language in relation the **meaning and conditionality**.
 - (4) The analytical skill in ready wit (*paṭibhāna, paṭisambhidā*), that is, the skilful application of meanings, conditionality and language for clarifying the Dharma and effecting spiritual liberation.
2. A Dharma speaker should have **a good memory** for scripture and scriptural facts, remembering what he has spoken, and remembering questions and remarks from his listeners.
3. A Dharma speaker should spend time **reflecting** on what he has learned, and to cultivate his mind (best method would of course be meditation).
4. A Dharma speaker should understand the nature of **religious language and spiritual experience**, that there are at least two levels of language. (This lecture deals mostly with this area.)
5. A Dharma speaker should cultivate **public speaking skills** and a good voice.
6. A Dharma speaker, above all, should be **an inspiring person**. This last point is so important that it has been called "the teaching method of the Buddha" (*desanā, vidhi*), which we shall look at next.

29. IMMEDIATE BENEFITS

The **Sonadaṇḍa Sutta** (D no. 4) relates the conversion of the brahmin Sonadaṇḍa of Campā. On learning of the Buddha's arrival, he goes to meet him, against the advice of other brahmins who think it below his dignity to do so. The Buddha then asks Sonadaṇḍa about the qualities of a true brahmin. Sonadaṇḍa mentions five, but after listening to the Buddha, he admits that they can be reduced to two: moral conduct and wisdom. He becomes a convert but does not experience the opening of the Dhamma-eye.

This sutta is important especially for lay Buddhist workers today, for the simple reason that, unlike the Buddha, the unenlightened Buddhist teacher or worker will not be able to know the result of his teaching. Even so, one's teaching should, like the ending of the Sonadaṇḍa Sutta, have four vital qualities, sometimes called "**the teaching method of the Buddha**" (*desana,vidhi*). The Sutta closes with these words:

Then the Blessed One, having **instructed** (*sandassetvā*) Sonadaṇḍa with a talk on Dhamma, **inspired** (*samādapetvā*) him, **fired** (*samuttejetvā*) him with enthusiasm and **gladdened** (*sampahaṃsetvā*) him, rose from his seat and departed.

(D 1:126, etc.; DA 2:473; UA 242. 361, 384)

"The Buddha then **instructed** (*sandassetvā*), **inspired** (*samādapetvā*), **roused** (*samuttejetvā*) and **gladdened** (*sampahaṃsetvā*)...with Dharma talk." This action sequence reflects the basic structure of the Buddha's teaching method: (1) the Dharma is shown; (2) the listener/s are filled with enthusiasm; (3) they are fired with commitment; and (4) filled with joy.¹ The Commentaries explain that by instructing, the Buddha dispels the listener's **delusion**; by inspiring him, **heedlessness** is dispelled; by rousing him, **indolence** is dispelled; and by gladdening, brings the practice to a **conclusion**. In short, when we teach Dharma to benefit others, we should do our best to **bring instruction, inspiration, motivation and joy** to the listener. These four qualities are, in fact, the sixth or last of the ideal skills of a Dharma speaker. [24]

30. THE CHALLENGE OF SPIRITUAL DIALOGUE

Udumbarika Sīhanāda Sutta

I would like to close this study with a summary of the **Udumbarika Sīhanāda Sutta**, the Discourse on the Lion-roar at Udumbarikā (D no. 25). This discourse is interesting not so much because it relates how the Buddha deals with evangelistic fervour but because no one in the audience was converted. That the Buddha took the trouble to teach to those who would not immediately benefit from his effort, is of great significance to Buddhist teachers and workers today in that no effort in teaching the Dharma is really wasted. It is a matter of planting the Dharma seeds and letting it grow by itself

Once the Buddha was staying at the Vultures' Peak in Rājagṛha, and the wanderer Nigrodha was staying at the Udumbarikā lodge with 3000 other wanderers. The atmosphere in the Udumbarikā lodge was raucous with the wanderers shouting and screaming talking about worldly and speculative topics.

