

THE LIVING WORD OF THE BUDDHA

The Buddha's Teachings in the Oldest Texts

Celebrating 20 years of full-time sutta translation and teaching, 2002-2022

Handbook of Meditation in Society 4


Sutta Discovery Vol 60.1d

Theme: *An Evolutionary Psychology of Mindfulness*

Buddhist experience: The individual and society

©TAN Beng Sin (Piya Tan) 2023a

For conventions (textual and technical) and bibliography, see **SD Guide**.

[PDF] To move around the book, click the BOOKMARK icon  on the far left panel; click the HEADINGS.

Page

- 7** [Detailed table of contents](#)
- 12** (1) [Mindfulness in daily life.](#)
- 42** (2) [The body-mind process.](#)
- 61** (3) [The social construct of Buddhism.](#)
- 77** (4) [Buddhist: religion or path?](#)
- 113** (5) [Approaches to Buddhism: the scholar and the practitioner.](#)
- 161** (6) [Teacher-constructed Buddhisms.](#)
- 196** (7) [A moral psychology of self-deception.](#)

Mindfulness is knowing oneself so that we awaken to true freedom

Sutta translations & study website: <http://dharmafarer.org>

Courses and messaging:

<http://themindingcentre.org>;

t.me/suttasangha (Global Sutta Community telegram)

ISBN 978-981-18-6493-3 (Physical)

ISBN 978-981-18-6494-0 (Digital)

©2023a TAN Beng Sin

All rights reserved
Printed in Singapore

THE MINDING CENTRE, based in Singapore, is part of Piya Tan's Dharma ministry. It was founded in 2006 to provide non-religious Dharma-based services to those in need of counsel and solace. It also serves as a haven and hub for those seeking Dharma by way of critical thinking, creative feeling, meditation, sutta translation and study, spiritual experience, and sharing that light and joy. The Centre also supports and promotes Piya Tan in his full-time Buddhist and related work.

Courses: <http://themindingcentre.org>

THE SUTTA DISCOVERY SERIES is part of the Living Word of the Buddha project which aspires to present and encourage an exploration of early Buddhism, both in a Dharma-inspired and academic manner for personal development as well as outreach work on a local and global scale. The Minding Centre and the Living Word of the Buddha project are motivated and guided by a quest for the historical Buddha and a vision of mere Buddhism.

Suttas: <http://dharmafarer.org>

THE MERE BUDDHIST VISION. We aspire to learn, teach and practise mere Buddha Dharma, or “non-religious Buddhism,” that is, Buddhism as simple as possible, as the teaching of the historical Buddha, so that it is open to all who seek true stillness and liberating wisdom. We aspire to compassionately and joyfully proclaim the possibility, necessity and urgency of gaining spiritual liberation in this life itself—at least as streamwinners, with or without dhyana—in keeping with the spirit of the Okkanta Samyutta (S 25). ***Mere Buddhism is easy: live it and be free.***

Piya Tan (TAN Beng Sin), 1949-

Title: Sutta Discovery 60.1d.

Theme: An evolutionary psychology of mindfulness: Buddhist experience – the individual and society

Series: The living word of the Buddha (2002-)

First published 2023; publisher: the author

ISBN 978-981-18-6493-3 (physical)

ISBN 978-981-18-6494-0 (digital)

YOU can help Buddhism grow

Your pledge & support bring Dharma to others:

- ☒ Print Dharma and related books, and Internet Dharma
- ☒ Support our sutta translation: <http://dharmafarer.org>
- ☒ Sponsor our full-time Dharma work and global ministry

*WE GIVE
for the sake of a beautiful mind,
as a support for the mind (in inner peace).
(Aṭṭha Dāna Sutta, A 8.31/4:236)*

KEEPING BUDDHISM CENTRED

Sutta translations: <http://dharmafarer.org>

As people today become more aware of Buddhism, many seek the simple original teachings of the Buddha. For over two decades now, Piya Tan has been inspired by this ideal of “mere Buddhism.” In this connection, he has set up the Minding Centre and Pali House.

The Minding Centre

A still centre in life's storms

Suttas and commentaries: <http://dharmafarer.org>

Classes and enquiry:

themindingcentre@gmail.com; Telegram Group: t.me/suttasangha.

hp +65 8211 0879 (Telegram & WhatsApp)

Address all mails to: “Pali House,” Blk 248, Jurong East St 24, #08-50, Singapore 600248

Pali House

On Vesak Day, 12th May, 2006, Pali House was born, fulfilling Piya's long-time dream for living space that is spacious, quiet and conducive for his Dharma work.

- ☐ Pali House has one of the most complete set of early Buddhist scripture (texts and translations).
- ☐ The translating of the early Buddhist scripture in the **Sutta Discovery** series is done at Pali House.

Pali House is possible through the generosity of the Buddhist community and various individuals like yourself who have generously and regularly contributed to Piya Tan's work. He is doing full-time lay Dharma work without any salary. As such, your continued support will greatly help our Dharma work.

How you can help

- ☐ Support for Piya Tan's full time Buddhist work (especially the Sutta Translation & related projects).
- ☐ Help with the Dharmafarer website (<http://dharmafarer.org>) through your expertise and time.
- ☐ Introduce people to the the Minding Centre and advertise our activities to your friends, etc.
- ☐ Donate to cost of computer peripherals and printing, especially laser printer toner and A4 copy paper.
- ☐ Sponsor purchases of Buddhist scriptures, books and materials (for the Sutta Translation library).
- ☐ Contribute to **the Sutta publication fund** (for printing costs of study notes and SD books, etc).
- ☐ Encourage relatives and friends to offer dāna together for merit of happy togetherness.
- ☐ After making such offerings or acts of merit, make this Dharmafarer aspiration:

*May this merit bring my mind peace and wisdom.
May I enter the path of streamwinning in this life itself.*

To pledge or donate, please make your cheque payable to “**The Minding Centre**” & mail to:

“Pali House,” Blk 248, Jurong East St 24, #08-50, Singapore 600248.

The Living Word of the Buddha • Living the Word of the Buddha

SUTTA DISCOVERY

Directly seeing the Buddha's Teachings

THE MINDING CENTRE

hp: +65 8211 0879; email: themindingcentre@gmail.com

Websites: <http://dharmafarer.org>; <http://themindingcentre.org>

Global Sutta Community Telegram: t.me/suttasangha (for online sutta class)

Piya Tan's Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/piyatan>

The Minding Centre Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/themindingcentre>

The most direct way to learn Buddhism is to read and live the Pali suttas which contain some of the oldest records we have of the Buddha's teachings. As we search these scriptures, we will discover ourselves amidst their stories, teachings and practices, and even take a first step towards spiritual awakening.

This series will also help you **learn and master the Pali Canon**: to locate suttas, teachings and stories, and have an idea of how Suttas are transmitted and translated. Wherever feasible, comparative studies are made between the Pali, Sanskrit and Chinese (Āgama) versions of the suttas. Although a very basic knowledge of Buddhism (the 5 Precepts, etc) is helpful, no knowledge of these languages is required for this course. This class is suitable for beginner and mid-range level.

The Sutta Discovery (SD) series started with **the NUS Buddhist Society** weekly Sutta Study Group (SSG) classes (February 2002 onwards), and **the Buddhist Fellowship** SD series (February 2003 onwards). The SD works are now freely available worldwide on <http://dharmafarer.org>. There is an on-going global team of volunteer **Sutta readers** who regularly study the suttas and essays, and proof-read them.

● **PIYA TAN**, a former **Theravada monk** for 20 years, works full-time on the Suttas with new commentaries, and teaches them. As a full-time lay Dharma teacher, he specializes in early Buddhism. He was consultant and regular lecturer to the Buddhist Studies Team (BUDS) that successfully introduced **Buddhist Studies in Singapore Secondary Schools** in the 1980s, and then, invited as a visiting scholar to **the University of California at Berkeley, USA**. He has written many ground-breaking and educational books on Buddhism (such as *Total Buddhist Work*) and social surveys (such as *Buddhist Currents* and *Charisma in Buddhism*).

As a **full-time Dharma teacher**, he runs Sutta and related classes like the basic Pali course series, the Sutta Study Group (NUSBS), Dharma courses (the Singapore Buddhist Federation), Sutta Discovery classes (Buddhist Fellowship and elsewhere), and Sutta-based (including meditation) courses (The Minding Centre), besides his own full-time **Pali translation and research project**, the Pali House, and doing a comparative study of the Pali Nikāyas and the Chinese Āgamas. As a Theravāda monk, he learned insight meditation from **Mahasi Sayadaw** himself in the 1980s, and forest meditation from various forest monks. He has run numerous **meditation courses and retreats** for students and adults (including non-Buddhists) since 1980s. In 1992, he taught meditation at the University of California at Berkeley, USA, and also to BP, JPMorgan, the Defence Science Organization, GMO, HP and SIA. He writes weekly reflections and gives daily online teachings on Facebook. All this for the love of Dharma and of Ratna and posterity.

GLOBAL DHAMMA SERIES (GDC) VIA ZOOM MEETING

Register at Telegram Group: Global Sutta Community (GSC) t.me/suttasangha

The Minding Centre YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/c/TheMindingCentre/videos>

BOOKS BY PIYA TAN

Sutta Discovery Series (plus Piya's current works, with Pāli fonts & PDF versions)

☐ Dharma thumb drive 2003-2022 by donation (please contact us)

Trilinear Translations

(Pāli / Word-for-word translation / Modern English) with notes

- ☐ Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (D 22) (around 77 pages) \$10.00
- ☐ Ānāpānasati Sutta (M 118) (around 40 pages) \$10.00

Buddha & Buddhism

- ☐ The Buddha and His Disciples \$15.00
- ☐ History of Buddhism \$15.00
- ☐ Teaching Method of the Buddha \$10.00
- ☐ Background to Buddhism (Introd. to Buddha & Teachings) \$10.00
- ☐ Introduction to Pali Chanting \$10.00

Buddhist psychology notes

- ☐ Meditation for Beginners \$10.00
- ☐ Buddhist psychology (Diploma in Buddhist Counselling P102)
2-volume set: (1) Early Buddhist Sutras; (2) Readings (on Buddhism and psychology) \$25.00
- ☐ Psychology of Meditation \$15.00
- ☐ Basic Buddhist counselling \$10.00

Audio CDs of Piya's talks (the monk years) [MP3; \$10.00 per CD unless otherwise stated]

The Diamond Sutra (\$30) • Psychological Types • The word of the Buddha • What happens when a person is born • What happens when a person dies • Buddhism and the nature of the universe • Buddhism and the God-idea • Preaching Techniques of the Buddha (\$15) • Actions of the Buddha & Noble Silence (CDA format) (\$15).

ORDERS

To order, please contact:

Ratna Lim (dharmafarer@gmail.com) or the Minding Centre (+65 8211 0879: ask for Ratna Lim)

COPYRIGHT & SHAREWARE NOTICE

This book is Dharmaware (Dharma shareware) & a **Right Livelihood project** of Tan Beng Sin (Piya).

He is a full-time lay Dharma teacher working on this project without any salary.

You may make digital and hard copies of single chapters (suttas or articles) of this work for study provided no charge is made and no alteration whatsoever is made to its contents.

You may not make commercial copies of this work. If you wish to make any personal copies, please remit US\$10.00 for each volume or US\$1.00 per article/piece to the author to support his Dharma work and as an act of merit.

If you wish to make free-distribution copies, please contact the author.

Dharma Drive

Early Buddhist Texts

The Sutta Discovery series by Piya Tan, beginning in 2002 and still going on.

For illustration only;
products may vary.



For Dharma stewards (supporters):

The Dharma Drive (USB thumb drive 16 GB) contains +60 SD vols, sutta teachings (MP3 talks, videos), reflections & books by Piya Tan.

Make this a gift to a monastic or someone who needs it

This series will also help you **learn and master the Pali Canon**: to locate suttas, teachings and stories, and have an idea of how Suttas are transmitted and translated. Wherever feasible, comparative studies are made between the Pali, Sanskrit and Chinese (Āgama) versions of the suttas. If you can read this message, you are ready to study the Sutta translations. No deep knowledge of Buddhism is needed. [For 20 reasons for the SD series, see <http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/sutta-discovery/printing-the-suttas>]

Sutta Discovery (quarterly; ring-bound A4 vols): S\$15.00 each (unless otherwise stated) or donation.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD Guide (key & index volume) FREE | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 33 (2011b) Dhyana |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 1 (2003, 2010) Dhammacakka Sutta & the Buddha's early teachings | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 34 (2011c) Spiritual friendship |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 2 (2003, 2010) Wealth & Lovingkindness | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 35 (2011d) Wisdom 2 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 3 (Sep 2003) Refuge-going | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 36ab (2011e/2012a) Buddhism & mythology (2-vol set) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 4 (Jan 2004) Karma 1 | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 37 (2012b) Right Livelihood 1 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 5 (Apr 2004) Dependent arising | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 38 (2012c) Love & compassion |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 6 (Jul 2004) Wisdom 1 | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 39 (2012d) Karma 3 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 7 (Jan 2005) The world and universe | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 40a1+2 (2013ab) Levels of learning (2-vol set) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 8 (Apr 2005) Lay sainthood | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 40b (Oct 2008) Chinese Buddhism \$20 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 9 (Nov 2004) Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 41 (2013d) Samatha & vipassana |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 10 (Apr 2006) The limbs of awakening | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 42 (2014a) Impermanence & diligence |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 10b (2016) The noble eightfold path | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 43 (2014b) Healing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 11 (Jan 2006) Emptiness | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 44 (2014c) Solitude & silence |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 12 (Apr 2006) Brahmā (the High God) | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 45 (2014d) Faith & giving |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 13 (Jul 2005) Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 46 (2015a) Teaching & learning |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 14 (Oct 2006) Self-identity view | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 47 (2015b) Precept & practice |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 15 (Jul 2006) Mental cultivation | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 48 (2015c) Death & mindfulness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 16 (Jul 2007) Impermanence 1 | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 49abc (2015d/2016ab) Life of the Buddha 1 (3-vol-set) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 17ab (Jan 2007) Five Aggregates (2-vol set) \$30 | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 50ab (2017ab) Awakening & nirvana (2-vol set) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 18 (Oct 2007) Karma 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 51ab (2017cd) Effort and energy (2-vol-set) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 19 (Jan 2008) The meditation sign | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 52.1 (2018a) Miraculous life of Gotama Buddha |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 20 (Jul 2008) Revulsion | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 52b (2018b) Parables 2 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 21 (Oct 2008) Views | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 53 (2018c) Truth & reality |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 22 (Apr 2008) Giving & generosity | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 54 (2018d) Devas 1 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 23 (May 2008) Death & Rebirth | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 55ab (2019d/2020a) Happiness and progress |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 24 (Dec 2008) Samadhi | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 56ab (2020bc) The gradual way/Various faculties |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 25 (Nov 2006) Brahmajāla Sutta | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 57ab (2020d/2021a) Rebirth and cosmology |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 26 (Apr 2009) Non-self | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 58 (2021b) Listening and speaking |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 27 (Jul 2009) Psychic powers | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 59a&b (2021c&d) Moral virtue 1 (2-vol-set) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 28 (Oct 2009) Parables 1 | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 60.1ab -1f HANDBOOK MEDITATION IN SOCIETY (HMS): |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 29 (2010a) Elements | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 60.1ab HMS 1+2 Character types; types of meditation |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 30 (2010b) Skillful means | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 60.1c HMS 3 Rhetoric of Buddhist experience |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 31 (2010c) Latent tendencies | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 60.1d HMS 4 Evolutionary psychology of mindfulness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SD 32 (2011a) Mental hindrances | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 60.1e HMS 5 Delusion and experience |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> SD 60.1f HMS 6 Psychopathology of mindfulness |

Please order from:

The Minding Centre "Pali House," Blk 248, Jurong East St 24, #08-50, Singapore 600248.

email: themindingcentre@gmail.com ; hp +65 8211 0879 ; Telegram: @RatnaTMC

The essay, **SD 60.1d**, *An Evolutionary Psychology of Mindfulness*, is part of the multi-volume SD 60 Handbook of meditation in Society, comprising (to date):

- SD 60.1a** Character Analysis
- SD 60.1b** Samatha, Vipassana, Kammaṭṭhāna
- SD 60.1c** The Rhetoric of Buddhist Experience
- SD 60.1d** An Evolutionary Psychology of Mindfulness
- SD 60.1e** Delusion and Experience
- SD 60.1f** Psychopathology of Mindfulness

Detailed Table of Contents

SUTTA DISCOVERY VOL 60.1D	I
THEME: AN EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY OF MINDFULNESS	I
IMPRINT PAGE ii	
THE MINDING CENTRE: CONTACTS AND SUPPORT	iii
LEARNING THE SUTTAS & PIYA TAN	iv
SOME SELECTED BOOKS BY PIYA TAN	v
SUTTA DISCOVERY SERIES	vi
DETAILED TABLE OF CONTENTS	7
1 MINDFULNESS IN DAILY LIFE	12
1.0 What is “evolutionary psychology”?	12
1.1 What is experience in early Buddhism?	12
1.1.1 Body and mind	12
Table 1.1.1.6 The 7 aspects of the mind. Cf SD 60.1e (Table 7.4) The 4 ultimates, sense-bases, and elements.	16
1.1.2 Experience and knowledge	18
1.2 The nature of experience	20
1.2.1 Experience and its objects	20
1.2.2 Supports for Buddhist experience	21
1.2.3 How do we know what we are experiencing?	25
1.2.4 How do we know it is a <i>Buddhist</i> experience?	25
1.2.5 Active and passive aspects of experience	26
1.2.5.1 The difference between experience and consciousness	26
1.2.5.2 A strong mind can grow in even a disabled body	27
1.2.5.3 How our body is connected with the mind.....	28
1.2.5.4 How we think	28
1.2.5.5 The 3 aspects of our mind: <i>Citta mano viññāṇa</i>	29
1.2.6 How our thinking process evolves	30
1.2.7 Vitakka, vicāra	31
Table 1.2.7.3. <i>Vitakka</i> and <i>vicāra</i>	33

1.2.8 Perception and conception	33
1.2.9 How does the mind construct our experiences?	36
1.2.10 The suffering pericope	38
1.3 Cognition: distributed and asymmetrical	39
1.3.1 The “arising-of-mind” pericope	39
1.3.2 Cognitive binding	40
1.3.3 Cognition: a structural symmetry	41
2 THE BODY-MIND PROCESS	42
2.1 Body-mind in Buddhist meditation	42
2.1.1 The conscious body	42
2.1.1.3 Mental object (<i>dhamma</i>)	43
2.1.1.8 The body-based mind	45
2.1.1.9 The physical base of mind and mind-consciousness	46
2.1.2 What is the purpose of all this?	47
2.2 “All the elements”	48
2.2.0 Investigating reality	48
2.2.1 Form: Our conscious body; the 6 elements; the 18 elements	49
2.2.2 Feelings: The 6 elements	50
2.2.3 Formations: the 6 elements	52
2.2.4 Consciousness: The 3 elements	53
2.2.5 Samsara and nirvana: The 2 elements	54
2.2.6 Dependent arising as a conditioned element	55
2.2.7 Nirvana: the unconditioned element	58
2.2.8 Speaking of nirvana	60
3 THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF BUDDHISM	61
3.1 Buddhism and religion	61
3.1.1 Buddhism as self-development	61
3.1.2 Who invented religion?	63
3.2 Buddhism and its developments	66
3.2.1 What’s wrong with Buddhist modernism?	66
3.2.2 Buddhism before religion, as a non-religious “path”	67
3.2.3 Buddhism and the Axial Age	69
3.3 Buddhism as lay practice	70
3.3.1 The lay discipline (<i>gihī.vinaya</i>)	70
3.3.2 The laity and moral training	72
3.3.3 Evolution of the 5 precepts	72
Table 3.3.3.2 The 10 courses of action [karma]	74
3.3.4 Laity as saints	75

4 BUDDHISM: RELIGION OR PATH?	77
4.1 Buddhism as a religion.....	77
4.1.1 Minding our own Buddhism.....	77
4.1.2 Out of the Buddha's hands?	80
4.1.3 Buddhism as a path.....	82
Table 4.1.3.1 The 3 trainings (basic practice) for laity and renunciants.....	82
4.1.4 The dynamics of Buddhist moral ethics	82
4.1.5 Buddhist spiritual psychology as mental health	85
4.2 McM mindfulness [SD 60.1c (1.9.2)].....	85
4.2.1 Marketing mindfulness	85
4.2.2 Why McM mindfulness is so successful.....	86
4.2.3 What's wrong with McM mindfulness?	86
4.3 Aspects of modern lay Buddhism	89
4.3.1 Modern Buddhism in the US.....	89
4.3.2 Our real task as lay Buddhists	90
4.4 Buddhism and modern science	91
4.4.1 Is Buddhism scientific?	91
4.4.2 The Chicago World Fair: Race and religion	94
4.4.3 The doctrine of evolution	95
4.4.4 Protestant Buddhism?	97
4.4.5 Meditation and science.....	98
4.4.6 Where Buddhism and science may meet	100
4.4.7 Non-duality in early Buddhism	102
4.4.8 The teacher or the teaching?	104
4.4.9 Being a Buddhist, <i>being</i> Buddhist	105
4.5 Modern Buddhism in Malaysia.....	108
4.5.1 How other religions and cultures influence local Buddhism	108
4.5.2 Priestly politics	111
4.5.3 Buddhism and Buddha Dharma	112
5 APPROACHES TO BUDDHISM: THE SCHOLAR AND THE PRACTITIONER.....	113
5.1 Early Buddhism and cultural Buddhisms.....	113
5.1.1 Early Buddhism	113
5.1.2 Cultural Buddhisms	120
5.1.3 Textual Buddhisms.....	122
Figure 5.1.3.4 The development of later Buddhisms	124
5.2 Evolution of modern Buddhism.....	124
5.2.1 Texts and contexts: Historians and ethnographers	124
5.2.2 The vital role and need for textual Buddhism	126

5.2.3 Socio-karma (Group karma).....	129
5.3 Scholars' Buddhisms.....	132
5.3.0 Reynolds' 4 modes of scholarship.....	132
5.3.1 Mode I scholarship: The Pali Text Society and Max Weber.....	133
5.3.2 Mode II scholarship: Spiro in Burma.....	136
5.3.3 Mode III scholarship: Gombrich in Sri Lanka.....	138
5.3.4 Mode IV scholarship: Tambiah in Thailand.....	141
5.3.5 Professional courtesy and academic honesty.....	149
5.3.6 Schopen's Buddhism.....	151
5.3.7 The 2 duties of a practitioner.....	154
5.3.8 Practitioners and professors of Buddhism.....	157
5.4 Overview and recap.....	158
5.4.1 Early Buddhist Texts.....	158
5.4.2 Modern Buddhist studies.....	159
6 TEACHER-CONSTRUCTED BUDDHISMS	161
6.1 Privatization and certification	161
6.1.1 Measuring meditation	161
6.1.2 Measuring sainthood	163
6.1.3 The middle of the middle way	166
6.2 Measuring the breath (A modern account of the awakening process)	167
6.2.1 Sunlun Sayadaw (1878-1952)	167
6.2.2 Theinngu Sayadaw (1913-1973)	170
6.2.3 Sunlun Sayadaw's meditation practice and experience	172
6.2.4 Theinngu Sayadaw's meditation practice and experience	175
6.2.5 Authority and controversy	182
6.2.6 So, you're an arhat! Charisma and Dharma.....	186
6.3 Whose Buddhism?.....	188
6.3.1 Make my Buddhism	188
6.3.2 My Buddhism, your Buddhism.....	188
6.3.3 Creative teachers, creative misreadings	194
6.3.4 Buddhism as a conversation	196
7 A MORAL PSYCHOLOGY OF SELF-DECEPTION	197
7.1 Self-deception in Buddhism	197
7.1.1 How we deceive ourselves.....	197
7.1.2 Religious belief formation.....	199
7.2 Unwholesome religious belief formation process	201
7.2.1 Unwholesome religious beliefs.....	201
7.2.2 Religious belief and faith.....	201

7.2.3 Defence mechanisms and self-deception	203
7.2.4 All that we know is provisional	203
7.3 Developments in self-deception studies	205
7.3.1 Divided minds: Psychological definitions, philosophical difficulties.....	205
7.3.2 Robert Trivers' theory	207
7.3.3 Evolutionary aspect of self-deception	209
7.4 Deception and delusion	209
7.4.1 Delusion or self-deception?	209
7.4.2 Belief, delusion and beyond.....	213
7.5 Self-deception in modern Buddhism	216
7.5.1 Notions of Self and Soul	216
7.5.2 Self-view: The root of self-deception.....	218
7.6 The 3 fetters of self-deception	219
7.6.1 Why 3 fetters?.....	219
7.6.2 Self-identity view: The status is not the state.....	221
7.6.3 Historical and social bases for self-identity view	222
7.6.4 Attachment to rituals and vows: Seeking answers outside of us	227
7.6.5 Rituals and "make believe"	229
7.6.6 The benefits of wholesome rituals	231
7.6.7 Doubt: Words as truth	232
7.7 Resolving self-deception	235
7.7.1 Healthy self-formation and streamwinning.....	235
7.7.2 "Seven at most": The significance of the number 7	236
7.7.3 Understanding the self.....	240
7.7.4 Seeing ourselves as we truly are.....	241
7.7.5 Understanding nonself.....	245
WHY SUPPORT OUR SUTTA TRANSLATION WORK: REASONS AND HISTORY	249

60.1d

Handbook of Meditation in Society 4

An Evolutionary Psychology of Mindfulness

Buddhist experience: The individual and society by Piya Tan ©TAN Beng Sin, 2023

1 Mindfulness in daily life

1.0 WHAT IS “EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY”?

Although the phrase “**evolutionary psychology**” is similar to that of a modern scientific discipline, it is simply a term I have adopted that is reflective of the nature of early Buddhist training, a path or journey of training in moral virtue (*sīla*), mindfulness psychology (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*). This term reflects the learning approach I have taken in writing this essay (SD 60.1d), discussing aspects of Buddhist experience as Buddhist individuals and as a group.

I have used “**mindfulness**” rather than the broad term “Buddhism” to narrow down this survey to focus on how *mindful* we are of the Buddha’s teachings and on *the nature of the minds* of Buddhists today, especially as reflected in their social actions. In other words, it is about how mindful we are of Buddhism today, both in the sense of actually recalling it as taught by the Buddha (as recorded in the suttas), and as we actually practise mindfulness the way it is taught by the Buddha.

SD 60.1c *The Rhetoric of Buddhist Experience* is a broad-based survey of Buddhism as constructed by scholars, as used by Buddhists themselves and as Buddhism’s interaction (or engagement) with the world. It is mostly a sociological survey of early Buddhism and its modern manifestations. This study has a practical purpose of understanding ourselves as modern Buddhists and becoming better individuals, how we can evolve as followers and practitioners of the Buddha’s teachings.

In contrast, **SD 60.1d** *An Evolutionary Psychology of Mindfulness*, as the subtitle suggests, is mostly a psychological survey of “Buddhist experience: The individual and society,” examining how Buddhists behave as individuals who are evolving in society. Occasionally, we will also examine how the scholars study the Buddhists in their daily lives. However, I am less interested in writing an academic tome than in keeping the records straight as one who seeks to know and see the Buddha’s teaching, and how we practise it so that we evolve into better humans, growing closer to the path.

1.1 WHAT IS EXPERIENCE IN EARLY BUDDHISM?

1.1.1 Body and mind

1.1.1.1 (1) The French scientist René (1596-1650) famously, but mistakenly, declared: *Cogito, ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am [exist]”).¹ Yet, there are so many things that exist, but they neither *think* (for example, plants) nor *live* (for example, earth and water). For just the present study, let us translate the Latin, *sum* (“I am”), idiomatically as “I live,” that is, as a living being. [7.7.4.1]

(2) This means that we have a mind (our learning faculty), and our physical senses (our doing faculty). We are **body and mind**, doing and minding, or better, simply, doing/minding or minding/-doing. How we act (do things) and how we mind and learn (or not) from our experiences depends on our attention to them each time. The difficulty with experience is that it is already gone when we perceive it: a *past* moment or memory. This is how we sense things; we *perceive* the “experienced.” [1.1.1.4]

¹ SD 2.16 (3.1.1.1).

1.1.1.2 In reality, so long as we are awake, we keep **sensing** *sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches*. Technically, “sensing” occurs at the physical senses, while “experiences” arise in the mind. The mind can, however, attend to either [7.7.4.2]: the Pali term for this is **manasikaroti**, “to attend to, to mind.” When the **attention** is proper, we notice how events occur as causes and effects, which in turn become *causes* bringing more *effects*, and so on: this is known as **conditionality** (*paccaya*). The proper attention of watching conditionality (including impermanence) is called **yoniso manasikāra**, “proper attention” or “wise attention.”²

When our mind is properly attending or focused on its object, we experience only 2 broad kinds of objects (*dhamma*): those of the body or of the mind. We can only experience (“sense”) **the body** in terms of *sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches*. Notice that we say here “experience the body,” not “through the body” (that is, the 5 senses: the eye, ear, nose, tongue and body). Even at this stage, we can say that we are what we sense: this is our **body**.

1.1.1.3 These senses, however, cannot work alone. When we are sleeping or unconscious, we still have functional senses,³ but we are not aware of any sensing activity. Our subconscious (*bhav’-āṅga*)⁴ is keeping us alive, so to speak; but **the mind** is, by itself, not conscious (like when we are sleeping, unconscious or in deep dhyana),⁵ that is, neither minding nor sensing. Hence, we do not sense anything. However, so long as the mind is present in a living person who is unconscious, such as asleep or under deep sedation, the mind may recall some experiences.⁶

Only when the mind is present and we are conscious, do we recognize (perceive) a sense-object or a mind-object. In other words, the mind senses or perceives its own self-created or “projected” objects. In this sense, technically, we say that the mind perceives (*sañjānāti*) sense-objects, and conceives (*maññati*) mind-objects. **The Mūla,pariyāya Sutta** (M 1) gives a useful and interesting description of how our mind works: how we perceive and conceive.⁷

Basically, when a sense-faculty senses a sense-object, the faculty becomes conscious of it, for example, when *the eye sees something*:

- (1) there is eye-consciousness (*viññāṇa*).
- (2) This triad (faculty + object + consciousness)—**the triangle of experience**—results in sensing, that is, contact (*phassa*). [1.2.10.1]
- (3) Dependent on this sensing arises feeling (*vedanā*).
- (4) On feeling the object (liking or disliking it), we perceive (*sañjānāti*) or recognize it.*
- (5) Then, we think (*vitakketi*) about it.
- (6) This makes us mentally proliferate (*papañceti*): our thoughts grow exponentially.
- (7) On account of this mental proliferation, we are flooded with thoughts and feelings about what’s going on, what happened in the past (memories), and what will happen in the future.⁸

*Notice that **feeling** (like, disliking, ignoring) arises *before* perceiving (recognizing): this is an involuntary reaction rooted in the unconscious: we don’t think about this until after it has happened. Notice

² Technically, this means to see any experience or moment of experience as being impermanent. SD 15.1 (5.6.2).

³ Even in a person in a coma, all or most of his senses would be intact.

⁴ On the subconscious, see SD 17.8b (1.1.2) def; SD 3.13 (5.3.2.3); SD 9 (9.10.5.2); SD 17.8a (6.1.2); SD 17.8b (3 + 5.1).

⁵ Consciousness is almost absent in the beings of the 4th formless realm, that of Neither-perception-nor-non-perception (*n’eva,saññā,nāsaññāyatana*) [SD 24.18; SD 57.17 (2.8.3)] and totally absent in the “non-percipient beings” (*asaññā,satta*) [SD 23.14 (3.2.60; SD 53.23 (2.1.5))].

⁶ We have cases where patients recall the music playing in the operation room or the operating team’s conversation while the patients were unconscious under anaesthesia. However, I’m not ready to discuss this at the moment.

⁷ M 1,3 + nn (SD 11.8); SD 6.1 (4.3).

⁸ On mental proliferation” (*papañca*), see SD 6.14 (2); also SD 57.1 (2.4.2.3).

that “think” (*vitakketi*) occurs after this. However, we can with training and a clear mind, intervene upon feeling by intending that this is “mind-made, impermanent ...,” and so on. [2.1.1.4]

1.1.1.4 We have noted how we perceive sense-experiences *after the fact* [1.1.1.1 (2)]: for example, the eye “senses” an object, then we see it. Now, we will briefly examine how we **conceive** a thought *before* the fact. Simply put, when we sense things in our daily life—when we see, hear, smell, taste, touch and think—we just let them come, we let them go; quickly they come, quickly they go. To that extent, no karma is created; or, describe above, we may direct a wholesome mind to it by reflecting on its conditioned and impermanent nature.

It is impossible for us to sense *all* our experiences at once; we may speak of “multi-tasking,” but we are merely referring to the *speed* at which our attention jumps from this and that object. In other words, we only “sense” or “know” (*vijānāti*) the object at which we direct our attention [1.1.1.2]. On a very simple level, we experience (sense or know) the most dominant sense-object, and this can change rapidly, as we *see, hear, smell, taste or touch* (feel) things.

1.1.1.5 Here is a summary of **the mental process** according to early Buddhist psychology,⁹ which begins by analysing the continuous stream of consciousness into a number of cognitive events. Each cognitive event is, in turn, analysed into 2 component parts. One is bare consciousness or *citta* and the other a constellation of mental factors (*cetasika*). This conception of a cognitive act is based on the early Buddhist analysis of the individual being into 5 aggregates (*pañca-k,khandha*): form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness. The last 4 of these are *the mental aggregates* that are always conjoined: they occur together, as shown in **the Upādāna Parivaṭṭa Sutta** (S 22.56).¹⁰

While *citta* corresponds to the aggregate of consciousness (*viññāṇa-k,khandha*), the *cetasikas* represent the other 3 mental aggregates (feeling, perception and formations). *Citta* as the knowing or awareness of an object is generally counted as one, while *cetasikas* which function as its “mental concomitants” total 52 [2.1.1.7]. Their position in relation to the well-known 12 sense-bases (*āyatana*) and 18 elements (*dhātu*) is as follows: While *citta* corresponds to the “mind-base” (*man’āyatana*), the *cetasikas* come under “mind-object-base” (*dharm’āyatana*), the sphere of mental objects.

This shows that *cetasikas* are directly apprehended by *citta* without the intermediate agency of any of the physical senses. Since *man’āyatana* is “internal” (*ajjhātika*) and *dharm’āyatana* “external” (*bāhira*), this shows, as Stcherbatsky observes, that the principle of externality of one element in relation to another is recognized in the mental sphere as well.¹¹

For in the *āyatana* set, while *citta* (*man’āyatana*) forms the subjective component, the *cetasikas* forms the objective component (*dharm’āyatana*). As Karunadasa has noted, this distinction does not correspond to the modern distinction between the subjective and the objective. This is, perhaps, traceable to the Buddhist denial of a self-entity as the agent of experience (2010:70).

1.1.1.6 In the analysis of “elements” (*dhātu*), *citta* is represented by 7 items, namely, mind (*mano*) and the 6 kinds of consciousness based on the 5 physical sense-faculties and the mind. Among the 7 items, the first is the mental faculty as *bare consciousness*. The next 5 refer to this same mind (*mano*) when based on the 5 physical sense-faculties, namely, eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, and body-consciousness.

The 6th is mind-consciousness, that is, consciousness having non-sensuous objects. This shows that mind (*mano,dhātu*) in its capacity as a cognitive faculty performs 2 functions. The first is that which cognizes non-sensuous objects, that is, as the sense-faculty sensitive to thoughts or ideas. The second is its function as the *sensus communis* (literally, “common sense”),¹² that is, as that which organizes and integrates the individual experiences of the physical sense-faculties. We find this twofold function

⁹ Also Y Karunadasa, *The Theravada Abhidhamma*, Hong Kong, 2010:70 f, 79; rev 2012.

¹⁰ S 22.56/3:58-61 (SD 3.7).

¹¹ Th Stcherbatsky, *Central Conception of Buddhism*, London, 1923:15-20. This work is mainly based on the late 4th cent Skt work Abhidharma,kośa of the Sautrāntika, one of the pre-Mahāyāna 18 early schools.

¹² See John D Schaeffer, *Sensus Communis: Vico, rhetoric and the limits of relativism*, Duke Univ Press, 1990.

recognized in the early texts as well, when they say that *while each separate sense is active in its own sphere the mind is the resort of them all*, as stated in **the Mahā Vedalla Sutta** (M 43).¹³

¹³ M 43,21/1:298 (SD 30.2); qu in DhsA 221.

Table 1.1.1.6 is not an Abhidhamma diagram but a simplified graphic representation of what is explained above following the sutta teachings:¹⁴

THE 18 ELEMENTS (aṭṭhārasa dhātu)		THE 12 SENSE-BASES (dvādas'āyatana)	THE 5 AGGREGATES (pañca-k, khanda)
The 6 faculty elements (cha indriya, dhātu)		The 6 internal sense-bases (cha ajjhatt'āyatana)	
eye element (cakkhu, dhātu)		eye-base	internal forms (ajjhattarūpa)
ear element (sota, dhātu)		ear-base	
nose element (ghāṇa, dhātu)		nose-base	
tongue element (jivhā, dhātu)		tongue-base	
body element (kāya, dhātu)		body-base	
mind element (mano, dhātu)		mind-base (man'āyatana)	consciousness (viññāṇa)
The 6 object elements (saḷ-āyatana, dhātu)		The 6 external sense-bases (cha bāhir'āyatana)	
(1) form-element (rūpa, dhātu)		sight-base	external forms (bāhirarūpa)
(2) sound-element (sadda, dhātu)		sound-base	
(3) smell-element (gandha, dhātu)		smell-base	
(4) taste-element (rasa, dhātu)		taste-base	
(5) touch-element (phoṭṭhabba, dhātu)		touch-base	
(6) mental-object elements (dhamma, dhātu)		mental-object base (dhamm'āyatana)	feelings (vedanā) perception (saññā) formations (sankhārā)
(7) The 6 consciousness elements (cha viññāṇa, dhātu)			consciousness (viññāṇa)
eye-consciousness element (cakkhu.viññāṇa, dhātu)			
ear-consciousness element (sota.viññāṇa, dhātu)			
nose-consciousness element (ghāṇa.viññāṇa, dhātu)			
tongue-consciousness element (jivhā.viññāṇa, dhātu)			
body-consciousness element (kāya.viññāṇa, dhātu)			
mind-consciousness element (mano.viññāṇa, dhātu)			

bare consciousness

the 7 aspects of the mind

dual functions

cognizes non-sensuous objects

integrates individual experiences

TABLE 1.1.1.6 THE 7 ASPECTS OF THE MIND. Cf SD 60.1E (TABLE 7.4) THE 4 ULTIMATES, SENSE-BASES, AND ELEMENTS. (Based on a diagram by GOH Hian Kooi)

¹⁴ For Abhidhamma notes, see Abhidhammattha, saṅgha: Abhs:BRS Guides to §§3.21 f, 7.37, 39.

In our daily life, we experience 6 continuous streams of sense-data: those flowing through the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. The first 5 are physical sense-data, while the 6th comprises thoughts. The 6th sense-data are more complicated: the mind is behind every physical sensing (seeing, hearing, etc), and also attends to its own “external” thoughts: each of these 6 is a “**mind-element**” (*mano,dhātu*). The 7th and last component is the mind that attends to its own *natural* functioning (watching the “bare” mental process), it is called “**mind-object element**” (*dhamma,dhātu*). The purely mental process that “minds” (that is, perceives, conceives, judges, constructs, projects, and so on) is the “**mind-consciousness element**” (*mano.viññāṇa,dhātu*).¹⁵ [2.1.1.7].

1.1.1.7 Thus, we experience—“cognize, have discriminative knowledge, are aware of, ascertain”—that sense-object. In fact, in the early suttas, it often simply means “to know,”¹⁶ at the sense level, *sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and thoughts*. These are the psychological bases of our **consciousness** (*viññāṇa*).

What we have described so far can, in modern terms, be called **the knower**. To know is to sense, as we have noted. Behind *the knower*—that which prods us on with an inner chatter—is the doer (another modern term): this is the mind just *before* we act, speak or think. This important aspect of our mind is called **intention** (*cetanā*), which can be any of the unwholesome roots or any of the wholesome roots. The unwholesome roots—greed (*lobha*), hate [hatred] (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*)—are listed first because we tend to be “instinctively” moved by them and act on them.

On account of our **evolutionary past**, there arises “the kinds of thoughts and perceptions that helped our ancestors get genes into the next generation.”¹⁷ Greed is not just a desire for material possessions, but a habit or instinct that is deeply rooted in the unconscious or latent tendency (*anusaya*)¹⁸ of sensual lust (*kāma,rāga*). We seem never to be satisfied with what we see, hear, smell, taste or touch; we look for more of what we like, and avoid what we dislike: we feel aversion (*paṭigha*) for the latter, manifested as *hate* (the opposite of greed), on our preconscious mind (the mind before we act).¹⁹ Then, there is ignorance (*avijjā*) that chains us to this loop of pulling (what we like) and pushing (what we dislike).

Of the 3 unwholesome roots, delusion (rooted in the latent tendency of ignorance) is the trickiest and most difficult to notice (we just don’t know what to notice!); hence, the most difficult to manage. The mind, among other things, works to *delude* us. Notice how our moments of greatest joy or deepest sorrow are all really rooted in delusion. Only when we have learned to cultivate and develop the wholesome roots—non-greed (charity), non-hate (love) and non-delusion (wisdom)—that we realize this. Then, we begin to ask ourselves life’s key questions: *What is the meaning of life? What is my purpose in life? What do I do next?* And so on. Simply, this is our “experience” in daily life. So long as we are awake (not in a sleeping state), this is what we do.

From all these—how we are prodded on by the unwholesome roots, and why we need to cultivate the wholesome roots—one vital reality should be noted: our mind is what moves us to act, speak and think. Our intention shapes our deeds as being unwholesome or wholesome. “The mind precedes all states” (*mano,pubbaṇ,gamā dhammā*, Dh 1 f) [2.1.1]. When we master the mind, we master *ourself*. This “self” then is a hive of experiences, of sensing and thinking, perception and conception. When we understand the nature of experience, we are better prepared to understand our mind and self.

¹⁵ For details, see Karunadasa 2010: ch 4.

¹⁶ Sn 93 f, 763; Dh 64, 65; Nm 442. Further see *citta mano viññāṇa* [1.2.5.5].

¹⁷ This is a perspective from evolutionary psychology: R Wright, *Why Buddhism is True*, Simon & Shuster, 2017:4; also 5, 212 f.

¹⁸ See *Anusaya*, SD 31.3.

¹⁹ On the preconscious, see SD 17.8b esp (1.1.2; 2.2); SD 7.10 (3.3).

1.1.2 Experience and knowledge

1.1.2.1 Briefly, this then, according to early Buddhism, is our human **experience**.²⁰ Firstly, notice that “experience” is an *uncountable* noun: it means “the feeling, knowledge and skill we have gained through doing or learning something over time.” When we experience something, we are, at some level, conscious of it. The mind perceives (*sañjānāti*) or recognizes an object: the mind is “internal” (*ajjhatta*), and works through the senses to experience the world of sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches. The mind is also aware of itself, that is, it conceives (*maññāti*) its own thoughts, which are projections or “proliferations” (*papañca*) of those sense-experiences and thoughts.

An ordinary person, like a noble individual on the path (including the arhat), is always conscious when awake. Whenever we are conscious, we are always conscious of something: a sense-object or a thought. In sense-experience, when we are “conscious,” we are always conscious *of* an object. However, the ordinary person (who is not yet on the path)²¹ experiences things differently from the learner (*sekha*, one on the path), from the arhat and the buddhas (*asekha*, “non-learners,” ie, adepts). Basically, the noble learner and the arhat are habitually mindful when they are awake [1.1.2.2].