Now, it was early morning and the white-robed householder Sandhāna was on his way to visit the Buddha. Realizing it was too early and that the Buddha and the monks were in retreat meditating, he decided to drop in at the wanderers' lodge. When Nigrodha saw Sandhāna coming, Nigrodha told the wanderers to be quiet, knowing that Buddhists love quiet and solitude, and in that way, might induce Sandhāna to visit them—which Sandhāna did.

After the preliminary greetings, Sandhāna sat down and commented on how noisy the wanderers were talking about worldly and speculative topics. Nigrodha replied that they were socializing, unlike the Buddha,

¹ L.S. Cousins, in his review of *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (tr. Ñāṇamoli) in JBE 4 1997:272, gives a slightly different listing.

who he charged was like a “wild buffalo (*go,kanna*) circling around keeping to the fringes” and that he could easily knock the Buddha down with one question.

The Buddha who had been following this conversation with his divine ear, came down from Vultures’ Peak and walked up and down in meditation in the Peacocks’ Feeding Ground in sight of the Udumbarikā lodge. Again, Nigrodha told the wanderers to be quiet, so that the Buddha would visit them.

When the Buddha came to the lodge, Nigrodha asked the Buddha his question. To the surprise of everyone present, the Buddha replied:

Nigrodha, it is hard for you, holding different views, being of different inclinations, and subject to different influences, following a different teacher, to understand the doctrine which I teach my disciples... Come on, then, Nigrodha, ask me about your own teaching, about your own self-mortification. How are the conditions of austerity and self-mortification fulfilled, and how are they not fulfilled?

The Buddha had thrown Nigrodha’s question back to him, which delighted the wanderers: “It is wonderful, it is marvellous, how great are the powers of the ascetic Gotama in holding back with his own theories and in inviting others to discuss theirs!”

The Buddha went on to point out how ascetics may outwardly practise various sorts of self-mortification and rules, but inwardly still bear various moral weaknesses (such as greed, ill-will, conceit, jealousy, etc.) The most important remark here I think is where the Buddha declares that among the non-Buddhist religionists, “**when the Dharma is presented in a way that should command an assent, they withhold their assent**”. In short, it is important to be receptive to what is right in spiritual dialogue.

The Buddha then explained how his followers keep away from the noise of useless talk, and “when the Dharma is presented in a way that should command an assent, they give their assent”. This then must be the pith of spiritual life, Nigrodha thought. No, the Buddha replied, it is only **the outer bark**.

The Buddha’s disciples train in the Precepts, in meditation until they fully develop the four divine abodes (*brahma, vihāra*), full of boundless love, compassion, altruistic joy and equanimity. This must be the pith of spiritual life: no, it is **only penetrating to the inner bark**.

The Buddha’s disciples, gaining the fruits of meditation, are able to recall their past lives: this **only reaches the fibres surrounding the pith**.

Finally, they gain the knowledge of seeing beings falling away and arising according to their karma—this is **the pith** of spiritual life. [It is interesting here that the Buddha did not go on mention the last of the “three knowledges” (*vijjā*), that is, the destruction of defilements, which anyway at this point would be beyond the ken of the wanderers.]

At this, the assembly of wanderers broke into a commotion, exclaiming: “We and our teacher are ruined! We know of nothing higher or more far-reaching than our teaching!” Then, Sandhāna turned to Nigrodha and reminded him of his challenge of knocking down the Buddha, for which he thereby apologized to the Buddha. To this, the Buddha remarked:

Nigrodha, it is a mark of progress in the discipline of the Noble Ones, if anyone recognizes the nature of his transgression and makes amends as is right, restraining himself for the future.

But, Nigrodha, I tell you this: Let an intelligent man come to me, who is sincere, honest and straightforward, and I will instruct him, I will teach him Dharma. If he practices what he is taught, then, within seven years...even in seven days he can gain the goal.