1.1.2.2 The Mūla,pariyāya Sutta (M 1) records the Buddha as explaining how each of the following 4 kinds of persons experiences things:²²

- (1) **an ordinary person** or worldling perceives x so; then conceives it, delighting in it (*abhinandati*), not having fully understood it;
- (2) **the learner** perceives x, directly knows it (*abhiñānāti*); trains not to conceive it, so as not to delight in it, *so that* he fully understands it;
- (3) **the arhat** perceives x, directly knows it; does *not* conceive it; does *not* delight in it: this is because he has fully understood it, since he is free of greed, hate and delusion;²³
- (4) **the buddha** perceives x, directly knows it; *does not* conceive it; does *not* delight in it: this is because he has understood their respective roots, on account of understanding dependent arising. [2.2.5.3]

Technically, we can say that all the 4 kinds of individuals “perceive” (*sañjānāti*) and “conceive” (*maññāti*) [1.1.2.1], that is, they *perceive* sense-experiences and *conceive* thoughts.²⁴ Beyond this, each of these 4 kinds of individuals differs from one another in the way he experiences things, depending on his spiritual maturity. We will now briefly see how they differ, essentially, between the way the worldly “ordinary person” experiences, and the way of supramundane individuals (both the learners and the non-learners) experience.²⁵

1.1.2.3 On the perception (*saññā*) level, we tend to “delight” (*abhinandati*) in our sense-experiences and thoughts; then, we get caught up with them, we want more of such experiences: This, as we have noted, is the work of greed [1.1.1.7]. When we like something, it means that we hate losing that experience, and reject whatever that prevents us from getting that experience or which ends

²⁰ I was inspired to write on the theme of Buddhist experience after reading Robert Sharf’s insightful papers on “Buddhist modernism and the rhetoric of meditative experience.” *Numen* 42,3 1995:228-283; “Experience,” in (ed) Mark C Taylor, *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, Univ of Chicago Press, 1998:94-116; “‘Knowing blue’: Early Buddhist accounts of non-conceptual sense perception.” *Philosophy East and West* 68.3 2018:826-870.

²¹ “Not yet on the path” means that one is not yet even a streamwinner, the 1st stage of the noble eightfold path.

²² See M 1 (SD 11.8), esp Table 1.2.

²³ On the 3 unwholesome roots (*akusala mūla*), see **Mūla S** (A 3.69), SD 18.2; SD 4.14 (1.5); SD 50.20 (3.1.3).

²⁴ These mental processes have been mentioned here in a simplified (even simplistic) way at this stage.

²⁵ Again, this is a simplified explanation, mainly to show how the 3 roots works.

that experience. Every time we like or desire something, we feed the latent tendency of **lust** [1.1.1.7]. Every time we hate something, we feed the latent tendency of **aversion**.

How we perceive or recognize things now is likely to be coloured or darkened by our memories of past experiences, that is, in any of these ways:

- (1) When we link the present state²⁶ to a pleasant memory, we tend to like the present state.
- (2) When we link the present state to an unpleasant memory, we tend to dislike the present state.
- (3) When we have no such memory, good or bad, we are likely to ignore it.

Since (1) is rooted in greed (*lobha*), it feeds the latent tendency of lust (*rāgānusaya*).
 Since (2) is rooted in hate (*dosa*), it feeds our latent tendency of ill will (*paṭighānusaya*).
 Since (3) is rooted in delusion (*moha*), it feeds our latent tendency of ignorance (*avijjā'nusaya*).

Emotionally, we are paralysed by *greed or hate*—which are the Janus-faces of **craving** (*taṇhā*)—caught in a loop of teased what we like, taunted by what we dislike, from the subtlest emotions to the grossest act of violence. We simply do not know how to stop because we are varied around on the shoulders of blind **ignorance** (*avijjā*). Lame Janus-faced craving sits on the shoulders of blind ignorance and directs him how and where to go in our self-made virtual world.²⁷ This is how we are incessantly baited and lured by the 3 unwholesome roots in the samsaric arena.

1.1.2.4 According to the **Mūla,pariyāya Sutta** (M 1) the worldling “delights” in perceiving sense and conceiving mental experiences—these experiences constitute the 5 aggregates [1.1.1.3] because they have not fully understood them [1.1.2.2]. What happens when we (as worldlings) *delight* in any of the 5 aggregates (whether it is *the body, feelings, perception, formations or consciousness*)? We are caught up in either seeing or imagining such experiences as “abiding” or having some kind of “essence” that we want to relate to.

We see such states as being “beyond” us (who are impermanent, suffering, without self): they, on the other hand, are believed to be eternal and pleasurable states or essences: some kind of soul or everlasting states. The suttas call such a belief a “**self-identity view**” (*sakkāya,diṭṭhi*) or simply “self-view” (*attānudiṭṭhi*) [7.5.1]. We tend to project such a view in any of these 4 ways:²⁸

- (1) We see **x** (an aggregate, eg, our body or its solid nature, “earth,” etc) **as the self** [soul] [1.1.2.5]. This notion is conceived through craving, through conceit, or through views. These are the 3 types of conceiving (*maññanā* or *maññita*) or “graspings” (*gaha*).²⁹
- (2) We see **the self or soul as possessing x** (eg, our consciousness). This is the best-known modern soul-idea, especially amongst theistic religions: the eternal “soul” or “breath” gives life to the body, and when this soul or breath finally departs (to heaven or to hell), the body dies. This view is often attended by the belief that some higher agency (such as God) created such a soul, which may be mortal or immortal.

²⁶ “State” here refers to “anything,” a person, a thing, an event or a situation.

²⁷ “The foolish, hindered by ignorance and yoked to craving”: **Bāleṇa Paṇḍita S** (S 12.19,2), SD 21.2; SD 40a.8 (2.1.1). The fable of “the blind man and the lame” is ancient, first attested in Western literature in the Greek (1st cent BCE) (mistakenly attr to Aesop). W R Paton (tr), London & NY: *The Greek Anthology* (in 5 vols), vol 3 bk 9 §§12, 13, 13B, 1917 8; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Blind_Man_and_the_Lame.
<https://archive.org/details/greekanthology03newyuoft/page/8/mode/2up?view=theater&q=lame>.

²⁸ See **Pārileyya S** (S 22.81,12-30), SD 6.1; SD 40a.8 (3.3); SD 55.17 (3.1.3.5). The first view is rooted in annihilationist view (*uccheda,diṭṭhi*); the rest, in eternalist view (*sassata,diṭṭhi*). On the 4 kinds of *attā'nudiṭṭhi*, see SD 2.16 (15.1.2, 15.2.1).

²⁹ **Mūla,pariyāya S** (M 1,3) n, SD 11.8; **Ejā S 1** (S 35.90), SD 29.10 (3); SD 31.10 (2.6). Subcomy: Craving, conceit and views are referred to here [MA 1:25,34], by 2 synonymous terms, “conceivings” and “proliferating tendencies” (MAṬ:Be 1:69).

- (3) We see **x** as being **in** [a part of] **the self or soul**. The self or soul is independent of or separate from the form aggregate. The best example of this is the brahminical belief in Brahman, the universal Soul, of which ours is but an “individual soul.”
- (4) We see the self or soul as being in **x** (an aggregate), meaning that the formless self or soul is located in some form or body. This is a description of *popular or animistic beliefs* in some kind of extracorporeal or disembodied being that is able to leave the body at will, and even inhabit another or some external object.³⁰

1.1.2.5 The Mūla,pariyāya Sutta (M 1) explains that for a worldling, the “**x**” [1.1.2.4 (1) etc] can be any aspect of these 8 grounds (*bhūmi*), with which we tend to identify as some kind of “eternal state,” self or soul, thus:³¹

- (1) **The 4 elements**: earth, water, fire, wind; in modern terms: solidity, liquidity, heat and gaseousness; for example, we may view that “everything is heat (fire).”³²
- (2) **The sense-sphere**: our sense-based universe, comprising beings (any living being), the gods (including intelligent alien life), or some Supreme God-idea (represented by Prajapati in the Mūla,pariyāya Sutta).³³
- (3) **The form-sphere**: the universe of beings of refined matter, that is, pure light-energy; such as Brahma and other such gods (or alien beings) of light.³⁴
- (4) **The 4 formless-sphere**: the universe of pure-energy beings; the beings of the universe that is infinite space, that is infinite consciousness, that is nothingness, or that is neither perception nor non-perception.³⁵
- (5) **The 4 modes of perception**: the seen, the heard, the sensed (the smelt, tasted, felt) and the known (cognized). The most common self-view is that of the last, that the Soul is our consciousness.³⁶
- (6) **The 2 modes of personal identity**: we tend to view the self or Soul as “one” (unity), such as the One Universal Soul, or as “many” (diversity).³⁷
- (7) **All (*sabba*)**: the view that the *whole* universe is the Great Soul.³⁸
- (8) **Nirvana**: some philosophical (Nirvana is the here and now) or theological view (samsara and nirvana are identical), etc.³⁹

1.2 THE NATURE OF EXPERIENCE

1.2.1 Experience and its objects

1.2.1.1 How do we know what we are experiencing? [1.2.3]. How do we know it is a Buddhist experience? How does the experience transform or benefit us? [1.1.2]. These are some of the questions we will examine and try to find some answers. This exploration is based on how early Buddhism

³⁰ For further details on these 4 self-identity views, see SD 2.16 (15.2.1).

³¹ See SD 11.8 (4.3.0.2).

³² M 1,3.2 + n (SD 11.8). On these 4 great elements (*mahā,bhūta*) or the 4 great elements constituting form or matter (*imahā,bhūta,rūpa*), see **Mahā Rāhu’ovāda S** (M 11,8-11, with §12 on “space”), SD 3.11; **Mahā Hatthi,pādōpama S** (M 28,6), SD 6.16.

³³ M 1,8 f + nn (SD 11.8); SD 57.10 (3.2).

³⁴ M 1,10-12 + nn(SD 11.8); SD 57.10 (6.1.2).

³⁵ M 1,15 + n (SD 11.8); SD 57.10 (6.1.3).

³⁶ M 1,19 + header n (SD 11.8); SD 53.5.

³⁷ M 1,23 + header n (SD 11.8); SD 29.10 (3).

³⁸ M 1,25 + n (SD 11.8); SD 7.1.

³⁹ M 1,26 + n (SD 11.8); SD 50.1 (3.3.2).

explains experience, how it is constructed (perception, conception, imagination), and how it is natural or automatic (knowing and seeing). [1.2.2.2 (4)]

To summarize, then, we can say that “to experience is to know,” that is, gather, examine, recall and use what we sense and mind (that is, the 6 sense-experiences of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking). When we speak of “Buddhist experience,” we are speaking of knowing what we are experiencing, whether it is wholesome or not. Both are to be discerned and understood as they are: the unwholesome is thus *not* to be done, and existing unwholesome states should be overcome; the wholesome should be cultivated and should be maintained. These are, in fact, **the 4 right efforts**.

1.2.1.2 Wholesome **experience** comprises 2 key aspects: the body and the mind [1.1.1]. In the early Buddhist training of ***satipaṭṭhāna*** (establishment or focuses of mindfulness)—as laid out in **the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta** (M 10),⁴⁰ we are instructed by the Buddha to train in “establishing mindfulness⁴¹ before us” (*parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapeti*).⁴² First, we need to correct the modernist over-simplification that says mindfulness means to keep our focus in the present moment.

While we should keep our mind focused on, say, the rise and fall of the breath or thoughts “before us” (*parimukha*), this is not so in other kinds of meditation, such as the reflections [1.2.2.4], where we recollect some qualities, say of the Buddha, the Dharma or the sangha: this entails some effort in recalling the past, from our memory. Then, there is the cultivation of lovingkindness—where mindfulness keeps our mind focused on the lovingkindness directed to oneself and various people, including other beings. This is directing our mind to what is to come, the future. Hence, mindfulness needs to be applied to all the 3 periods of time depending on the meditative context.

Hence, the term *parimukha* does not refer merely to *time*, but keeping the mind properly directed to the meditation subject. We should not only know what is going on *right now*, but we should know what really is going on: this is experiential knowledge characterized by attention, consideration, discrimination and comprehension; or simply focus leading to mental concentration.

To “focus” means to renounce (let go) of all other sensing and thinking, and keep our mind only on the meditation object. The Buddha teaches various methods we can use to remove distractions and hindrances to focus our mind. Let us now look at a special set of teachings in this connection.

1.2.2 Supports for Buddhist experience

1.2.2.1 When we speak of “Buddhist experience,” we are referring to mindfulness and meditation. For a start, we will treat mindfulness and meditation together. We will briefly examine where they overlap, that is, *meditation as mindfulness*. To meditate we need to be mindful: our mind should be focused on the meditation object. In sutta language, we are instructed to “establish mindfulness” (*sati upaṭṭhapeti*).

The (Ekādasaka) Nandiya Sutta (A 11.13) gives an interesting and important set of teachings to the Sakya layman Nandiya, who is recorded as spending the rains retreat in the vicinity of the Buddha so that he is able to listen to the Buddha’s teachings and get his work done in Sāvattṭhī. With the ending of the rains and before the Buddha goes on his tour of teaching, he instructs Nandiya that a lay practitioner should first establish himself in 6 qualities [1.2.2.2], and then establish mindfulness (*sati upaṭṭhāpetabbā*) through 5 reflections [1.2.2.3].⁴³

⁴⁰ **M 10**/1:55-63 (SD 13.3). This is the “practice” sutta. **Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna S** (D 22/2:290-315) is meant for study. The Burmese version of **D 22** incorporates **Sacca Vibhaṅga S** (M 141/3:248-351 (SD 11.11), which, however, makes it lengthy and cumbersome: SD 13.1 (1.1.1, 1.6)

⁴¹ For a definition of mindfulness, see SD 60.1e (1.1.4).

⁴² *Upaṭṭhapeti* (etc) (causative of *upaṭṭhāti*), “to cause to appear, bring about” [DP 1:450]. [1.2.2.2]

⁴³ A 11.14/5:334-337 (SD 99.2) = A:Be 11.13.

1.2.2.2 Firstly, as lay practitioners, we “should develop [establish]” (*patiṭṭhāya*)⁴⁴ **6 qualities**: *faith, moral virtue, effort, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom*. Then, we should establish mindfulness (*sati upaṭṭhapetabbā*)⁴⁵ internally by way of **5 reflections**, that is, those on *the Buddha, the Dharma, spiritual friends, charity we have done, and deities*. Both the verbs *patiṭṭhāya* and *upaṭṭhāpetabbā* come from the same root, √STHĀ, “to stand,” meaning to establish. Here, the former applies in an intellectual and psychological manner, that is, to know and understand the purpose of those 6 qualities; the latter term refers to their actual application by way of each of the 5 reflections. In short, the former is the theory, the latter the practice.

The 6 qualities to be “established” and mastered for a lay practitioner are done in the following ways:

(1) **Faith** (*saddhā*), in early Buddhism, has a double sense (the passive and the active) of self-reliance (*atta, saraṇa*) or “self-refuge” [2.1.2.4]. In the passive or “cognitive” sense, that is, the confidence arising from learning the Dharma, studying the suttas, or listening to teachings. The active or “affective” sense of *faith* refers to the confidence arising from a personal experience or meditation. In either case, it is the effort of “understanding so that we may believe.” Hence, they are called “wise faith” (*ākāravati saddhā*) or “confidence through understanding” (*avecca-p, pasāda*).⁴⁶ [2.1.2.4]

(2) **Moral virtue** (*sīla*) is the refining of our bodily and verbal karma (intentions expressed through the body and speech) so that they conduce to mental concentration. Bodily good karma comprises the 5 kinds of respect, that is, for life (not to kill), for others’ happiness (not to steal), for other’s freedom (not to commit sexual misconduct), for truth (not to lie), and for the mind (not to cloud it in any way, especially through intoxicants or drugs). They are, in fact, the 5 precepts (rooted in natural morality), and practised with lovingkindness for self and compassion for others.⁴⁷

(3) **Effort** (*virīya*) means that we keep up the 4 right efforts in our daily lives. When we do not have a bad habit (like smoking, drinking or immorality), we keep this up: this is the effort to restrain (the senses). When we notice any negative thought or action arising in us, we make the effort to abandon it. We then assert the effort to cultivate, that is, initiating a wholesome habit not done before (such as keeping the precepts, studying the suttas or meditating). Finally, we keep up the effort to maintain such wholesome habits.⁴⁸

(4) **Mindfulness** (*sati*) is the practice of keeping the mind calm and clear, learning to see through both of the past and of the future as mentally constructed, and watching the impermanence of the present as it arises and falls.⁴⁹ At this stage, we practise to understand the basic nature of the 4 focuses of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*): those of the body (*kāyānupassanā*), of feelings (*vedanā, nupassanā*), of the mind (*cittānupassanā*), and of dharmas or realities (*dharmānupassanā*). [1.2.1]

It is sufficient, at this stage, for us to cultivate the mindfulness of the breath (*ānāpāna, sati*) as the basis for understanding the fundamentals of the 4 satipatthanas. When we begin to watch our breath in meditation, we are watching the body, that is, the physical body, and we notice how the

⁴⁴ Gerund or absolutive of *patiṭṭhahati* (*pati* + √STHĀ, “to stand”), “standing against, supported by” (DP 3:172; DhammajotiRP §9.4.3 p160).

⁴⁵ Fut pass part of *upaṭṭhahati* (and its various forms) [DPS 1:448, 450], “should be caused to appear, brought about.” [1.2.1.2]

⁴⁶ On faith, cognitive and affective: SD 10.4 (2.2). On the faith of Sāriputta and the householder Citta: SD 60.1c (12.1.4).

⁴⁷ On moral virtue, see SD 54.2e (2.3.2.4); helped by lovingkindness, SD 1.5 (2.9); leads to concentration, SD 57.10 (3.1.2).

⁴⁸ On the 4 right efforts, see SD 10.1 (4); SD 10.2; SD 10.16 (6.2).

⁴⁹ See **Bhadd’eka, ratta 5** (M 121), SD 8.9.

senses intrude and demand our attention: we respond each time by renouncing every one of these sensings by bringing our mind back to focus on the breath.⁵⁰

In due course, the breath becomes subtler, more mental, and we notice how pleasant and liberating it is: this is the **feeling** that we must watch, and it needs to be renounced, so that we progress beyond the breath. We then notice, for example, the joy. **The mind** notices that the joy changes: it is impermanent. We see that these **dhammas** or realities—the 5 mental hindrances, the 5 aggregates, the 6 sense-bases, the 7 awakening-factors, the 4 noble truths—appear as passing visions and momentary flashes of insight that build up, giving us a clearer and fuller understanding of our mind and reality. This also helps to improve our mental concentration.⁵¹

(5) **Concentration** (*samādhi*) as a limb of the noble eightfold path is defined as the 4 form dhyanas (*rūpa-jjhāna*), that is, when the mind is blissfully and radiantly free from the body (the physical senses). Dhyana is necessary for the attainment of non-returning and arhathood.⁵² The attainment of streamwinning or once-returning does not need dhyana, but upon attaining these path-states, it is easier for us to attain dhyana necessary for the higher path-states. At this preliminary stage, we cultivate sufficient mental calm and clarity to know and see impermanence, or even suffering and nonself. [4.1.5.0]

(6) **Wisdom** (*paññā*) refers to the right understanding gained from the above practices that is directed to the perception of impermanence (*anicca,saññā*)—contemplating the rising and falling away in our daily life—which is the basis for our aspiration to attain streamwinning in this life itself, and gain the path to freedom from suffering.⁵³

1.2.2.3 These 6 qualities are an extended set of **the 5 spiritual faculties** (*pañc'indriya*)—the factors that conduce to mental development with meditation⁵⁴—with moral virtue added to it. Since Nandiya (to whom the Buddha gives this teaching) is a layman (not a renunciant), this teaching set reminds him (and us) that faith and moral virtue are the vital bases for healthy mental development and spiritual liberation. A morally healthy body (deeds and speech) supports a healthy mind, and both bring happiness in this life, and lead to the path of awakening.

The Dīgha,jānu Sutta (A 8.54) lists 4 of these qualities—*faith, moral virtue, charity and wisdom*—to be “accomplished” (*sampadā*) by the lay person who lives by earning an honest and diligent living. Clearly, this is the practice of a busy working lay person who learns to live by mentally noting impermanence in daily life even though he does not practise deep meditation.⁵⁵

1.2.2.4 The Buddha teaches Nandiya the lay practitioner's 6 qualities [1.2.2.2] as the grounds for **the 5 reflections** (*anussati*): those on *the Buddha, the Dharma, spiritual friends, charity we have done, and deities* [1.2.2.1]. This pentad is an abridged version of the 6 reflections mentioned in **the (Chakka) Mahānāma Sutta** (A 6.10), that is, those on the Buddha, the Dharma, the sangha, moral virtue, charity and the deities.⁵⁶ The recollection on the sangha has been omitted from the pentad either because Nandiya is a layman or that he is not close to the monks.

⁵⁰ The beginner's breath meditation is laid out in **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10,4 f), SD 13.3. For details, see **Ānāpāna,sati S** (M 118), SD 7.13,

⁵¹ See **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10), SD 13.3.

⁵² Arhathood or awakening needs dhyana: SD 8.5 (2); SD 10.16 (1.5.1.6); SD 15.1 (13); SD 41.1 (2.2.2.4); SD 23.6 (4).

⁵³ **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.2), SD 16.7.

⁵⁴ On the 5 spiritual faculties, see *Pañc'indriya*, SD 10.4; SD 3.6 (3)' SD 54.3h (3.1).

⁵⁵ A 8.54,11 etc (SD 5.20).

⁵⁶ A 6.10/3:284-288 (SD 15.3). On the 5 meditations, see SD 4.18 (3.2.0.3).

The recollection of moral virtue is not listed because it is to be cultivated by keeping to the precepts (one of the 6 qualities) as a basis for meditation. Any of the following recollections will inspire us with the joyful mindfulness we need for mental concentration.

Briefly, the 5 recollections are significant in the following ways:

(7) **The recollection of the Tathagata (the Buddha)** (*buddhânussati*) is a powerful reminder that even as humans, we are capable of attaining the superhuman or transhuman state of the path of awakening. The Buddha's arising reminds us that we should not take for granted that the teaching is always present; that we are fortunate to have the teachings now, and should at once take this opportunity for practice. The Buddha's passing reminds us that his physical body—a composite of the 4 elements—is conditioned and impermanent: the final proof, as it were, that everything (even the Buddha) is impermanent. Yet, nirvana is the unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*) timeless liberation from sam-sara. **The (Ekādasaka) Nandiya Sutta** (A 11.13) gives the traditional recollection of the 9 virtues of the Buddha.⁵⁷

(8) **The recollection of the Dharma** (*dharmânussati*) reminds us of the natural truth and universal reality of the Buddha's teaching—that all things in the universe are impermanent, suffering, nonself. The Buddha fully understands this and declares it to the world for our liberation. This Dharma that is true reality is neither something that we must believe in (hold views about it) nor something that we ritually commune with as an external agency of succour or salvation. We can only and must practise it, beginning with the understanding and accepting that we are capable of **self-effort**, self-realization and self-liberation.⁵⁸

(9) **The recollection of spiritual friends** (*kalyāṇa, mittânussati*) is that of rejoicing in the good and gain that we have spiritual friends who, out of compassion, desire for our good, instruct and guide us in the Dharma. This recollection specifically refers to having a good teacher, from whom we receive proper Dharma teachings and meditation instructions. This is a joyful companionship of like-minded virtue and vision.⁵⁹

(10) **The recollection of charity** (*cāgânussati*) is rejoicing in the fact that, despite living surrounded by crowds of those who are obsessively stained with greed and miserliness, we dwell at home free from such stain, freely generous, open-handed, devoted to charity, delighting in giving and sharing. Such a recollection inspires gratification and joy within us which helps us cultivate concentration in our meditation.⁶⁰

(11) **The recollection of deities** (*devatā'nussati*) is a "bridging practice" introduced by the Buddha for those who believe in some kind of heavenly beings (devas) or aliens, that they too, are reborn with a mind-made body in companionship with deities who have evolved beyond the need of being sustained by solid food, sustained instead by joy; hence, seeing themselves as happily satisfied beings. The happiness and longevity of these deities are the karmic fruits of having lived habitually with moral virtue and mental joy and goodness.⁶¹ Notice that this is *not* a prayer to some "other" or higher agency, but a reflection on how good inspires greater goodness, and how we can transform our faith into mental concentration and wisdom.⁶²

⁵⁷ A 11.14,4 (SD 99.2); see also *Buddhânussati*, SD 15.7 for details.