*Nigrodha, you may think that the ascetic Gotama says this in order to win disciples. But you should not think so. **Let him who is your teacher remain your teacher.***

Let your way of life remain as it was...

Let those things you consider wrong continue to be so considered...

Let whatever you consider right continue to be so considered. I do not speak for any of these reasons.

There are, Nigrodha, unwholesome things that have not been abandoned, tainted, conducive to rebirth, fearful, productive of painful results in the future, associated with birth, decay and death. It is for the abandonment of these things that I teach Dharma. If you practise accordingly, these tainted things will be abandoned...and by your own insight and realization, you will attain the fullness of perfected wisdom.

At these words, the wanderers “sat silent and upset, their shoulders drooped, they hung their heads and sat there downcast and bewildered, so possessed were their minds by Māra”. Acknowledging this, the Buddha then rose up in the air and returned to Vultures’ Peak. And the householder Sandhāna also returned to Rājagrha.

(D 3:36-57 abridged)

CONCLUSION

At the opening of this lecture, I said that there are no synonyms, only ways of talking; that the same words never have the same meanings; that each person makes his own sense of a word. In short, there are as many words and meanings as there are people. If this is true, then **I am contradicting myself** just by speaking to you.

For, by the very same token from what I have said, all words mean the same thing. But, this can only happen on the level of **spiritual experience**. All the 84,000 Dharma Doors open to the same chamber of enlightenment, all the paths lead to the same destination. However, this only happens when you start opening that door, when you start walking on that spiritual path.

Let one first establish oneself
In what is proper
Then instruct others—
Such a wise one will not be defiled.

*attānaṃ eva paṭhamaṃ
paṭirūpe nivesaye
ath’aññaṃ anusāseyya
na kilisseyya paṇḍito.*

(Dh 158)

□ □ □

ABBREVIATIONS

[For details, see under Primary Sources.]

AA	Aṅguttara Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā = Commentary to the Numerical Sayings (volume: page).
Abhk	Abhidharmakośa
Comy	Commentary (<i>aṭṭhakathā</i>).
D	Dīgha Nikāya.
DA	Dīgha Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā = Commentary to the Long Sayings (volume: page).
DhsA:PR	<i>The Expositor</i> , 2 vols. Attha,sālinī tr. Pe Maung Tin & Mrs. Rhys Davids.
JPTS	Journal of the Pali Text Society, London.
JRAS	Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, London.
M	Majjhima Nikāya.
MA	Majjhima Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā = Commentary to the Middle Length Sayings (volume: page).
Mpps	Mahāprajñāpāramitā Śāstra
Mysg	Mahāyānasāgraha
Nett	<i>The Guide</i> , Nettippakaraṇa tr. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli.
Nc	Culla,niddesa.
Nm	Mahā,niddesa.
Peṭk:Ñ	<i>The Piṭaka-disclosure, Peṭakopadesa</i> , tr. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli.
PTS	The Pali Text Society (1881).
S	Saṃyutta Nikāya.
SA	Saṃyutta Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā = Commentary to the Connected Length Sayings (volume: page).
SnA	Suttanipāta Commentary (page).
T	Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō, edd. Junjirō Takakusu & Kaigyoku Watanabe, Tokyo, 1924-34. Vols. 1-55 translations and works of non-Japanese and Chinese monks. Vols. 58-64 works by Japanese monks. Vol. 85 a miscellaneous collection and manuscripts of doubtful texts. Vol. 86-97 supplementary illustrations and charts (the Zokuzōkyō, 1932-34).
VA	Vinaya Commentary = Samantapāsādikā (Buddhaghosa).
VA:J	<i>Bāhīranidāna</i> of the Samantapāsādikā (VA), <i>The Inception of Discipline and the Vinaya Nidāna</i> , tr. N.A. Jayawickrama. London: PTS, 1962.
Vism	Visuddhi,magga.

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Piya Tan's website: Author's essays and answers to questions asked through the Internet.