⁵⁸ On whether buddhas arise or not, the true Dharma exists: **Dhamma, niyāma S** (A 3.134), SD 26.8; see also *Dharmânussati*, SD 15.9 for details.

⁵⁹ On spiritual friendship, see **Spiritual friendship: A textual study** (SD 34.1); **Spiritual friendship: Stories of kindness** (SD 8.1).

⁶⁰ For charity as the foundation (*adhiṭṭhāna*) of spiritual life and awakening, see **Dhātu Vibhaṅga S** (M 140,-27), SD 4.17; see also *Cāgânussati*, SD 15.9 for details.

⁶¹ In this connection, it forms one of the 6 habitual practices of the streamwinner [4.1.5.1 n].

⁶² On the recollection of deities, see *Devatā'nussati*, SD 15.3.

1.2.3 How do we know what we are experiencing?

1.2.3.1 The ability to **know** is perhaps the most fascinating human faculty: it makes us human, and possibly more than human, even *superhuman*, in the physical and mental sense. Since we have the capacity to *know*, we may also have the capacity to understand (think and know for oneself) what this means or could possibly mean. Advancements in medical science help us to better understand our body and health. While religion tends to exploit the mind of others and warps our own, spirituality, properly cultivated, frees the mind.

Some scholars are of the view that, on historical, philosophical and ethnographical grounds, all experiences, including religious and mystical experience, are socially, culturally and conceptually mediated, that is, conditioned by our society, community and ourselves.⁶³ To **know**, then, is a broad term for when we are aware of something, understand it, or realize it, as a result of our experience. What we do with this kind of knowledge depends on how well aware we are of our body and mind, and of others. [1.2.1]

1.2.3.2 In this context, to be “**aware**” is simply to sense something through any of the 6 senses: the 5 physical senses and the mind. To “**understand**” means to see and relate causes and effects, that is, the meaning of conditionality. To “**realize**” is to understand our experience, as result of which we see purpose in our life, and ultimately, to be free of our senses and mind. More of this as we delve deeper into our study here.

1.2.4 How do we know it is a *Buddhist* experience?

1.2.4.1 Broadly speaking, “experience” does not belong to any religion or category: there is simply experience, succinctly described above. Having said and understood this, we may speak of **Buddhist experience**, or better, early Buddhist experience, which actually speaks volumes, or at least a series of essays, of which this is a part (SD 60). We are here speaking of how a Buddhist acts, speaks and thinks, and how such acts bring about wholesome states, even liberation.

There are 2 ways of studying this interesting but challenging task, on account of its purview and profundity; yet, it is the most natural aspect of Buddhism as a whole. The first method is a scholar’s careful study—an etic⁶⁴ or outsider’s approach—to the topic, that is, a “scholar’s Buddhism.” A scholar relies mostly on texts, traditions, studies, maybe feedback from informers, even living with Buddhists for a time, and, of course, a lot of insight. Robert Sharf [3.2.1.1] has done this remarkably

⁶³ See Sharf, “Knowing blue: Early Buddhist accounts of non-conceptual sense perception,” *Philosophy East and West* 68,3 2018:827.

⁶⁴ This anthropological and linguistic distinction (that is, “frames” or “strategies” of study) was introduced by scholars. By etic (from *phonetic*) is meant the most general, often universal, frame for analyzing cultural behaviour, ie, a generalization beyond the subject’s cultural world, and an emic (from *phonemic*) frame examines social subsets of the species. ie, the “inner” or native view. While emics (Goodenough, “Componential analysis and the study of meaning,” *Language* 32 1956:22-37) refer to local (single culture) meaning, function and structure, etics are culture-free (or at least operate in more than one culture) aspects of the world:

Kroeber & Kluckhohn, *Culture: A critical review of concepts and definitions*, 1952:181.

Pike, *Language in Relation to a United Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior*, 1966.

Berry, “Introduction to methodology,” in (edd) Triandis & Berry, *Handbook of Cross Cultural Methodology*, 1980:12.

Brislin, “Translation and content analysis of oral and written materials,” in (edd) Triandis & Berry, *Handbook of Cross Cultural Methodology*, 1980.

Naroll, Michik & Naroll, “Holocultural research,” in (edd) Triandis & Berry, op cit, 1980.

See Gale Ency of Sociology, 2nd ed 2000, 1:550, 564, 3:2091 f 4:2889.

I’ve not used these terms in a strict technical sense, but as convenient terms for what I wish to highlight in this study.

well with a deep feeling for Buddhism—which makes his works (mentioned in the footnote) valuable, and as far as such studies go, enduring.

1.2.4.2 Open-minded Buddhists (that is, those who are not burdened by ethnic or dogmatic aspects of Buddhism), those who are deeply curious about what the Buddha teaches, of which the Pali canon serves *as an open window into the nature of his awakening*, would understand that **the Abhidhamma** (or the Sanskrit Abhidharma) is not canonical (not taught by the Buddha) for the simple reason that it is *historically* not so.

The Abhidhamma was a post-Buddha attempt to systematize and enumerate into a unified and complete theory or set of theories of what the Buddha taught and what he seemed to have left unaddressed. Where the Abhidhamma or Abhidharma clarifies for us “what is related to the Dharma” (*abhi-dhamma*)⁶⁵ without going against the spirit of the suttas, we may use it.

Beyond that, no matter how interesting or “scientific” it may sound, it is mostly theories and dogmas based on personal views of certain teachers. For this reason, we have, even before the rise of the Mahāyāna, at least 18 early Buddhist schools, each with their canon of Abhidharma or views of it. The only Abhidharma canons that have survived almost intact are those of the Theravāda and the Sarvāstivāda.⁶⁶

The Abhidhamma, by its very attempt to be theoretically and technically accurate—unlike the more experiential nature of the suttas—opens itself to further theorizing and development. More so, in its efforts to be what we today would say “scientific,” it invites scholars to study it, even master it better than most Buddhists would, and compare it with other philosophical and psychological theories and systems. In short, we are now beginning to see a growing number of modern scholars critically examining the various Abhidharma theories and dogmas, revealing the difficulties, even flaws, in their efforts to theorize or philosophize on the Buddha’s experiential teachings.⁶⁷

1.2.4.3 A good study of Buddhism, even as an **etic** effort [1.1.1.3] can help us, as Buddhists, better understand the deeper aspects of early Buddhism, building up from what we (as Buddhists) already know. We are then better equipped to examine with a deeper understanding of our own experience as Buddhists. In other words, early Buddhism is not an academic mastery of the Buddha’s teachings (useful and profitable as this may be)—which can only be at best an *etic* study—but it is our effort to recount and relate Buddhism as our own experience, especially through meditation and mindfulness, of what the Buddha teaches: this is an **emic** scholarship, a study of early Buddhism based on our own experiences of it, that is, not merely a scholar’s Buddhism, but a “practitioner’s Dharma.”

1.2.5 Active and passive aspects of experience

1.2.5.1 THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN EXPERIENCE AND CONSCIOUSNESS

These are clearly two necessary and important aspects of our being: that we live means that we **experience** things and are conscious of them (or not). Perhaps, we can begin with the basic understanding that “experience” refers to what we *see, hear, smell, taste or touch*; and what we are “conscious” of refers to what goes on in our minds: thinking, feeling, perceiving, conceiving, imagining, dreaming, and so on. Now we have enough to think about and discuss for the rest of this section.

When we say that experience comprises what we *see, hear, smell, taste or touch*, we are referring to the **active** aspects of our being: we see, we hear, we smell, and so on; and yet these experiences

⁶⁵ See K R Norman, *Pali Literature*, 1983b:97.

⁶⁶ For a scholarly overview, see Noa Ronkin, “Abhidharma,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/abhidharma/>; also Y Karunadasa, *The Theravāda Abhidhamma*, Hong Kong, 2010.

⁶⁷ A good example of such a critical analysis is seen in Robert Sharf, “Knowing blue,” op cit, 2018. See also **Dhamma and Abhidhamma**, SD 26.1.

are more often **passive**. Often, we do not need to make an effort to see, hear, smell, taste or touch. It simply *happens* to us. Either way, whether we act through our senses or we sense through our acts, they *are* not only our conduct but they also influence our mind, that is, how we will act or react the next time.

In simple terms, when we act in a certain way—like learning to walk, or to ride a bike, or to read this—we **learn** by repeating our experience. “We” here is the mind acting through our senses: in other words, we can say that the mind is like a computer (the CPU, BIOS, RAM, etc) while the 5 senses are its peripherals (monitor, sound system, keyboard, mouse and so on). Yet all these things must function together for the computer to “work,” for us to live “sensibly.”

We can imagine how our mind is like a computer, and the rest of our body (the physical senses) like its peripherals. We need them all, so to speak, for “us” to exist, to live. Our mind is behind all the actions we do, whether we are conscious of them or not; and our senses feed the mind with sense-data: they are all interconnected. This is what the suttas mean when it speaks of “**the body with the mind**” (*sa, viññāṇaka, kāya*).⁶⁸

1.2.5.2 A STRONG MIND CAN GROW IN EVEN A DISABLED BODY

As humans, we cannot live by body alone nor mind alone. We may exist only with our body—the eye, ear, nose, tongue and body—we would then be said to be a “vegetable” in a coma. We may exist only as the mind: we would then be in a dream or, more terribly, existing in some kind of paraplegic way with very limited power over our limbs and faculties.

Helen Keller (1880-1968), American author, disability rights advocate, political activist and lecturer, lost her sight and hearing after an illness when she was 19 months. Her achievements showed that even a blind-deaf person with severe speech impediment was able to live a full intellectual and social life. Sadly, the social attitude of her times did not allow a disabled woman to marry although she was engaged with someone she deeply loved. Keller was keenly intelligent and an expressive person, with a powerful sense of social activism, despite her disabilities.⁶⁹

Stephen Hawking (1942-2018), English theoretical physicist, cosmologist and author, is regarded as one of the most brilliant theoretical physicists in history. His work on the origins and structure of the universe, from the Big Bang to black holes, revolutionized the field of theoretical physics, while his best-selling books on science have appealed to readers without any scientific background. He is best known for his discovery that black holes emit radiation which can be detected by special instrumentation. His discovery has made the detailed study of black holes possible.

In October 1959, at only 17, he began his university education at University College, Oxford, where he received a 1st-class BA degree in physics. In October 1962, at 21, he began his graduate work at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, where in March 1966, he obtained his PhD degree in applied Mathematics and theoretical physics, specializing in general relativity and cosmology.

In 1963, Hawking was diagnosed with an early-onset slow-progressing form of motor neurone disease (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis or ALS) that gradually, over the decades, paralysed him.⁷⁰ He was told that he had only 2 years to live. He had a dream in which he was about to be executed, and believed that this disease helped him become the scientist that he famously was: “Before my condition was diagnosed, I had been very bored with life, there did not seem to be anything worth doing.”⁷¹

⁶⁸ SD 17.8a (12.3); SD 56.1 (4.3.2.2) n.

⁶⁹ Helen Keller with Anne Sullivan & John A Macy, *The Story of My Life*, NY: Doubleday, 1903. For refs: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller.

⁷⁰ “Mind over matter: How Stephen Hawking defied Motor Neurone Disease for 50 years,” *The Independent* 26 Nov 2015; “How has Stephen Hawking lived to 70 with ALS?” *Scientific American* 7 Jan 2012.

⁷¹ *Stephen Hawking: An inspirational story of willpower and strength*, Swagatham Section 12 <https://www.swagathamcanada.com/inspirational/stephen-hawking-an-inspirational-story-of-willpower-and-strength/>.

With the sudden realization that he might not even live long enough to complete his PhD, Hawking devoted all of his time and energy to his work and research. He once said, “When I was 21, my expectations were reduced to zero. Everything that has happened since then has been a bonus.” At the time of his death, Hawking was director of research at the Centre for Theoretical Cosmology at the University of Cambridge. He was married and survived by three children.

Real-life stories like these—of Keller and Hawking—testify to the fact that when the mind is strong and lucid enough, it is neither hampered nor limited by a frail, even disabled body. So long as some sense of perception (that is, at least touch), with some help from human ingenuity or scientific invention, learning and expression are possible by the physically handicapped person. In short, it is the mind that limits or breaks the limits of our personal development.

1.2.5.3 HOW OUR BODY IS CONNECTED WITH THE MIND

As humans, we need both our body and our mind [1.2.1] to function properly, and for us to *sense, know, and understand* our sense-experiences; the mind must have some level of stability (calm) and lucidity (clarity). Sense-experiences feed us knowledge: we know, for example, a colour or shape, a sound, a smell, a taste or a touch (a feeling). However, even animals can sense in this manner, often in a more agile or dexterous way: they can, in some way, *see, hear, smell, taste or feel* better than we do. However, they can only **sense** things better, even know or learn from them (like a cow or a deer knowing a better pasture), but they can often be tricked and trapped by humans. In other words, humans have a better **understanding** and command of what they sense and know.

Human experience is not limited to the body level, so to speak, but we “mind” such experiences: we have memory, we notice causes, conditions and effects, we are able to make wise choices (or not to), we can (often enough) create or re-create such experiences if we desire. We are able to learn from such experiences and communicate them (the experiences and learning) so that we evolve not just physically and socially, but also mentally and spiritually.

With such understanding, and proper effort, we begin to notice and understand the universal nature of the causes and effects (conditionality) of such sense-experiences and their respective sense-objects (sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and thoughts). This means that we **think** about it: *before* we act, *while* we are acting, *after* we have acted. Thinking, according to early Buddhism, is a function of the mind, which (according to early Buddhism) is not located in the brain or any particular part of the body. The mind pervades our whole body and being, even beyond.⁷²

1.2.5.4 HOW WE THINK

To better understand what it means to say that our mind pervades our whole being, let us explore how the mind functions, or more exactly: **how we think**. An idea of human evolution, and how we learn to think about ourselves, and then as a society, is briefly related in **the Aggañña Sutta** (D 27). In this mythical re-evolution (a new beginning) of the universe, humans and society, we are described as arising in the watery expanse from which we, as radiant formless beings, began to feed on some kind of nutritious matter in the primordial waters.

In due course, plants evolved, and we fed on them, our bodies taking progressively more solid form and shape. We began to notice differences in these shapes, suggesting an awareness of others, and thinking about them. Over the long duration of our evolution, physical, social and sexual, we learned to gather food, and live moral lives. Then, we turned to agriculture, and socialization began, and so forth. This remarkable (and humorous) myth is the closest that any pre-modern religion came to explaining the rise of humans, our thinking process and socialization, in an evolutionary manner.⁷³

⁷² SD 17.2a (9.6.2).

⁷³ **Aggañña S** (D 27,10-21), SD 2.19.

1.2.5.5 THE 3 ASPECTS OF OUR MIND: *CITTA MANO VIÑÑĀṆA*

We often use the words “thought,” “the mind” and “consciousness” as being more or less synonymous. In a sense, we are not wrong; the suttas too, often list these 3 words (in Pali)—*citta mano viññāṇa*—as synonyms. However, in various contexts, the suttas also use each of these words on their own referring to some special or distinct function of our “mind.” That said, we may basically take the word **mind** as an umbrella term for all mental aspects of a sentient being.

While the mind refers to all the mental aspects of a being, **consciousness** usually refers to the 3 aspects of a sentient being’s waking state, that is, *the mind in action*. The 3 aspects of **the waking state** are as follows:

- (1) “Being conscious,” in contrast to being *unconscious*, such as during fainting, dreamless sleep, coma or death. This is a general state of our being *aware and alert*,⁷⁴ that is, the existential aspect of our mind as *citta*. This may taken as the “conscious mind.”⁷⁵
- (2) Doing something consciously, that is, the person acts with deliberation (purposefully) or with intention (with a mind morally rooted in good or bad). Hence, this includes the mental process of conception. This is the moral aspect of our mind, that is, *mano*. This overlaps with the modern notion of the subconscious.
- (3) Cognizing (or knowing) an object. We are “conscious of” the object, that is, we are *perceiving* an object or idea. This is what happens in our normal processing of sense-data by the physical sense-faculties and thinking by the mind. This is the psychological aspect of our mind, that is, *viññāṇa*. This term includes the “unconscious” and the “rebirth consciousness.”

Two points should be noted here: firstly, it should be emphasized that in early Buddhism, the mind is understood as always being intentional: it must have an object. When the mind knows or thinks, it entails specific contents: it knows *something*, it thinks *of something*. Hence, whether we are simply being aware, or we are cognizing something, or doing something, it always has a perceptual element.

Secondly, we are using the same word, “conscious” in all the 3 aspects; yet, we are able to differentiate the context of the word “conscious.” Like us, in early Buddhism too, the suttas differentiate the 3 aspects of mental experience by using the terms *citta*, *mano* and *viññāṇa*, all of which may be understood by the English word “mind,” differentiated by context.

1.2.5.6 In other words, there are significant differences in each of these 3 terms.

(1) **Citta**, “thought,” comes from √CIT, “to perceive, know, appear,” in the sense of seeing things in a variegated manner (or simply noting variety and differences). Hence, *citta* is our sense of “self-identity,” and how we think of others and identify them. It is the sum of our identity, habits and characteristics, and it maintains our continuity of being which we construe as our “identity”: this is what “I am” and so on. Yet, *citta* is described in the suttas as being *passive*. It is said that *citta* is defiled and we should purify it through spiritual training. The other two terms, *mano* and *viññāṇa*, are *active* by nature, and never used in this context.

(2) **Mano**, “mind,” comes from √MAN, “to think,” and is thus used in reference to the mind thinking or “intending” good or bad actions through the 3 karmic doors of thought, speech and action. *Mano*, then, is the agent of mental and moral actions. This is also our memory: we think of the past and of the future, constructing mental (virtual) realities of them.

(3) **Viññāṇa**, “consciousness,” is derived from √JÑĀ, “to know”; hence, it is always used in the context of a cognitive process, such as when we perceive or “know” an object. In other words, it is

⁷⁴ John Searle, *Mind, Language and Society: Philosophy in the real world*, says: “By ‘consciousness’ I mean those states of sentience or awareness that typically begin when we wake up in the morning from a dreamless sleep and continue throughout the day until we fall asleep again.” (1998:40 f)

⁷⁵ On the “conscious mind” and “the subconscious,” see SD 60.1f (4.3.2.1).

the perceptual aspect of mind. This is the mind working behind each of the 6 sense-faculties: the 5 physical senses and the mind itself. To see, hear, smell, taste, touch and think, we are also conscious of each of these actions as we do it.

Despite their nuances and usages in different circumstances, these 3 terms are often used in the suttas as a triad of synonyms, in the general sense of “the mind.” Clearly, then, the mind can refer to any of these 3 terms, or all of them together. We can, as a rule, discern the sense of each of the 3 terms from the sutta context. Otherwise, we would not be wrong to simply reflect the triad as passing aspects of “the mind.”⁷⁶

1.2.6 How our thinking process evolves

1.2.6.1 Let us begin by observing or imagining how we think when we were still babies. First of all, we experience the taste of food (milk, etc); we smell a familiar parent scent (usually our mother’s); we hear sounds and voices; we see forms that grow familiar, and we feel warmth, cold, discomfort, hunger. We are given toys of different colours and shapes that make distinct sounds helping us in our learning process through becoming more conscious of the external world.⁷⁷

Babies do not, of course, think like adults. A baby’s first thought, called “proto-thoughts,” arise at birth. These thoughts are based on sensations,⁷⁸ as they are not yet capable of specifying with words or images everything they perceive. Young children are sensitive to what is occurring around them but are not conscious, as they are still neither able to reason nor remember as adults do. The baby’s first ideas are those linked to bodily experiences: hunger, cold, warmth, comfort, sleep, and so on.⁷⁹

Babies’ brains are still developing up to the age of 6. From 4 months old, babies begin to make voluntary movements and are a little more aware, able to observe their environment. They begin to become aware of what their bodies are capable of, and to learn to take advantage of them. With this new interest in movement begins their cognitive development. We see body awareness and mind awareness developing in tandem. Their learning increases with sensory stimulation and body experiences, and they learn to discover the world around them.

Although human babies are born almost helpless, totally dependent on their parents or carers, their brains have a great capacity, depending on environmental stimuli: their minds are like sponges. Between 4 and 5 months, they can notice the working of causes and effects.

Between 6 and 7 months, their memory starts to develop and they become aware of the results of their actions. They start to associate certain activities with pleasant sensations or with things they do not like. For example, they enjoy playing, but feel uncomfortable when hungry. They begin to remember different experiences that make them feel a similar way.

Even before the age of 1, children are aware that objects have certain stable properties (eg, number, mass, substance) without ever explicitly learning this information. At this time, children are aware that human and living beings have properties that differ from physical objects.⁸⁰ They know that organisms require nutrition, have life-spans, and that species’ properties hold in spite of different appearances—for example, that a cow in horse’s costume is still a cow, and that a small low table that we sit on becomes a chair.⁸¹

⁷⁶ See SD 17.8a (12.5.3); SD 56.4 (3.4.2.5); LIN Qian, *The Mind in Dispute*, PhD diss, Univ of Washington, 2015: 8 f.

⁷⁷ In **Kosambiya S** (M 48), the Buddha says that one who has right view is like a young tender infant, lying prone, at once draws back his hand or foot when it feels a live coal (M 48,11/1:324), SD 64.1.

⁷⁸ On “feelings” and “sensations” in early Buddhism, see SD 17.3 (1.2).

⁷⁹ W R Bion, *Learning from experience*. London 1962. A Samuels, *Jung and the Post-Jungians*, Routledge, 1985:33 f.

⁸⁰ E Spelke, A Phillips & A L Woodward, “Infant’s knowledge of object motion and human action.” In (edd) D Sperber, D Premack & A Premack, *Causal Cognition*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995:44-78..

⁸¹ S A Gelman & E Markman, “Young children’s induction from natural kinds: The role of categories and appearances.” *Child Development* 58 1987:1532-1540.

1.2.6.2 From the age of 1, children start learning to talk. As their language skills grow, neural connections between words and objects form, they start to investigate the cause-and-effect relationships of their actions, and begin acting intentionally (in a psychological sense).⁸² They will throw toys to the floor repeatedly to see how they fall, or shake a rattle to hear the noise it makes. These are behaviours that involve an action that they now recognize and keep repeating to ensure that it happens the same way every time.

At around a year and a half, they start to develop the capacity for representation or symbolic function. They associate words with certain objects. For example, they will say “wa-wa” for water, “ba-ba” for bottle, “mum-mum” for food (with variations in other languages), and will imitate behaviours they see, like putting a doll to bed. During this stage, they start to develop sympathy and show empathy for others.

From 3 years old, they are aware of certain basic rules and can do what they are told. They continue to perceive things through their senses, but are yet to start thinking logically because they do not know how to work out why things happen. They think symbolically, based on creativity and fantasy. Some 90% of their neural connections are made before the age of 3, with the remaining 10% occurring thereafter until the age of 6. Between 5 and 6, children develop a capacity for reasoning in a way similar to that of adults.⁸³

Very briefly, this is how the experts explain the evolution of early human consciousness and the thinking process in a young child. The point to note is that under normal circumstances, human consciousness evolves and develops naturally, the significance of which we will return to later [4.4.3].

1.2.7 Vitakka, vicāra

1.2.7.1 In early Buddhism, the well-known dvandva ***vitakka, vicāra*** is often used in reference to the basic “thinking” process both in daily life and during dhyana. Due to the often polysemous and non-technical nature of such Pali terms, the exact sense or application of such terms should be teased out from their contexts.⁸⁴ This “open-mindedness” is vital for a better understanding of early Buddhist psychology.

The earliest senses of *vitakka* and *vicāra* are simply *thought, pondering, rumination or the inner discursive activity that precedes speech*.⁸⁵ In time, especially in meditative contexts, each of the two terms assumes a more distinct sense: *vitakka* evolves to mean the initial and imprecise detection, discernment or recognition of a perceived object, while *vicāra* refers to the following mental inspection and conception of that subject.

Interestingly, we begin to notice here the distinction between the words “object” (perceived) and “subject” (conceived). Despite the flexibility of early Buddhist language, especially that relating to the mind and its processes—and *because of it*—we see here a discriminating clarity of psychological language remarkable for its time (over 2500 years ago) that is unmatched until modern times.

⁸² In **Samāṇa, maṇḍika S** (M 78), the Buddha says that a helpless infant is incapable of moral intentionality; hence, does no evil. An adult who merely lives (1) doing no evil deeds, (2) utters no evil speech, (3) has no evil intentions, (4) does not resort to evil livelihood (without understanding how the unwholesome and the wholesome arise and end) is just like such a helpless infant. (M 78,8/2:25 f), SD 18.9.

⁸³ In **Mahā Mālunkya,putta S** (M 64), the Buddha states that the 5 lower fetters—the latent tendencies of self-identity view, of doubt, of attachment to rituals and vows, of sensual lust and of ill will—are always present, not just when some mental stimulus arouses any of these tendencies (M 64,3/1:433 f), SD 21.10. For refs on Jean Piaget’s theory of cognitive development: [Child development - Wikipedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory_of_cognitive_development).

⁸⁴ This is what I call the “rule of context(uality)” [7.7.2.7]: SD 6.11 (2.1.2); SD 53.5 (4.2.3); SD 54.3b (2.3.2.3).

⁸⁵ **Vitakka, saṇṭhāna S** (M 20) uses *vitakka* in the sense of “thought,” esp those that distract the meditator, and lists 5 methods for overcoming them (M 20/1:118-122), SD 1.6. On the early meanings of *vitakka, vicāra* and their occurrences in the Commentaries, see Cousins, “*Vitakka/vitarka* and *Vicāra*: Stages of samādhi in Buddhism and Yoga,” *Indo-Iranian J* 35,2 1992:137-157, & Jaini, *Abhidharmadīpa with Vibhāṣāprabhāṇī*, 2nd ed, Patna, 1977:84 f.

1.2.7.2 Accordingly, many commentators and translators, medieval and modern, interpret the 2 terms as 2 kinds or degrees of conceptual discrimination or discursive thought. Hence, we see in English translations of Pali texts where **vitakka** is rendered as “thinking,” “conception,” “ideation,” “reasoning,” “examination,” “inquiry,” “directed thought,” and “initial application (of thought)”; while **vicāra** is rendered as “pondering,” “investigation,” “scrutiny,” “judgment,” “exploring,” “sustained application (of thought),” and so on.⁸⁶

The earliest canonical definitions of **vitakka, vicāra** are found in the **Dhamma, saṅgaṇī** (Dhs):⁸⁷

[7] What, at that time (of a mental process), is **vitakka**?

That which, at that time, is the thinking, the (initial) application (of mind), fully directing and focusing (of mind), fixing the mind onto the object, right intention.

This is, at that time, the initial application (**vitakka**).

[8] What, at that time, is **vicāra**?

That which, at that time, is the process, the pondering, the progress after and access up to (the mind), the continuing and on-looking of the mind.

This is, at that time, the sustained application (**vicāra**). (Dhs §7 f/10)

From this Abhidhamma jargon, we can deduce the 2 most important usages of **vitakka, vicāra**: in daily life, it means “thinking and pondering,” and in dhyana meditation, it refers to “initial application and sustained application.” For a better understanding of these technicalities, the paracanonical works apply a number of similes, which we shall now look at.

1.2.7.3 Paracanonical works are texts compiled after the Pali canon was closed but before the Commentarial period. The best-known of these are the *Peṭakôpadesa* (an older version of the *Nettipakaraṇa*), an exegetical work (explaining how suttas are compiled), and the *Milinda, pañha*, on Buddhist apologetics and dialectics (dealing with some doctrinal dilemmas). The Burmese Pali canon includes the 2 works along with Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhi, magga* in their *Khuddaka Nikāya*, the 5th collection of suttas. It is well-known that the *Visuddhi, magga* was based on *Upatissa Vimutti, magga*,⁸⁸ which may thus be also considered paracanonical.

Significantly, all these mentioned works discuss **vitakka, vicāra** at length. This list of contrasting **similes** (summarized from *Vimm* 8.19/287)⁸⁹ is typical of such works [Table 1.2.7.3].⁹⁰ From these distinctions between the 2 key aspects of our fundamental mental process, we are able to investigate further into the nature of the mind, and to understand its key processes more clearly. We are now ready to decipher, even understand, the almost cryptic definition of **perception** as “perceiving blue” (*nīlakam pi sañjānāti*) or any other colour.⁹¹

⁸⁶ See **Vitakka, vicāra**, SD 33.4.

⁸⁷ *Katamo tasmim samaye vitakko hoti? Yo tasmim samaya takko vitakko appannā, vyappa-nā cetaso abhiniropanā sammā, saṅkappo. Ayaṁ tasmim samaye vitakko hoti. Katamo tasmim samaye vicāro hoti? Yo tasmim samaya cāro vicāro anuvicāro upavicāro cittassa anusandhanatā anuppekkhanatā. Ayaṁ tasmim samaye vicāro hoti.* (Dhs §§7 f/10)

⁸⁸ The original was written either in Pali or Skt, but was lost, and exists only in Chin tr, 解脫道論 *jiětuō dào lùn*, **Vimokṣa, mārga Śāstra*, better known by its Pali name, **Vimutti, magga* (*Vimm*). For an annotated tr: Bh Nyana-tusita, *The Path to Freedom: Vimutti-magga*, 2 vols, Hong Kong, 2021. On *Vimm*, see SD 60.1a (1.3.3. n).

⁸⁹ *Vimm* refs are to Nyanatusita’s tr (*Vimm:Ñ*), *The Path to Freedom* 2 vols, 2021.

⁹⁰ For the Chin version and its tr, see Sharf, “Knowing blue,” 2018:838 f.

⁹¹ Robert Sharf (2018) translates this as “knowing blue,” as in the title of his paper and throughout it.

	<i>Vitakka</i>	<i>Vicāra</i>
mental object (<i>ārammaṇa</i>)	(1) the striking of a bell	reverberations (Vism 4.89/142)
dhyana (<i>jhāna</i>)	(2) thinking	exploring (pondering)
recollecting (remembering)	(3) seeking dhyana	guarding it
	(4) recollecting	not abandoning the recollected
	(5) retaining a coarse mind	retaining a refined mind
	(6) initial directing of mind	investigating what is obtained ⁹²
(perception)	(7) seeing a form afar	recognizing as man or woman
	(8) seeing a person	judging one as virtuous or not, rich or poor
bird taking flight	(9) exerts its wings (flaps)	gliding on spread wings (Vism 4.89/142)
thinking	(10) maintains	investigates
	(11) thinks	explores (ponders)
	(12) non-attention to the bad	resolving upon dhyanas
	(13) reciting/learning a sutta	contemplating its meaning
	(14) trying to understand	having understood
	(15) <i>nirutti + paṭibhāṇa</i>	dhamma + <i>attha</i> ⁹³
	(16) the mind's distinction	analysing

(T 1648 @32.415c4-15.⁹⁴ Vimmiṇṇa 8.19/287)

Table 1.2.7.3. VITAKKA AND VICĀRA

1.2.8 Perception and conception

1.2.8.1 The suttas—especially the **Mahā Vedalla Sutta** (M 43) and the **Khajjanīya Sutta** (S 22.79) in almost identical words—define perception (*saññā*) as follows:

“Perception, perception,” it is said, avuso. In what connection, avuso, is it called perception?

And what does it perceive?

It perceives [recognizes], avuso, it perceives, therefore it is called perception.⁹⁵

And what does it perceive?

It perceives blue [blueness], it perceives yellow, it perceives red, it perceives white.⁹⁶

It perceives, avuso, it perceives, therefore it is called perception.

(M 43,8/1:293), SD 30.2; (S 22.79,9/3:87), SD 17.9

The definition, **“it perceives, therefore it is called perception”** (*sañjānāti sañjānāti ti saññā*) sounds tautologous, or looks merely as a change in grammatical form. The Sutta explains it etymologically in Pali, that is, the nature of the verb *sañjānāti*, comprising the prefix *sañ*, meaning “(com-

⁹² This is often rendered as “initial application” and “sustained application.” (6) onwards are qu from Peṭṭ 142 f.

⁹³ These are the 4 analytic skills (*paṭisambhidā*) [2.2.8.1].

⁹⁴ Note that this early Chin tr uses 覺 *jué*, “to think (be aware of)” and 觀 *guān*, “to watch, observe,” for *vitakka* and *vicāra*, rather than 尋 *xún*, “to seek” and 伺 *sì*, “to examine,” which became standard later on. (Sharf’s fn 34, 2018: 859)

⁹⁵ *Sañjānāti sañjānāti ti kho āvuso, tasmā saññā ti vuccati.* On *saññā*, see SD 17.5. Sue Hamilton, in *Identity and Experience*, points out that although the def of *viññāṇa* here encroaches on that of *saññā*, we should understand that *saññā* does the actual discrimination of the 5 sensory objects, identifying say, a taste, more precisely, while *viññāṇa* “is the awareness by which we experience every stage of the cognitive process, including the process of discriminating” (1996a:92). See S:B 1072 n114; also *Viññāṇa*, SD 17.8a.1.

⁹⁶ Of course, perception encompasses all the senses, not just colours.

ing or putting) together” + *jānāti*, from √JÑĀ, “to know.” Its Sanskrit form *saṃjñā* also has the sense “name,” that is noting, “the taking up of the sign of the field (object).”⁹⁷ This reminds us of how *saññā* arises in connection of “name-and-form” (*nāma,rūpa*) [1.2.8.2].

The prefix **saṃ** suggest a literal “co-operating”⁹⁸ (operating together) of what we remember and what we sense, and “putting them together,” so that we recognize *it*. *Sam-* is like the Latin prefix *com-* (before labials) or *con-* (before dentals), which has the sense of putting together, a synthesis of parts: the past (that is, from our memory and ideas formed of those memories) and the present object. This “co-operating” is usually weak in our daily experience: we “recognize” someone or something and leave it at that. When the *saññā* is strong, that is, more focused, it is the basis for memory (*sati*).

The meaning of this passage is that the eye can only perceive, that is, *recognize*, a colour—the ear, a sound; the nose, a smell; the tongue, a taste; the body, a touch—just as we often *recognize* someone but do not know (or cannot recall) the name. The *knowing* of the name is conceived by the mind. This is the gist of the perceptual process according to the suttas.⁹⁹

Hence, **perception** is the recognition of each of the physical sense-data as it arises, which happens most of our waking moments. However, the untrained worldly mind often goes a step further by taking the perception to another level: it “value-adds” that perceptual object (based on past memories or conditioning) by **conceiving** it as desirable or undesirable or simply ignoring it. Once this happens, the karmic notions are **formed**: there are karma-formations and we will taste these fruits in due course.

1.2.8.2 Back to some basics. There are the 6 sense-bases: the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body and the mind. In early Buddhist psychology, we speak of “perceiving” as the function of the 5 physical senses, and “conceiving” as that of the mind [1.2.8.3]. This distinction between perception and conception is pointed out in **the Mahā,nidāna Sutta** (D 15), paraphrased thus (with further explanation by me within *round brackets*, mostly based on the Subcommentary):

With name-and-form (*nāma,rūpa*) there is contact (sense-impression or sensing). (D 15), SD 5.17

(1) **Name-and-form** conditions contact through “its qualities, its traits, its signs, its indicators” (*yehi ākārehi yehi lingehi yehi nimittehi yehi uddesehi*). Then, **designation impression** (*adhivacana,-samphassa*) or “naming contact,” arises in a physical body (*rūpa,kāya*) (meaning, the mind perceives an *internal* (mind-based) sense-experience, based on the 5 physical senses). [1.2.9.1]

The Commentary explains each of the above terms as follows:

- “**qualities**” (*ākāra*) are the mutually dissimilar natures of *form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness*. (When we sense or mind a form (an object), we name it; then, we recognize and go on to conceive views (like, dislike, ignore) about it, and so form karma in our conscious process: these are our 5 aggregates.)
- “**traits**” (*linga*): when carefully looked at, they betray the hidden meanings (of their base) (*līnam-attha*). (They make sense of, for example, what is formless, or how the mind “bends” towards an object.)
- “**signs**” (*nimitta*) because they are the causes of perceiving (*sañjānana,hetuto*) [through these, the meaning is signalled or inferred]¹⁰⁰ (that is, recognized as an object based on our memory).
- “**indicators**” (*uddesa*) because they are to be indicated (“pointed out”) (*uddisitabbo*). (They have to be described or explained on account of their being formless, on how we feel about them, and so on.)

(DA 2:500 f)¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Abdhk 54. See SD 17.4 (7.1.6.3).

⁹⁸ See SD 17.8a (8.2.5).

⁹⁹ Further see SD 17.4 (7.1.4).

¹⁰⁰ DAṬ 2:131 @ DA 500,37.

(2) Similarly, name-and-form conditions contact through “*its qualities, its traits, its signs, its indicators*” bringing about **sense-impression** (*paññā, samphassa*) in the mental body (*nāma, kāya*) (meaning, the mind conceives an *external* (sense-based) experience, as a mind-object).

(3) Through their respective “*qualities, its traits, its signs, its indicators*,” both the mind and the body work together to bring about either **conceptual impression** or **sense-impression**.

(4) Through “*qualities, its traits, its signs, its indicators*,” there is name-and-form; then, **contact**¹⁰² arises. (Sense-impression arises at all the 6 sense-doors: the 5 physical sense-faculties and the mind.)

1.2.8.3 At this stage, it is sufficient for us to note that while **sense-impression** or perception is a direct, non-conceptual sense-experience, which is mostly what happens in our normal perceptual experience: we experience things, and almost at once just let them go. **Conceptual impression** or conception only occurs when we “think about” what we perceive. In fact, L S Cousins, in his detailed analysis of “*Vitakka/vitarka* and *vicāra*” (1992:153), summarizes the Pali Abhidhamma understanding of these processes, thus: “*Vitakka* is ‘thinking of’ something, whereas *vicāra* is ‘thinking about’ that same thing.” This statement reminds us of the distinction between perceiving “blue” and conceiving, “It is blue. [This is blue.]”

Another point we should note is that sense-impression is a *pre-linguistic state*: it is the non-verbal stage of our daily experience. As it were, we are simply “experiencing it” without thinking *about* it, without any words for it. Hence, we only perceive “blue” (a kind of quale,¹⁰³ a “raw feel,” not a word); hence, we do not think, “It is blue” (in terms of words). This is like when we see the traffic lights, and when it is green, we drive on (when we are driving a car) or cross the road (as a pedestrian or cyclist). We do this almost naturally, without thinking about it.

1.2.8.4 Thus far, all the early (pre-Mahāyāna) Buddhist schools agree on the nature of mental experience, differing only in some minor technical details, which need not detain us here.¹⁰⁴ They all agree that prior to the mind-consciousness conceptualizing a sense-object, the object is grasped non-conceptually by sensory consciousness. This non-conceptual perceptual moment is described in **the *Vijñānakāya-śāstra*** (阿毘達磨識身足論 *āpīdāmóshì shēnzú lùn*) (late 1st century)—an analogue to the *Dhātu, katha* (the 5th book of the Pali Abhidhamma) —one of the earliest Sarvāstivāda compendia, as follows.¹⁰⁵

There are 6 body-consciousnesses, namely, eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness, and mind-consciousness. Eye-consciousness is only able to perceive blue [blueness]; it is unable to discern “it is blue.”

Mind-consciousness is also able to discern blue. As long as [mind-consciousness] is unable to perceive [the colour’s] name, it is unable to perceive “it is blue.” But should it be able to perceive its name, it perceives, at the same time, both “blue” and “it is blue.”

The colours yellow, red, white, and so on are [analyzed] in the same way as the colour blue.

Ear-consciousness is only able to perceive a sound; it is unable to perceive “this is sound.”

¹⁰¹ For trs of Comy & Subcomy, see Bodhi, *The Great Discourse on Causation*, Kandy, 1984:96-100.

¹⁰² On how contact works (the triangle of experience), see (1.1.1.3) above; also **Madhu, piṇḍika S** (M 18,16) + SD 6.14 (4); **Mahā Hatthi, padōpama S** (M 28,27-38) SD 6.16.

¹⁰³ Simply, a **quale** (pl qualia) is what analytic philosophers call a “sensum” (pl sensa) or percept on a rudimentary pre-conceptual sensing level. See **qualia**: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/qualia/>; Macmillan Ency of Philosophy (2nd ed) 8:191-195.

¹⁰⁴ For an insightful study of such developments, see R Sharf, “Knowing blue,” 2018.

¹⁰⁵ On *Vijñānakāya-śāstra*, attr *Devaśarman or *Devakṣema (提婆設摩 *típóshè mó*), see Frauwallner, *Studies in Abhidharma Literature and the Origins of Buddhist Philosophical Systems*, 1995:28-31; Dhammajoti, *Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma*, Hong Kong, 2009:91-93 (§4.1.2.1).

Mind-consciousness is also able to perceive the sound. So long as it is unable to perceive its name, it is unable to perceive “this is sound.” But should it be able to perceive its name, it perceives, at the same time, the sound, and perceives, “this is sound.”¹⁰⁶ [1.2.8.1]

The *Vijñānakāya* passage goes on to apply the same template for nose and smell, tongue and taste, body and touch, and concludes by saying that “mind-consciousness is also able to discern all states.”¹⁰⁷

1.2.8.5 The matter of perceiving blue and conceiving (naming) “It is blue,” is not easy to understand, much less to explain, despite some clarification from the **Mahānidāna Sutta** [1.2.8.2]. This difficulty often features in later Abhidharma, Parmāṇavāda and Yogācāra treatises. Vasubandhu, however, in his discussion on contact (*sparsā*) in his *Abhidharmakośa* (阿毘達磨俱舍論 *āpīdāmó jùshè lùn*) (4th-5th century), helpfully explains as follows.

Five (kinds of contact) are associated with resistance (*pratigha*), and the 6th is conjoined with verbal designation (*adhivacana*).

Commentary: The 5 kinds of contact of the (senses such as the) eye, etc, are called “resistance (contact)” (*pratigha sparśa*) as their support (*āśraya*, ie, the sense-faculty) are the faculties that “resist” (their objects).

The 6th is mental contact, which is called “designation (contact)” (*adhivacana saṁsparśa*). The reason is that designation means “name,” and name is the primary object grasped through mental contact. It is for this reason that it is called **designation-contact**.

Thus, it is said that eye-consciousness alone is able to know “Blue,” but it does not know “It is blue.” Mind-consciousness knows blue and knows “It is blue.” Therefore, name is primary.

Thus, the name “**resistance-contact**” is derived from its support (*āśraya*), while the name “**designation-contact**” is derived from its consciousness-object (*ālambana*).¹⁰⁸ [1.2.8.3]
(Abhk 2:30cd)

From the *Vijñānakāya* and the *Abhidharmakośa*, it is clear that the Abhidharma explanations of mental experience are in agreement with the teachings of early Buddhism, with only slight variations in the terminology. This textual agreement is helpful in our quest for an understanding of the early Buddhist teaching on consciousness and experience (the theme of this volume, SD 60.1d). We may now explore the next question:

1.2.9 How does the mind construct our experiences?

1.2.9.1 A simple answer to this question is: The mind constructs our experiences through **name-and-form** (*nāma,rūpa*), or better, through naming and forming (as activities). Often enough, we seem to know about the technical aspects of a Buddhist teaching, but we are ignorant of how it works in daily life, or simply forget how it happens even though we have learned about it before.

The true test for early Buddhist teachings—the most useful and beautiful aspect of it—is that it helps us understand how our mind works in daily life. This helps us live a better life and understand ourselves better, that is, we cultivate moral living and a mind of calm joy and open clarity. How does all this happen?

¹⁰⁶ 有六識身。謂眼識耳鼻舌身意識。眼識唯能了別青色。不能了別此是青色。意識亦能了別青色。乃至未能了別其名。不能了別此是青色。若能了別其名。爾時亦能了別青色。亦能了別此是青色。如青色黃赤白等色亦爾。耳識唯能了別聲。不能了別此是聲。意識亦能了別聲。乃至未能了別其名。不能了別此是聲。若能了別其名。爾時亦能了別聲。亦能了別此是聲。 (T1539 @ 26.559b27-c6; cf earlier discussion on the 6 consciousnesses: T1539 @ 26.582c20-583a13)

¹⁰⁷ 意識亦能了別諸法 T1558.29.52c4-10.

¹⁰⁸ 五相應有對。第六俱增語。論曰。眼等五觸說名有對。以有對根為所依故。第六意觸說名增語。所以然者。增語謂名。名是意觸所緣長境。故偏就此名增語觸。如說眼識但能了青不了是青。意識了青亦是青。故名為長。故有對觸名從所依。增語觸名就所緣立。 (T1558 @ 29.52c4-10; cf Abhk 3.30cd, Abhk:Pr 2:425)

We have briefly noted how name-and-form conditions **contact** (*phassa*), that is, sensing and minding: we are aware of a sense-object or a mind-object [1.2.8.2]. **Name-and-form** is a dvandva (comprising 2 components): name and form. **Name** (*nāma*) refers to the act of our mind “bending (to-wards)” (*namati*) to its object.

Form (*rūpa*) technically refers to whatever that exists in the world, and they are all formed of earth, water, fire and wind, with space as the 5th element “containing” them. Their meaning overlaps with the modern conception of the 4 states of matter, respectively: solids, liquids, heat and gases. We should not trouble ourselves with too much “scientific” comparisons, since this idea was introduced by the Buddha in a pre-scientific age for the purpose of reflection on the conditioned nature of all material existence.¹⁰⁹ [2.1.1.8]

1.2.9.2 On a simple level, we “sense” material forms—the 4 elements—but we **perceive** them as sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches. These are forms of the 4 elements that we sense, and experience them: we “bend” (*namati*) or construct them into mental objects [1.2.9.1]. **Sights** are visible to us as light; hence, light is matter or “earth.” Some solids when hit or shaken make a sound; since **sounds** are vibration or movement, we may regard it as “wind.” Interestingly, the suttas group the senses of **smell**, **taste** and **touch** together as something “sensed” (*muta*) or “felt.”¹¹⁰

The Commentaries explain that the word **muta** refers to “the objects of touch” (*mute, saddena phoṭṭhabb’ārammaṇa*).¹¹¹ **Touch** is the feeling of material resistance; hence, it is earth, meaning that the molecules of smell and taste, and physical contact impact on our bodily sensitivity, leading to their respective experiences. In a way, we can imagine these 3 senses work as a “flow” of molecules or “transfer” of contact through feeling; hence, it is of the water element.

1.2.9.3 Once again, we should be reminded that this is not a scientific description of some cognitive process, but a Buddhist reflection on the nature of experience as taught in the suttas. This knowledge helps us better understand how we perceive and conceive our experiences. Simply put, we only **perceive** the flow of the 4 elements as we *see, hear, smell, taste and touch*. Insofar as we do not direct a mind of *greed, hate or delusion* at any of these experiences, we do not conceive views, and form karma. Our action then may be considered to be “neutral,” that is, non-karmic.

But often our perceptions and conceptions are the result of our habits (*natī*); otherwise, they are habit-forming, in the sense that we get used to an experience and tend to repeat it under similar circumstances or when our memory or tendency dictates us. Hence, there is always a chance that such an experience or action can be karmic once we like it, or dislike it, or ignore it without understanding its impermanent nature. For this reason, the habit of observing the impermanent nature of such experiences and **reflecting** on them conduces to freeing ourselves from being caught in a habitual loop of karma or habitual acts. Thus, leading us closer to the path of awakening.¹¹²

1.2.9.4 Let us return to the puzzle of perceiving “blue” [blueness] and conceiving “it is blue.” **Perception** is when we recognize blueness (we have seen it before and recall it). It’s almost like we have seen some Chinese characters, and when we see them at another time, we perceive “Chinese characters,” but we do not know what they mean. To know in this way, we need **to conceive**, to form ideas and understand Chinese. That far we can go with language as an example.

When we perceive something, we merely recognize it on a sense-experience level, so to speak. However, the eye by itself cannot see anything: it is the mind acting behind the eye that perceives things. They work together, but with the mind deciding what to perceive and how to perceive it, since

¹⁰⁹ On the 4 elements, see SD 17.2a (2).

¹¹⁰ As in the well-known phrase “the seen, heard, sensed, known” (*diṭṭha, suta, muta, viññāta*): SD 53.5 (5.5). On the polysemy of *muta*: SD 53.5 (5).

¹¹¹ Buddhaghosa (SA 1:270,9); Dhammapāla says basically the same thing: “The word *mute* means grasped as touch” (*mute, saddena phoṭṭhabbāṃ gahitan ti vuttam*, ThaA 3:190,16-20).

¹¹² On how these habits are formed, see **Dvedhā Vitakka S** (M 19,6 f), SD 61.1.

the mind “precedes” all states (Dh 1 f) [1.1.1.7]. Hence, it is the mind that “adds” the knowledge, “it is blue.”

It is this cognitive process of “added” knowledge that creates our virtual world, that informs us about this world: this is suffering (the 1st noble truth) and the arising of suffering (the 2nd noble truth) for us: this is **the meaning of life**. Having understood these 2 truths, we are ready to see or have a good idea of the other 2 truths: the ending of suffering and the path to its ending: This is **the purpose of life**. This is the Buddha’s teaching according to early Buddhism.

1.2.10 The suffering pericope

1.2.10.1 Thus far, we have learned how we sense things—how **contact** (*phassa*) arises—that is:

with the meeting of a sense-faculty, its object and respective consciousness, there is contact (tiṇṇaṃ saṅgati phasso).

For example, with the meeting of the eye-faculty, a form and eye-consciousness, eye-contact arises. This is summarized thus:

faculty + object + consciousness → contact [1.1.1.3].

We have also noted how “with name-and-form there is contact” [1.2.8]. “**Form**” (*rūpa*) refers to an external object (the 4 elements) that we perceive then by way of naming it, that is, recognizing and giving it its “**name**” (*nāma*). Thus, name-and-form works as **sense-impression** (*paṭigha, samphassa*), that is, perception [1.2.9]. Once we recognize that sense-impression as something pleasant, we conceive it as being *desirable*; when the sense-impression is that of something unpleasant, we conceive it as being *undesirable*. This is how **conceptual impression** (*adhivacana, samphassa*) works, as explained in **the Mahā, nidāna Sutta** (D 15). Here, *samphassa* has the same sense as *phassa*, both meaning “contact,” on the sense level and the mind level (or perceiving and conceiving) respectively. [1.2.8]

1.2.10.2 We should be clear about the spirit of early Buddhism, the teachings of the historical Buddha: it is *not* about explaining “Buddhist” psychology or even the cognitive process: this would be “philosophical Buddhism,” mostly *Talk Dharma or Word Buddhism* with almost neither purpose nor power to bring us to the path, but mostly self-consciously making itself a great grand worldly presence, at least in the ancient libraries and for the profit of scholars. The Buddha, on the other hand, clearly states his purpose: “As before, Anurādha, and even so now, **I declare only suffering and the ending of suffering.**”¹¹³

In order to know how to end suffering, we need to know how it arises, and reflecting on this, we see the path of awakening. The basic formulation of the arising and ceasing of suffering is found in the teaching of dependent arising (*paṭicca samuppāda*) [2.2.5.3]. Dependent ending is, of course, the ending of suffering, which is formulated in **the (Nidāna) Dukkha Sutta** (S 12.43), in this well-known pericope as how the mind arises and brings about the arising of suffering:

And what, bhikshus, is the arising of suffering?

Dependent on **the eye** and forms, eye-consciousness arises.

The meeting of the three is contact. (*tiṇṇaṃ saṅgati phasso*)

With contact as condition, there is feeling;

with feeling as condition, there is craving.

This is the arising¹¹⁴ of suffering.

¹¹³ *Pubbe câhaṃ anurādha etarahi ca | dukkhañ c’eva paññāpemi dukkhassa ca nirodhan ti. Anurādha S* (S 22.86,.2) + SD 21.13 (2); **Alagaddūpama S** (M 22,38), SD 3.13. Explained in **Yamaka S** (S 22.85,37), SD 21.12; SD 40a.1 (11.1.1); SD 58.1 (1.2.2.2).

¹¹⁴ On why *samudaya* is better translated as “arising” than “origin,” see SD 1.1 (4.3).

Dependent on **the ear** and sounds, ear-consciousness arises.

The meeting of the three is contact.

With contact as condition, there is feeling;

with feeling as condition, there is craving.

This is the arising of suffering.

[The same is said of **the nose** and smells, **the tongue** and tastes, **the body** and touches, **the mind** and thoughts.]¹¹⁵ (S 12.43/2:72), SD 108.14¹¹⁶

1.2.10.3 We need to reflect on this teaching. Firstly, we suffer because nothing we experience is really permanent, even when we keep wanting them and wish them to be permanent, pleasant and self-affirming. Secondly, we do not, as a rule, cognize or know what we sense: we often take it as a projection of our own memory, desire and imagination. In time, we get disappointed with it and keep seeking more of it or something “better.” Thirdly, even when we feel delighted with such experiences—especially when we do—in time, familiarity breeds contempt: we then desire something different.

Fourthly, after a while, we realize we keep getting the same “things,” that we are caught in a loop, and life seems to have no meaning. In fact, this is itself the very meaning of life: **suffering and its arising**; hence, life’s purpose is the way to ending suffering, and the ending of suffering itself (nirvana).¹¹⁷ This is the suffering pericope, especially in connection with the exposition of the causality (*nidāna*) of dependent arising [2.2.5.3], such as in the Nidāna Vagga of the Saṃyutta Nikāya (the 93 suttas of S 12).

1.3 COGNITION: DISTRIBUTED AND ASYMMETRICAL

1.3.1 The “arising-of-mind” pericope

1.3.1.1 We have noted that the “suffering pericope” [1.2.10.1] is one of the most common passages found in the Pali suttas, as well as in their parallels in the Chinese Āgamas. The Āgama version had been translated to highlight *not* the arising of suffering, but **the arising of the mind**. This process highlights the meaning behind the way our mind works: it is the stage for the drama of suffering. This subtle but vital point was missed in the Chinese translations, which we must concede was no mean task in those early centuries of Buddhism in China.¹¹⁸

Taking it as it is, this “**arising-of-mind pericope**,” as Robert Sharf calls it (2018:829), succinctly touches upon all the 18 elements (*dhātu*)—*the 6 sense-faculties, the 6 sense-objects and their respective sense-consciousnesses*—that collectively comprise the phenomenal world, as well as their causal and temporal interrelations, that is, the physical world (the 4 elements) detected by the sense-faculties, and the virtual world we project and inhabit through our conceptions. [1.2.10.2]

1.3.1.2 As noted by Sharf, the terse formulation also raised a number of problems that would preoccupy Buddhist exegetes for centuries to come. To appreciate the “arising-of-mind” pericope,

¹¹⁵ I have opted to use a simple English word, “thoughts” (in a broad sense) instead of the cumbersome “phenomena.” The latter also gives us the impression that they arise from outside, whereas the process arises *within* the mind itself.

¹¹⁶ = **Dukkha Samudaya S** (S 35.106/4:86), SD 108.15. See also (**Sa]-āyatana) Pariññā S** (S 35.60/4:32 f), SD 6.17; **Madhu,piṇḍika S** (M 18/1:108), SD 6.14; **Cha,chakka S** (M 148/3:280), SD 26.6. LIN Qian lists a total of 12 parallel passages in the Chin **Saṃyukta Āgama**: SĀ 68, 213, 214, 221, 228, 273, 276, 306, 307, 308, 460, and 551 (*The Mind in Dispute*, 2015: 104).

¹¹⁷ The 4 noble truths usually listed as 1-2-3-4 is the “teaching model”; here, they are listed as 1-2-4-3, the “practice” or “realization” model. See **Mahā Sa]-āyatanika S** (M 149,11 etc) + SD 41.9 (2.4); SD 53.26 (2).

¹¹⁸ On some issues relating to translating early Buddhist texts into Chinese, see, eg, R S Bucknell, “Taking account of the Indic source-text,” in Meisig (ed), *Translating Buddhist Chinese: Problems and prospects*, Wiesbaden, 2009; T H Barrett, “Translation and transmission of Buddhist texts,” British Museum, 2019.

keep in mind that Buddhist scholiasts sought to produce, using the resources provided in the scriptures, a robust account of mind and perceptual experience that does not invoke an enduring self or subject (*attā*). Rather than pointing to a single overriding cogito or “witness consciousness,” the suttas distribute cognition among 6 quasi-independent registers: 5 of which are associated with the physical senses (*indriya*), and one with the mind or mental sense (*mano*), namely, mind-cognition (*mano,viññāṇa*).

These 6 registers are structurally alike in that each involves the interactions of 3 components: the sense-faculty (*indriya*), its perceptual range (*gocara* or *visaya*), and its consciousness (*viññāṇa*). All these form the well-known 18 elements “that collectively account for *the whole of our conscious experience* that is without an independent observer or agent overseeing the process.” (Sharf, 2018: 829 f, emphases added)

1.3.2 Cognitive binding

1.3.2.1 In the 2nd last line above [1.3.1.1], Sharf states that the 18 elements—the 6 sense-faculties, the 6 sense objects (or perceptual range) and 6 respective sense-consciousnesses—are the “whole” of our conscious experience. Actually, these 18 elements (*aṭṭhārasa dhātu*) are only the bases of our conscious experience. The suttas add more levels of cognitive activity, as we have seen, such as the arising of suffering [1.2.10.1].¹¹⁹ Another example of mental process that goes beyond mere consciousness is the perceptual process of mental proliferation.¹²⁰

1.3.2.2 Reflecting on an interesting problem in modern philosophy, Sharf points out that “it is not obvious how this model [1.3.1.1] can account for what modern philosophers call the synthetic unity of apperception or **cognitive binding**.”¹²¹ How is it that these 6 registers interact to create the semblance of a unified and integrated phenomenal domain? There is, to my knowledge, only a single sutta that acknowledges and addresses this problem directly.” (2018:830 + fn10). He was referring to **the Mahā Vedalla Sutta** (M 43).

The Mahā,vedalla Sutta (M 43) consists of a series of questions that Mahā Koṭṭhita asks Sāriputta, along with Sāriputta’s responses. One of the questions—related to our present discussion—is as follows:

21 “These 5 faculties, avuso, have 5 different ranges, 5 different fields. They do not experience each others’ range or field,¹²² that is to say:

- | | | |
|-----|---------------------|----------------------|
| (1) | the eye-faculty, | <i>cakkhu’ndriya</i> |
| (2) | the ear-faculty, | <i>sot’indriya</i> |
| (3) | the nose-faculty, | <i>ghan’indriya</i> |
| (4) | the tongue-faculty, | <i>jivh’indriya</i> |
| (5) | the body-faculty. | <i>kāy’indriya</i> |

¹¹⁹ For a graphic diagram, see SD 1.1 (App 4); SD 57.25 (Table 1.2.2).

¹²⁰ SD 17.4 (Table 8.1).

¹²¹ For a technical discussion, see T Schmidt, “Perception: The binding problem and the coherence of perception,” in *Encyclopedia of Consciousness*, Academic Press, 2009 2:147-158. For other refs: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/neuroscience/binding-problem>.

¹²² *Pañc’imāni, avuso, indriyāni nānā,visayāni nānā,gocarāni, na aññam-aññassa gocara,visayaṃ paccanubhonti*. Here, in **Mahā Vedalla S** (M 43,21/1:295), clearly the *physical* faculties are meant; for, its foll **§22** (“On what do these 5 faculties stand dependent on?” *Imāni āvuso pañc’indriyāni kiṃ paṭicca tiṭṭhanti*), the answer is that they stand mutually dependent on vitality (*āyu*) and heat (*usmā*) (M 43,22/1:295). In **Brāhmaṇa Uṇṇābha S** (S 48.42), they seem to correspond to the 5 sense-consciousnesses, “for the physical sense faculties cannot properly be said to experience (*paccanubhoti*) an objective field (*visaya*) or resort (*gocara*) [“range or field”] [S 48.42,3/5:217], SD 29.3]. Their function is only to serve as the media through which consciousness cognizes objects.” (S:B 1936 n225)

Now, avuso, these 5 faculties have 5 different ranges, 5 different fields; they do not experience each others' range or field.¹²³

So what is it that they resort to?¹²⁴ What is it that experiences their range or field?"

(M 43,21.1/1:295), SD 30.2

This seems to be quite a straightforward solution to the so-called binding problem: The cognitive reach of each of the sense-faculties is restricted to its own register, what then integrates them? To which Sāriputta responds:

"Avuso, they have the mind as resort,¹²⁵ and the mind experiences their range and field."

(M 43,21.2/1:295), SD 30.2¹²⁶

According to early Buddhist psychology, it is clear that sense-perception cannot occur by itself, since none of the sense-faculties are conscious in itself. They are simply tools of the mind like lenses, hearing devices, and instruments for smelling, tasting and touch(feeling). They function with the mind; without the mind, there is no sensing.

1.3.3 Cognition: a structural symmetry

1.3.3.1 The Chinese Āgama version (T1.26.790b08-792b29), worded slightly differently, but conveys the same idea of the mind underlying all sense-experiences. The roles of the 2 monks—Sāriputta and Mahā Koṭṭhita—in the Sutta are, however, switched around, thus:

1 有五根異行異境界。	There are the 5 sense-faculties, each with its own course, its own domain,
2 各各受自境界。	each has its own object.
3 眼根耳鼻舌身根。	(There are) the faculties of eye, ear, nose, tongue and body.
4 此五根異行異境界。	These 5 sense-faculties, each with its own course, its own domain,
5 各各受自境界。	each receiving its own object.
6 誰爲彼盡受境界。	<u>What is the limit of their domain?</u>
7 誰爲彼依耶。	<u>What is their basis [support]?</u>
8 尊者大拘絺羅答曰。	The venerable Mahā Kauṣṭhila replied: ¹²⁷
9 五根異行異境界各各自受境界。	The 5 senses each has its own course, its own domain.
10 眼根耳鼻舌身根。	The faculties of eye, ear, nose, tongue and body:
11 此五根異行異境界。	these 5 sense-faculties (each with) its own course, its own domain,
12 各各受自境界。	each receiving its own object:
13 意爲彼盡受境界。	The mind is the limit of their domain.
14 意爲彼依	The mind is their basis [support].

MĀ 211 = T26 @ 1.791b11-17)¹²⁸

¹²³ Each of the 5 sense-faculties (*pañc'indriya*) has its own object, ie, the eye sees forms, the ear hears sounds, the nose smells odours, the tongue tastes, and the body touches; but the mind-faculty (*man'indriya*) is able to experience all such objects, as well as its own mental objects. Hence, the 5 faculties have "the mind as their resort" (*mano,paṭisaraṇa*), which Comy says is the "impulsion" (*javana*) stage of the 5-door mental process (MA 2:349): see *Nimitta & Anuvyañjana*, SD 19.14 (3); also *Uṇṇābha Brāhmaṇa S* (S 48.42/5:217-219), SD 29.3. See *Sāmañña,phala S* (D 2,64/1:70), *Cūḷa Hatthi,paḍōpama S* (M 27/1:180), *Pamāda,viḥārī S* (S 35.78/4:78 f), *Apaṇṇaka S* (A 3.16/1:113). For a scholastic expl, see Dhs §17/11; Abhs 7.18 (Abhs:SR 188f; Abhs:BRS 273 f).

¹²⁴ *Paṭisaraṇa*; here used in a psychological sense; at M 46,2/1:311 & 108,7/1:310, it simply means "refuge."

¹²⁵ *Mano,paṭisaraṇa*: see *Brāhmaṇa Uṇṇābha S* (S 48.42), SD 29.3 (1).

¹²⁶ On *Mahā,vedalla S*, see Analayo, *A Comparative Study of the Majjhima-nikāya*, 2011:268-276.

¹²⁷ Sharf (2018:830) mentions *Mahā,vedalla S* (M 43), but follows with a tr of MĀ 211 passage on the 5 faculties. He notes: "To which Sāriputta responds," but it should be Maha Kauṣṭhila (Mahā Koṭṭhita) as stated in the Chin text.

¹²⁸ On *Mahā,vedalla S*, see Analayo, *A Comparative Study of the Majjhima-nikāya*, 2011:268-276.

In short, **the mind** is the common denominator for the 6 sense-faculties, serving as their support or resort (*mano, paṭisaraṇa* 依 yì, “basis”) for each of the 5 physical sense-faculties.

1.3.3.2 The Mahā,vedalla Sutta is notable among the Pali suttas for the way in which it defines, often in a rather technical manner, terms like consciousness (*viññāṇa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), dhyana (*jhāna*), and so on. It is possible that the Sutta belongs to a relatively late stratum of the Pali canon, serving as precursor to the kind of systematic exposition found in Abhidharma literature. In any case, it may be the earliest extant Buddhist text to posit a structural asymmetry between the 5 sense-consciousnesses and mind-consciousness.

2 The body-mind process

2.1 BODY-MIND IN BUDDHIST MEDITATION

2.1.1 The conscious body

2.1.1.1 Every waking moment, we—that is, our conscious body (*sa, viññāṇaka, kāya*) [1.2.5.1]—are experiencing “something”: *a sight, a sound, a smell, a taste, a touch, a thought*. The first 5 are physical experiences: they arise in our body, that is, as physical sensations, sense-based states. The 6th kind of experience is a mind-based state. However, all these 6 kinds of experiences are “mind-rooted” or “mind-based.” [1.1.1.7]

Psychologically, these 6 kinds of mind-based activities are termed “states” (*dhamma*). The term *dhamma* (Skt *dharma*) literally means “that which stands,” meaning this is what arises and “stays” with us, influencing and shaping our mind. The verb *stay* is within quotes to remind us that these states are our own creation or projection: they are all **mind-made** (*mano, mayā*); hence, they are termed *dhamma*, here meaning “states; phenomena.”

2.1.1.2 Every “conscious state or moment,” called ***citta*** (here meaning “consciousness” or conscious moment) in the Abhidhamma, along with its associated mental factors (*cetasika*), always takes an object: we are always conscious “of” something. Consciousness, in short, consists essentially in the activity of cognizing an object. The Abhidhamma and later works use 2 terms to denote a mental object: (1) ***ārammaṇa***, derived from √RAM, “to delight (in)”;

(2) ***ālambana***, from √LAMB, “to hang down or on to.”

Thus, the object is that which consciousness and its concomitants delight in or that which they hang on to. There are 6 kinds of objects, corresponding to the 6 senses. The first 5 are all included in the category of **materiality** (or simply, matter) (*rūpa*).¹²⁹ Four of these—visible form, sound, smell and taste—are regarded as types of “derived matter” (*upādā, rūpa*), that is, secondary material states dependent on the primary elements of matter (earth, water, fire, wind). Touch or the tangible object is identified with 3 of **the 4 primary elements** themselves: the earth element, or solidity, which is experienced by touch as hardness or softness, or resistance; the fire element, which is experienced as heat or cold (that is, as temperature and decay); and the wind element, which is experienced as pressure or distension. The 4th of them, the water element, has the characteristic of cohesion, which, according to the Abhidhamma, cannot be experienced as a datum of touch but can only be cognized through the mind-door.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ *Rūpa* has 2 important senses: (1) the broad sense, meaning “matter,” as opposed to the mind (as used here), and as an aggregate (*khandha*); (2) in a specific sense, meaning “form,” as the object of the eye-faculty.

¹³⁰ On the older term, *upādāya, rūpa*, see (**Upādāna**) **Parivaṭṭa S** (S 22.56,7), SD 3.7; SD 17.13 (3.3.2.2). On the distinction between primary matter and derived matter, see Abhs 6.2 (Abhs:BRS 235 f).

2.1.1.3 MENTAL OBJECT (*DHAMMA*)

There are 6 kinds of mental objects: those of the first 5 objects (the physical sense-faculties) can be cognized (known) in any of these ways:

- (1) through its own respective sense-door process;
- (2) through a mind-door process; [2.1.1.4] and
- (3) by the process-free *cittas* arising in the roles of rebirth-linking (*bhav'aṅga*), during death and rebirth.

Simply, this means that (1) the mind works *ahead* of every sense-experience. Before we see, hear, smell, taste or touch something, the mind is already there, a moment ahead at least, preparing the ground for our experience [1.1.1.7].

(2) The mind is aware of itself: in modern terms, this is called “reflexive consciousness.” Besides leading our senses into experiencing a sense-object, the mind also experiences its own mental object (an idea, view, imagination, etc). As a human experience, this reflexive consciousness is our basis for personal development, and enable us to meditate and develop our mind to the point of reaching the path of awakening. Since we can be aware of ourselves, we can and must be **self-reliant** so that we free the self from the gravity of the senses and the prison of the mind.

(3) Since the mind can work by itself even without the help of the senses—with the perceptual process of sense-experience—it is said to be “process-free.” Hence, we may broadly call this “the cognitive process,” but this can be confusing since there is no agreement among the experts what “cognition” really means other than “the conscious process”! However, if we keep in mind that here it refers to the mental process of a conscious mind, it can be helpful in our study of Buddhist psychology.

Another important reminder is that the mind is capable of creating or projecting its own wildly imaginative idea. Notice how an event like hearing or reading a piece of news or gossip, or meeting someone, or some sense-experience (a sight, sound, smell, etc) can trigger a flood or explosion of thoughts that may even paralyze us emotionally and intellectually. This is called “thought proliferation” (*papañca*).¹³¹

2.1.1.4 Mental objects—the objects of the 6th class, that is, the mind—cannot be cognized through a sense-door process. These 6 kinds of objects fall into the category of mental objects (*dhamm'ārammaṇa*), that is, those of the 5 physical senses and the mind. These are perceived in the mind itself. In other words, this is the mind conceiving views (like or disliking) regarding the sense-experiences, and also holding on to each thought as they are arising (perceived), and then forming views (conceiving) with them too.

It is important to remember that in any cognitive process, it is *not* the “sense-organs” that are involved but **the sensitive matter** (*pasāda,rūpa*), that is, the sensory receptive structure in each of the 5 sense-faculties: *the eye-sensitivity, ear-sensitivity, nose-sensitivity, tongue-sensitivity, and body-sensitivity*. The term “sense-organs” is not used in early Buddhist psychology, and are taken to refer merely to the physical structure. Buddhist psychology stresses the mind behind these organs as part of this “conscious body” (*sa,viññāṇaka,kāya*) [1.2.5.1].

According to the Abhidhamma, there is an aspect of the mind (*citta*) that is passive or “process-free” (*vīthi,mutta*), functioning, as it were, by itself (through the karma of latent tendencies) as the life-continuum (*bhavaṅga*) [7.7.4.3] and during death and rebirth. It is this aspect of the mind, as conceived in early Buddhism, that is called **the unconscious**.¹³²

¹³¹ **Madhu,piṇḍika S** (M 18), SD 6.14 (2); SD 57.1 (2.4.2.3). On how to cultivate the faculties: SD 17.13 (Table 3a).

¹³² See **The unconscious**, SD 17.8b. For a graphic representation of the “location” of the latent tendencies (the unconscious), see **Fig 2.2.3** (SD 17.8b).

2.1.1.5 We are back with the important Abhidhamma term *citta*, meaning “conscious mind-moment.” It is also a type of mental object: *citta experiences* objects, and in turn can become an *object*. It should be noted, however, that a *citta* cannot *immediately* become its own object, for the cognizer cannot cognize itself: the knower does not know himself (at the moment of knowing). A *citta* in our mental continuum (conscious process), however, can experience earlier *cittas* in that same continuum as well as the *cittas* of other beings.

In simple terms, this means that when we are caught up with any sense-experience (a “sensing”) or mind-experience (a thought), we are likely to forget ourselves. Notice however good-natured we may be, under the right (wrong) circumstances, we may find ourselves doing something (saying something improper or breaking a precept) that is “out of character.” If we are “sensible” enough, we at once apologize and correct ourselves, or we may do this later as a carefully considered afterthought. This is our moral self working to set things right, and setting ourselves on the right course of Buddhist training.

2.1.1.6 In Abhidhamma psychology, our mind is seen as a continuous stream of consciousness, comprising a number of cognitive acts or events. Each cognitive act is, in turn, analysed into 2 components. One is “bare consciousness” called *citta*, and the other, a group of “mental factors” called *cetasika*. This explanation of a cognitive act is based on the early Buddhist analysis of the individual being into the 5 aggregates: *form (the physical body) and the mental aggregates of feeling, perception, formations and consciousness*. Of these, the mental aggregates (the last 4) are always inseparably conjoined.

This distinction between *citta* and *cetasika* is based on **the Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta** (M 44), which states that perception (*saññā*) and feeling (*vedanā*) are “*cetasika dhammā*” (component states of the mind) and that they are “conjoined with consciousness” (*citta, paṭibaddhā*). While *citta* corresponds to the aggregate of consciousness (*viññāṇa-k, khandha*), the *cetasikas* represent the other 3 mental aggregates. *Citta* as the knowing or awareness of an object is generally counted as one, while *cetasikas* which function as concomitants of *citta* are 52 in number.

The mind may cognize any of **the 52 mental factors** (*cetasika*), wholesome, unwholesome or neutral, as objects in its mind-door process, such as when we become aware of our feelings, volitions or emotions. Nirvana (*nibbana*) becomes the object of *cittas* occurring in the mental processes of noble individuals, that is, the learners and the arhats. Concepts (including ideas, views, judgements, imaginations, hallucinations and so on)—conventional realities that do not exist in the ultimate sense —also fall into the category of mental object.¹³³

2.1.1.7 Before we close this brief introduction to practical Abhidhamma, we will examine a few tricky terms relating to the “elements” (*dhātu*) of the mind. **The Bahu, dhātuka Sutta** (M 115), in the last triad of its analysis of the 18 elements (6 sense-faculties + 6 sense-objects + 6 sense consciousnesses), lists the following: [7.7.4.2]

(16) the <u>mind</u> element	<i>mano, dhātu,</i>
(17) the mind-object element	<i>dhamma, dhātu,</i>
(18) the mind-consciousness element	<i>mano.viññāṇa, dhatu.</i>

For easier understanding, we can momentarily disregard the ending term, “element” (*dhātu*), which is used to show that all the 18 aspects are “elements” of our mental experience, and that we are profoundly conditioned by these experiences. If we have difficulties with these terms, we can read them simply as: “the mind,” “mind-object” and “mind-consciousness” (which are the components of the “triangle of experience”) [1.1.1.3].

¹³³ On 52 mental factors (*cetasika*), see SD 17.1a (4.3.2); SD 60.1b (13.1.1) + Table 13.1.1. For technical details, see Y Karunadasa, *The Theravāda Abhidhamma*, 2010:70-75.

(16) **The mind element** (*mano, dhātu*), according to Abhidhamma, includes the consciousness that adverts (or attends) to the 5 sense-objects impinging on the 5 sense-faculties (*pañca.dvār'āvajjana, -citta*),¹³⁴ and the consciousness that receives the object after it has been cognized through the senses (*sampañicchana, citta*). This is the closest we have of any idea of an “agent” in our experience, but it is neither fixed nor permanent, and is conditioned by what it experiences.

(17) **The mind-object element** (*dhamma, dhātu*) refers to any sense-object that the mind precedes, and also its own mental object. (Hence, the suffix “element” is useful here to distinguish this.) It includes the types of subtle material phenomena not involved in sense-cognition, the 3 mental aggregates of feeling, perception and formations, and, finally, nirvana. It does not include concepts, abstract ideas, judgements, etc. Though these latter ideas are included in the notion of mind-object (*dhamm'ārammaṇa*, an Abhidhamma term), the mind-object *element* includes only things that exist by their own nature, not things constructed by the mind.

(18) **The mind-consciousness element** (*mano.viññāṇa, dhātu*) includes all types of consciousness except the 5 sense-consciousnesses and the mind-element. In other words, it comprises purely mental states arising in connection with all the 6 sense-bases. It includes concepts, abstract ideas, judgements, etc, whatever that the mind constructs or projects.

2.1.1.8 THE BODY-BASED MIND¹³⁵

Here is an interesting situation where the Abhidhamma parted ways from the suttas. Note that every one of the physical senses has a physical basis (*vatthu*): the physical eye (*cakkhu*) is the basis for seeing, the physical ear (*sota*) the basis for hearing, the physical nose (*ghāṇa*) the basis for smelling, the tongue (*jivhā*) the basis for tasting, and the body (*kāya*) the basis for touch (feeling). However, there is *no* basis, or physical organ, ever mentioned by the Buddha for the mind.

It is true that the Theravādins maintain that the proximately preceding mind-moment (*citta*) serves as a condition for one following immediately. This conditional relationship (*paccaya*) is one of immediate contiguity (*anantara*) or one of linear sequence (*samanantara*). However, the Theravādins do not consider the immediately preceding consciousness as the base (*vatthu*) of the immediately succeeding consciousness.

For the Theravādins, the base of mind and mind-consciousness is physical, not mental. This position follows the sutta teachings, where consciousness (*viññāṇa*) and name-and-form (*nāma, rūpa*) are described as being interdependent. *Nāma, rūpa*, as we have noted [1.2.8.2], refers to certain mental and material phenomena which arise together with consciousness. These material phenomena clearly refer to the 5 physical sense-faculties on which the 5 respective sense-consciousnesses depend and whatever kind of other organic matter on which mind and mind-consciousness depend as their physical support.¹³⁶

This is confirmed by the following well-known sutta statement, thus:

“This body of mine is form composed of the 4 great elements,¹³⁷ born from mother and father, nourished with rice and porridge, subject to inconstancy, rubbing, pressing, dissolution, and dispersion.¹³⁸ And this consciousness of mine lies attached here, bound up here (*ettha sitaṃ ettha patibaddhaṃ*).”¹³⁹ (D 2,85+86), SD 8.10

¹³⁴ See *Nimitta & Anuvyañjana*, SD 19.14 (2).

¹³⁵ For details, see Y Karunaratne, *The Theravāda Abhidhamma*, Hong Kong, 2010:78-82.

¹³⁶ On *nāma, rūpa*, see Karunaratne 2010 ch 1.

¹³⁷ The 4 great (or primary) elements (*mahā, bhūtā*): earth, water, fire, wind (D 1:214; Vism 11.27; Abhs 154): see *Rūpa*, SD 17.2a.

¹³⁸ See *Vammika S* (M 23,4/1:144) for parable of the anthill (representing the body).

¹³⁹ *Puna ca, paraṃ udāyi akkhātā mayā sāvakānaṃ paṭipadā, yathā paṭipannā me sāvakā evaṃ pajānanti “ayaṃ kho me kāyo rūpī cātu, mahā, bhūtiko mātā, pettika, sambhavo odana, kummāsūpacayo anicc, ucchādana, parimaddana, bhedana, viddhaṃ sanadhammo, idaṃ ca pana me viññāṇaṃ ettha sitaṃ ettha paṭibaddhaṃ.*

2.1.1.9 THE PHYSICAL BASE OF MIND AND MIND-CONSCIOUSNESS

The first sutta reference to the physical base of mind and mind-consciousness found in the **Paṭṭhāna** (the book of conditional relations), the 7th book of the Abhidhamma and the very last books of the whole Pali canon. The Paṭṭhāna specifically states that the eye is a condition by way of a base (*nissaya, paccaya*) for eye-consciousness (*cakkhu, viññāṇa*). Likewise, the ear, the nose, the tongue, and the body are stated as the base-conditions for their respective kinds of consciousnesses.

However, the Paṭṭhāna is less specific when it comes to refer to that which forms a base-condition for mind and mind-consciousness (it does not specify what the “organ” is for the mind—like the eye is for seeing):

“That materiality based on which the mind-element and the mind-consciousness-element occur, that materiality is a condition by way of base for the mind-element and mind-consciousness-element and the mental phenomena associated with them.”

(*yaṃ rūpaṃ nissāya mano, dhatu ca mano, viññāṇa, dhātu ca vattanti, taṃ rūpaṃ mano, dhātuyā ca mano, viññāṇa, dhātuyā ca taṃ sampayuttakānañ ca dhammānaṃ nissaya, paccayena paccaya*). (Tikap 4)

It will be seen that in the quoted sentence the physical base of the mind and mind-consciousness is not specified. It is alluded to in a circuitous way as “*yaṃ rūpaṃ ... taṃ rūpaṃ*” (whatever materiality on which mental activity depends). A British pioneer in early Buddhism, Mrs Foley Rhys Davids, speculates that “the evasion of the word ‘heart’ is quite marked.”¹⁴⁰ Modern Theravāda expert, Y Karunaratne, disagrees, “What we find here is not evasion but caution, a case of leaving the matter open.” (2010:79).

Karunaratne adds that the Paṭṭhāna’s “open” approach is perhaps due to the fact that “the physical seat of mental activity was thought to be very complex and pervasive and therefore that its location was not limited to one particular part of the physical body.” Anyway, from the numerous sutta quotes on our consciousness “**lies attached here, bound up here**” in our body [2.1.1.8], it is clear that consciousness pervades our whole being.

In fact, the *Mahāsaṅghika*, an early pre-Mahāyāna school,¹⁴¹ held a similar theory that consciousness pervades the entire physical body and, depending on its object (*viśaya*) and support (*āśraya*), can contract or expand. The subtle (*sūkṣma*) mind-consciousness (*mano, vijñāna*) resides in the entire body that constitutes its support.¹⁴² In fact, if we carefully read the sutta accounts of how the meditative mind is able to project itself psychically, we can say that the mind is capable of extending itself even beyond the physical body.

D 2,85+86/1:76 (×2), SD 8.10 = **D** 10,2.21 f/1:209 = **M** 109,9/2:17; **M** 23,4/1:144, **74**,9/500; **S** 35,105/4:83 = **A** 9.15,2/4:386; **S** 55.21/5:369 f; **Nigrodha, miga J** 12/1:146. Cf Divy 180: *śatana, patana, vikiraṇa, vidhvaṃsanā, dharmatā*. See **Dīgha, nakha S** (M 74,9/1:500), SD 16.1 tr & nn. This statement means that consciousness here (in a physical being) is dependent on the physical body. RD points out that this and other passages disprove the idea that the consciousness (*viññāṇa*) transmigrates. For holding such a view, Sāti was severely rebuked by the Buddha (M 38). A new re-linking consciousness (*paṭisandhi*) arises at conception, dependent on the old one (see Vism 17.164 ff). [§58n]

¹⁴⁰ C A Foley Rhys Davids, *Buddhist Psychology*, London, 1914:71.

¹⁴¹ The Mahāsaṅghika was the “other” mainstream (non-Mahāyāna) school that arose in opposition to the mainstream elders during the 2nd council (Vesālī), held about 100 years after the Buddha’s *parinibbāna*.

¹⁴² A Bareau, *Les Sectes Bouddhiques du Petit Vehicule*, Saigon, 1955:74; tr G Migme Chodron, *The Buddhist Sects of the Lesser Vehicle*, 2005:64; tr S Boin-Webb, *The Buddhist Schools of the Small Vehicle*, Hawai’i, 2013. For other detailed studies in the sutta teachings on mind-body relationship, see Peter Harvey, “The mind-body relationship in Pāli Buddhism: A philosophical investigation,” *Asian Philosophy* 67, vol 3.1 March 1993; Suwanda H J Sugunasiri, “The whole body, not heart, as seat of consciousness: The Buddha’s view,” *Philosophy East and West* 45,3 July 1995.

2.1.2 What is the purpose of all this?

2.1.2.1 All these theories and studies of early Buddhist psychology and Abhidhamma have only one real purpose: an understanding of our mind, and mindfulness or meditation for the sake of mental development; and both as the bases for the cultivation of liberating wisdom, that is, a vision of true reality that frees us from suffering. These comprise “**the 3 trainings**” (*sikkha-t, taya*)¹⁴³ taught by the Buddha for the benefit of anyone who is willing to learn no matter what their religion is or if they have none.¹⁴⁴

The liberating **wisdom** (*paññā*) that arises from moral virtue and mental cultivation—a wholesomely healthy mind in a wholesomely healthy body—gives us a good understanding of the fears, difficulties and troubles that arise in our lives and in others: we have greater insight into **the 1st noble truth**: the reality of our conscious body. As our vision of this truth grows, we have greater insight into **the 2nd noble truth**: we are composed of the 6 senses, their respective objects and consciousnesses, and how we project a virtual world around their experiences. [4.1.3]

2.1.2.2 All this—an insight into the 1st and the 2nd noble truths, suffering and its arising—gives us **the true meaning of life**: that all our experiences are impermanent; hence, unsatisfactory; what is impermanent and unsatisfactory has no abiding essence and there is nothing that we can identify with. We can rephrase this as follows:

- (1) We are incomplete, hence, unsatisfactory, a process caught in a self-loop; this is **suffering**.
- (2) This is a self-made (that is, mind-made) loop: our identifying with some kind of “self”; this is **craving**.

From this understanding (or provisional acceptance as working truths), we can see and be guided by a vision of the path of freedom, that is, **the true purpose of life**, which is to overcome suffering by freeing ourselves from its root, craving, and attaining nirvana: this is **the 3rd noble truth**.

To overcome the root of suffering and attain nirvana, we must first reach the path of awakening, that is, the learner’s noble eightfold path: this is **the 4th noble truth**. We can rephrase this as follows:

- (3) We work with the understanding that the “self” is a process, by which we grow and change; this is the **path**.
- (4) We grow in self-understanding (wisdom); we are fully and joyfully free from self-deception; this is **nirvana**.

This learners’ noble path begins with our becoming a streamwinner (*sotāpanna*), that is, we have become strong enough not to identify with worldliness. This “non-identification” (*atammaya-tā*)¹⁴⁵ occurs in 3 related ways (that is, breaking the 3 fetters):

- (1) not identifying with our body-mind duality (letting go of our self-identify view);
- (2) not identifying with anyone or anything that makes us doubt our ability and will for self-liberation (awakening); and
- (3) not identifying with ritual and vows that externalizes our efforts in cultivating our body (moral virtue) and mind (concentration) that bring self-liberation.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ SD 60.1c (11.4.10).

¹⁴⁴ SD 60.1c (11.4.4).

¹⁴⁵ See *Atammayatā*, SD 19.13.

¹⁴⁶ Technically, the 3 fetters are: (1) self-identity view (*sakkāya, diṭṭhi*), (2) spiritual doubt (*vicikicchā*), and (3) attachment to rituals and vows (*sīla-b, bata, parāmāsa*): streamwinning: SD 3.3 (5); SD 56.1 (4.4.1). See **Abhabba Tayo, dhamma S** (A 10.76,6), SD 2.4; **Emotional independence**, SD 40a.8.

2.1.2.3 First, we do not identify with our body-mind duality (that any of it is “I, me, mine”) [7.6.1.2]: we see it as basically passing moments of consciousness from which we know and see its *impermanence* and *unsatisfactoriness* (or incompleteness) of all experiences. This is known as breaking the fetter (*saṃyojana*) of **self-identity view** (*sakkāya, ditthi*). We are now free from the notion that we are merely our body or mind or both or neither, gradually breaking free of the limits of such views.

When a religion holds a person as the highest source of truth or authentication, it can be no better than that person. Similarly, when a religious prophet or preacher tells us that the source of faith, truth or liberation is someone or something “up there” or “out there,” we are left to the whims and wiles of that prophet or preacher. Religion is deeply pathological when it is rooted in the notion that we are not good enough, fallen short of goodness. It becomes bad salesmanship when that religion demands, “Have total faith in us; we can save you!” Such religions create **doubt** in us, and bait with the hook of heaven and love. We must free ourselves from such doubt by rejecting such false claims.

Our problems and difficulties arise from within our own minds. Hence, it is there that we should start seeking the solution, and not resort to external solutions or succour through rituals or vows. To rely on external solutions for problems rooted internally is called **superstition**. Should all our prayers work, much of humanity would be devastated, the rest bereft of mind or heart. Prayers work best when we are willing to work for them.¹⁴⁷

2.1.2.4 In the God-religions, their scriptures, prophets and preachers, totally *disempower* us of the will and ability to be free of good and evil—we are all “sinners” in rejecting God. Yet. When we must surrender with faith, we will be “saved”! We are not caught in a double bind, a catch-22: we have no will, yet we are asked to act willfully, that is, make a choice, to have faith; once we do act in faith, it means that what was previously preached is false!

Early Buddhism records the Buddha as constantly reminding us that we are responsible for our moral well-being and spiritual salvation. The spirit of this teaching of **self-reliance** and self-salvation are reflected in, for example, these Dhammapada verses:¹⁴⁸

<i>attanā va kataṃ pāpaṃ</i>	By oneself alone is bad done,	
<i>attanā saṅkilissati</i>	by the self is one defiled;	
<i>attanā akataṃ pāpaṃ</i>	by oneself is bad not done,	
<i>attanā va visujjhati</i>	by the self is one purified.	
<i>suddhi asuddhi paccattaṃ</i>	Purity and impurity are within oneself.	
<i>nāñño aññaṃ visodhaye</i>	No one may purify another.	(Dh 165) ¹⁴⁹
<i>tumhehi kiccam ātappaṃ</i>	You yourself should make the effort:	
<i>akkhātāro tathāgatā</i>	the tathagatas [buddhas] are teachers—	
<i>paṭipannā pamokkhanti</i>	the meditators who practise (to enter) the path	
<i>jhāyino māra, bandhanā</i>	are freed from Māra’s bonds.	(Dh 276) ¹⁵⁰

2.2 “ALL THE ELEMENTS”

2.2.0 Investigating reality

According to **the Bahu, dhātuka Sutta** (M 115), instead of being fooled by fears, difficulties and problems, we should investigate true reality: that we are nothing but the 5 aggregates: *form, feeling,*

¹⁴⁷ Further on streamwinning, see SD 60.1c (14.4.1).

¹⁴⁸ On the mind as leading all our actions [2.1.1], see **Dh 1-2**: SD 8.3(3); SD 17.3(6.3); SD 17.8a (4.5); SD 18.1 (3.2); SD 57.10 (3.1.3.3).

¹⁴⁹ On **Dh 165** (Patna Dh 308 (17.3); Uv 28.11 f): SD 36.1 (3.4.1), SD 38.4 (3.3.3.4), SD 49.10 (1.2.2).

¹⁵⁰ On **Dh 276** (Patna Dh 359 (20.2); Uv 12.9, 6.20): M 131, 3.3n SD 8.9, SD 26.3 (4.3.4) SD 39.5 (1.3.3 n), SD 45.8 (4.3.1).

perception, formations and consciousness. They constitute the “elements” (*dhātu*) of our being, as follows:¹⁵¹

(1) form (our body)	earth, water, fire, wind, space, consciousness	the 6 elements ¹⁵²	[2.2.1]
(2) our senses + mind	the 6 senses, 6 objects, 6 consciousnesses	the 18 elements ¹⁵³	[2.2.1.4]
(3) feelings	the 6 kinds of feelings (<i>vedanā</i>)	the 6 elements ¹⁵⁴	[2.2.2]
(4) formations	the 6 kinds of formations (<i>saṅkhārā</i>)	the 6 elements ¹⁵⁵	[2.2.3]
(5) consciousness	the 3 realms (sense, form and formless)	the 3 elements ¹⁵⁶	[2.2.4]
(6) samsara + nirvana	the conditioned and the unconditioned	the 2 elements ¹⁵⁷	[2.2.5]

2.2.1 Form: Our conscious body; the 6 elements; the 18 elements

2.2.1.1 We will begin investigating the true reality of our being, what we really are, in terms of **body and mind**, that is, our “conscious body” (*sa,viññāṇaka,kāya*), adding on what we have noted earlier [2.1.1]. The Bahu,dhatuka Sutta [2.2.0] analyzes our being in terms of the “6 elements”: *earth, water, fire, wind, space, consciousness*. We have already noted how our physical body comprises **the 4 primary elements**, thus: [2.1.1.2]

<u>the earth element</u>	is the <i>solidity</i> experienced by touch as resistance, that is, hardness or softness;
<u>the fire element</u>	is experienced as <i>temperature</i> (heat and cold) and decay (oxidation, etc);
<u>the wind element</u>	is experienced as <i>movement</i> , including pressure or <i>distension</i> ;
<u>the water element</u>	comprises over ¾ of our body, as the element of <i>cohesion</i> , holding it together.

2.2.1.2 The set of 6 elements then lists space and consciousness. According to Abhidhamma, there are 2 kinds of **space** (*ākāsa*): (1) limited space (*paricchinn’ākāsa* or *paricched’ākāsa*) and (2) endless or cosmic space (*anant’ākāsa*).

(1) **Limited space**, as “space element” (*ākāsa,dhatu*), belongs to derived form (Dhs 638) and to a sixfold classification of elements.¹⁵⁸ It is also an object of meditation, that is, the space kasina.¹⁵⁹ Buddhaghosa defines it as follows: “The space element has the characteristic of delimiting matter. Its function is to indicate the boundaries of matter. It is manifested as the confines of matter, or its manifestation consists in being untouched (by the 4 elements), and in holes and apertures. Its proximate cause is the matter delimited. It is on account of the space element that one can say of materiality delimited that “This is above, below, around that.” (Vism 14.63)

(2) **Endless space** (*ananta ākāsa*). This term occurs often in the suttas,¹⁶⁰ and is defined in the Commentaries as “unobstructed or empty space” (*ajata’ākāsa*).¹⁶¹ It is the 1st of 4 formless dhyanas,

¹⁵¹ M 115/3:61-67), SD 29.1a.

¹⁵² See **Dhātu Vibhaṅga S** (M 140,7 + 14-19), SD 4.17.

¹⁵³ Def at Vbh §§183-184/87-90; expl in detail at Vism 15.17-43/484-490. For details, see SD 17.13 (3.3.3).

¹⁵⁴ M 115,6 (SD 29.1a); def at Vbh §180/85 f.

¹⁵⁵ Def at Vbh §182/86 f.

¹⁵⁶ Comy says that the sense-sphere element (*kāma,dhātu*) is the 5 aggregates of the sense-sphere (*kāmāvacara-k,khandha*), the form element (*rūpa,dhātu*) is the 5 aggregates of the form sphere (*rūpāvacara-k,khandha*), and the formless element (*arūpa,dhātu*) is the 4 aggregates of the formless sphere (*arūpāvacara-k,khandha*) (MA 4:104). See M 115,8 (SD 29.1a).

¹⁵⁷ See M 115,9 (SD 29.1a).

¹⁵⁸ **Cha-b,bisodhana S** (M 112,8), SD 59.7; **Bahu,dhātuka S** (M 115,5), SD 29.1a; **Dhātu Vibhaṅga S** (M 140,7, 14-19), SD 4.17.

¹⁵⁹ **Mahā Sakul’udāyi S** (M 77,50), SD 49.5a; SD 49.5b (1.9).

¹⁶⁰ D 1:34,35, 183,26, 2:112,6, 3:224,12; M 3:27,9, 43,21; S 5:119,31; A 2:184,23, 4:40,12, 401,20, 410,14, 5:345,28. Also Pm 2:39,30 (PmA 557,18); Vbh 262,5-9; Vism 10.4/327,2, 10.24/331,13-17.

¹⁶¹ SA 1:213,5, 3:69,8, 70,10; DhsA 346,22; NmA 2:45,15; BA 102,8; KvuA 92,18.

the sphere of boundless space (*ākāsañc āyatana*), and is also a realm of beings. According to Abhidhamma, endless space has no objective reality (it is purely conceptual), as indicated by the fact that it is not included in the wholesome triad (*kusala,tika*), which comprises the entire reality.¹⁶²

Some post-Buddha schools (such as Uttarā, pathaka, Mahimsāsaka, Mahā, saṅghika, Sarvāsti, vāda and Yogācāra) regarded it as one of the several unconditioned or uncreated states (*asaṅkhata dhamma*), a view rejected in the Kathā, vatthu (Kvu 6.6/328, 24 f) and 2 other early schools.¹⁶³ Early Buddhism and Theravāda accepts only nirvana as an unconditioned element (*asaṅkhata, dhatu*, Dhs 1084).¹⁶⁴

2.2.1.3 Some later schools regarded space as being of “unchanging nature” (Skt *nitya, dharma*), In this sense, it is similar to the Western conception of ether, a virtually immaterial but glowing fluid that serves as the support for the 4 material elements. Because this ethereal form of space is thought to be glowing, it is sometimes used by later Buddhists as a metaphor for Buddhahood, which is said to be radiant like the sun or space.

2.2.1.4 Consciousness as a component of the 6 elements refers simply to our mind [1.2.5.5], that is, as an internal faculty; as external reality, it refers to other beings, and cosmologically to the “3 worlds,” that is, *the sense-world, the form world and the formless world* [2.2.4].

As for **the 18 elements**, comprising *the 6 sense-faculties, their respective objects and their consciousnesses*, we have investigated them earlier in some detail [2.1.1], which should be revised in connection with these new details.

2.2.2 Feelings: The 6 elements

2.2.2.1 The suttas list bodily feelings or sensation¹⁶⁵ as pleasant, unpleasant and neutral, and mental feelings as joyful, sorrowful and neutral, such as in **the Vedanā Saṃyutta**.¹⁶⁶ In other words, a pleasant feeling, painful feeling or neutral feeling can be physical (*kāyika*) (arising through the 5 physical senses) or mental (*cetasika*) (arising through the mind), totalling 6 types of feelings in all.¹⁶⁷

The Abhidhamma, however, lists only **5 types of feeling**: pleasant bodily feeling, painful bodily feeling, joyful mental feeling, sorrowful mental feeling, and **neutral feeling** (this last one is only a single category). Neutral feeling, according to the Abhidhamma, is felt or known only mentally, that is, we are only aware that a feeling is present or not.¹⁶⁸

Although it is said to be literally “neither painful nor pleasant” (*adukkham-asukhā vedanā*), and may be taken as the absence of both pleasure and pain in a generic sense, it is still regarded as “feeling” in a psychological sense. The significance lies in whether we *know* or do *not* notice this absence. It works this way:

When we are drawn by greed to a pleasant feeling (bodily or mental), we feed our latent tendency of **lust** (*kāma, rāgānusaya*); when we are repulsed by hate towards the object, we feed our latent tendency of **aversion** (*paṭighānusaya*); and when we are unaware of the absence of either and

¹⁶² Vbh 112 f; DhsA

¹⁶³ Traditionally, there are 18 early Buddhist schools (after the Buddha’s time): SD 58.1 (5.4.5.6) n.

¹⁶⁴ Miln says of space (*ākāsa*) and nirvana that neither is born of deeds, cause or the creative power of nature (*ākāso ca nibbānañ ca ime dve akammajā ahetujā anutujā*, Miln 271,6 f; 268,21+25; DhsA:M 161,6 f). However, this is only a comparison of concepts, not realities: the two are *not* identical, since nirvana is unconditioned and beyond attributes. For a discussion, see Noa Ronkin, *Early Buddhist Metaphysics*, 2005:179 f; also A B Keith, *Buddhist Philosophy in India and Ceylon*, 1923 (1979):168 f.

¹⁶⁵ On “feelings” and “sensations: in early Buddhism, see SD 17.3 (1.2).

¹⁶⁶ **Samādhi S** (S 36.1/4:204); see also **Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna S** (D 22,11/2:298), SD 13.2 = **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10,32/1:59) SD 13.3; and also D 3:275; S 2:53, 82, 4:207; A 3:400. See also SD 13.1 (5B).

¹⁶⁷ **Cūḷa Vedalla S** (M 44,23/1:302), SD 40a.9; **Sall’atthana S** (S 36.6/4:208), SD 5.5. See SD 17.3 (1.1).

¹⁶⁸ Vbh 72; Dhs 133.

ignore it, we feed the latent tendency of **ignorance** (*avijjā'nusaya*).¹⁶⁹ Furthermore, according to **the Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta** (M 44), a neutral feeling, because it is not easily detected, may be seen to be either pleasant or unpleasant; thus, it can be pleasant when there is knowledge of it, painful when we lack knowledge of it.¹⁷⁰

To be mindful is to notice both the presence and the absence of feelings. Since neutral feeling is of such a tricky nature, we need some wisdom training of the suttas to help us notice it, and to know what to do then. Basically, our training should be to note that it is "mind-made; hence, conditioned and impermanent" or simply as being "impermanent." As we keep on noting neutral feeling in this way, it becomes a knowledge of change. When we begin to see the significance of this, that knowledge becomes liberating wisdom.¹⁷¹

2.2.2.2 In fact, ignorance is specifically listed as the last component in **the 6 elements of feelings**, according to **the Bahu, dhātuka Sutta** (M 115), thus [SD 29.1a]:

(1) the physical pleasure element,	<i>sukha, dhatu</i>	[M 115,4]
(2) the physical pain element,	<i>dukkha, dhatu</i>	[M 115,5]
(3) the mental joy element,	<i>somanassa, dhatu</i>	[M 115,6]
(4) the mental pain [grief] element,	<i>domanassa, dhatu</i>	[M 115,7]
(5) the equanimity element, and	<i>upekkhā, dhatu</i>	[M 115,8]
(6) the ignorance element.	<i>avijjā, dhatu</i>	[M 115,9]

These are defined in **the Vibhaṅga**, as follows:¹⁷²

The physical pleasure element is bodily ease, bodily pleasure, bodily ease or pleasure experienced (*vedayita*) through bodily contact [externally stimulated], bodily ease or pleasure as feeling arising from bodily contact [internally felt].

The physical painful element is bodily unease, bodily pain, bodily unease or pain experienced through bodily contact [externally stimulated], bodily unease or pain as feeling arising from bodily contact [internally felt].

The mental joy element is mental ease, mental pleasure, mental ease or pleasure experienced through mental contact [externally stimulated], mental ease or pleasure as feeling arising from mental contact [internally felt].

The mental pain element is mental unease, mental displeasure, mental unease or displeasure that is felt as arising from mental contact [externally stimulated], mental ease or pleasure as feeling arising from mental contact [internally felt].

The equanimity element is that which is neither mental ease nor unease, neither painful nor pleasant experience arising from mental contact, neither painful nor pleasant feeling arising from mental contact.

The ignorance element is the absence of knowledge, absence of vision, absence of realization, absence of understanding, absence of self-understanding, absence of penetration, absence of mental collectedness, absence of scrutiny, absence of observation, absence of reflection, absence of perceptiveness, stupidity, foolishness, non-circumspection, delusion, denseness, muddle-mindedness, ignorance, the flood of ignorance, the yoke of ignorance, latent tendency of ignorance, gross ignorance, the barrier [block] that is ignorance, the unwholesome root that is delusion.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁹ See SD 17.3 (1.1).

¹⁷⁰ M 44,24/1:303 (SD 40a.9); SD 17.3 (4.5.2).

¹⁷¹ Further see SD 55.4 (2.1.3).

¹⁷² Vbh §180/85 f. [The notes within square brackets are additional explanations.]

¹⁷³ *Yaṃ aññāṇaṃ adassanaṃ anabhisamayo ananubodhi asambodhi appaṭivedho asaṅgāhanā apariyogāhanā asamapekkhanā apaccavekhaṇā apaccakkha, kammaṃ dummejjhaṃ balyaṃ asampajaññaṃ moho pamoho sammoho avijjā avijj'ogho avijjā, yogo avijjā'nusayo avijjā, pariyutthānaṃ avijjā, laṅgī moho akusala, mūlaṃ.*

2.2.2.3 In the 6 elements of feelings [2.2.2.2], elements (1)-(4) are straightforward, referring to bodily and mental feelings of ease and unease [comfort], and of pleasure and pain, all of which refer to the affective nature of feelings. Early Buddhist psychology includes “equanimity” or “neutral feeling” as referring to the absence of both pleasure and pain (that which is neither pleasant nor painful).

This element is especially significant in managing our meditation experience, when we are experiencing a state we are unable to identify, especially from a lack of experience. This is the kind of “equanimity” that is “on-looking ignorance,” which, in turn, feeds the latent tendency of ignorance. We should reflect on such a state as being “mind-made,” and hence “impermanent and unsatisfactory.”

This overlapping between **mundane equanimity** and **ignorance** is noted in the Sammohavinodanī as being a “pair” (*dvaya*) because of their similarity on account of their obscurity (*avibhūtattā*) (VbhA 73,27-29). For practical purposes, we may take equanimity as “on-looking ignorance,” which we can easily note during the review at the end of our meditation session, and correct accordingly. Ignorance (*avijjā*), however, is more profound, especially when we lack knowledge about something that we desire to know. This is where a reflection on these elements of feeling will prepare us for a gradual progress in understanding the nature of ignorance and overcoming it as a “wise investigator” (*pañña vīmaṃsaka*), as stated in **the Bahu,dhātuka Sutta** (M 115,3), SD 29.1a.

2.2.3 Formations: the 6 elements

2.2.3.1 The Bahu,dhātuka Sutta (M 115) lists the 6 elements [2.2.0] as the 6 kinds of formations (*saṅkhārā*), which the Vibhaṅga defines as the 3 unwholesome karmas (*akusala kamma*) and the 3 wholesome karmas (*kusala kamma*) not in the usual moral sets, but in their psychological components of the path-limb of **right thought** (and its opposite), as defined in **the Dvedha,vitakka Sutta** (M 19) and **the Vibhaṅga** (Vbh §183/86 f) [2.2.3].

The Dvedha,vitakka Sutta describes the Buddha, even as a bodhisattva, reflecting on the psychological nature of the 6 elements, and cultivated moral virtue, thus:¹⁷⁴

2 “Bhikshus, before my awakening, while I was still only an unawakened bodhisattva, it occurred to me:

‘Suppose that I dwell working with my thoughts in 2 ways.’¹⁷⁵

Then, I set on one side

thoughts of **sensual desire**, thoughts of **ill will** and thoughts of **cruelty**,
and I set on the other side

thoughts of **renunciation**, thoughts of **non-ill will**, and thoughts of **non-cruelty**.¹⁷⁶

(1-3) THOUGHTS OF SENSUAL DESIRE, OF ILL WILL, OF CRUELTY

3 As I dwelled thus, diligent, ardent and resolute, a thought of **sensual desire** arose in me. I understood thus:

‘This thought of sensual desire has arisen in me.

This leads to my own affliction, to others’ affliction, and to the affliction of both;
it obstructs wisdom, causes difficulties, and leads away from nirvana.’

¹⁷⁴ Summary of **Dvedhā,vitakka S** (M 19,2-13/1:114-117), SD 61.1.

¹⁷⁵ *Yaṃ nūnāhaṃ dvidhā katvā dvidhā katvā vitakke vihareyyan’ti*. The Bodhisattva deals with his thoughts in these 2 ways during his 6 years seeking for awakening. (MA 2:79,19-35). For another sutta dealing with a similar dichotomy of thoughts, as unwholesome and wholesome, see **Andha,karaṇa S** (It 3.4.8/82 f).

¹⁷⁶ The language here is apophatic (“negative”). In positive terms, these are, respectively, “thoughts of charity (*cāga*) and letting go (of unwholesome states) (*nekkhamma*),” “thoughts of lovingkindness (*mettā*) and thoughts of compassion (*karuṇā*).

When I considered: ‘This leads to my own affliction,’	it subsided in me;
when I considered: ‘This leads to others’ affliction,’	it subsided in me;
when I considered: ‘This leads to the affliction of both,’	it subsided in me;
when I considered: ‘This obstructs [destroys] wisdom, causes difficulties, and leads away from nirvana,’	it subsided in me.

Whenever a thought of sensual desire arose in me, I abandoned it, removed it, did away with it.
[The same template applies to “a thought of **ill will**,” and to “a thought of **cruelty**.”]

2.2.3.2 The Buddha then reminds us that whatever we “frequently think and ponder upon” (*anuvitakketi anuvicareti*), that will become our mental inclination (*nati hoti cetaso*) [which will feed our latent tendencies of lust, aversion and ignorance].¹⁷⁷

On the other hand, when we constantly think of **renunciation** (letting go of thoughts of sensual desire, of ill will and of cruelty), of **non-ill will**, of **non-cruelty**, we have nothing to lose, only good to gain. Of course, over-thinking even of such good states can tire the body; then, the mind tires too; then, the tired mind will not be able to concentrate. Hence, we should not strain the mind (that is, keep to the middle way).

Nevertheless, we should remember the rule that whatever we frequently think and ponder upon will become our mental inclination (our karmic habit): [1.2.9.3]

When we frequently think and ponder upon **renunciation**, our mind will incline to renunciation.
When we frequently think and ponder upon **non-ill will**, our mind will incline to non-ill will.
When we frequently think and ponder upon **non-cruelty**, our mind will incline to non-cruelty.

This is, in fact, the practice of **right intention** (*sammā saṅkappa*). We build our good karmic foundation of keeping the mind free of the roots of greed (*lobha, mūla*) and hate (*dosa, mūla*). This is also the cultivation and strengthening of our moral virtue (*sīla*), as a foundation for **right mindfulness** (*sammā sati*).

2.2.3.3 This is when we learn and cultivate a suitable body-based meditation, especially the mindfulness of the breath (*ānāpāna, sati*). Even if we are unable to attain dhyana, we can still direct our mind when it is calm enough to reflect on impermanence. In fact, it also works the other way around: when our concentration is poor, we can still reflect on impermanence (nothing lasts for long). This is a helpful habit that keeps our mind in proper perspective so that we do not get carried away by negative emotions.

Then, we are ready for effective meditation to attain dhyana (*jhāna*), when our mind is temporarily free from the senses and all sense-based experiences to become calm and clear by attaining full concentration (*samādhi*). When we have properly mastered at least the 1st dhyana, we then emerge from it, and in the focused mind’s clear light, we reflect on impermanence, and when we are ready, reflect on suffering and nonself too. We will reach the path in no time, certainly in this life itself, as stated in **the (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1).¹⁷⁸

2.2.4 Consciousness: The 3 elements

2.2.4.1 A detailed study of **consciousness** (*viññāṇa*) has been done elsewhere [SD 17.8a]. You should read this carefully if you have not done so before continuing here: the explanation here assumes that you have some preliminary knowledge of the early Buddhist teaching on consciousness. Or, you can continue reading, and stop at the end of this section, and go on to read SD 17.8a. Then, read this section again so that it is clearer for you.

¹⁷⁷ On the latent tendencies, see **Anusaya** (SD 31.3).

¹⁷⁸ S 25.1 (SD 16.7); or any of the 10 suttas of the Okkanta Saṃyutta (S 25).

The Bahu,dhātuka Sutta records Ānanda as requesting the Buddha for “another way whereby we could rightly say that a monk [any practitioner] is “**skilled in the elements**” (*dhātu,kusala*) and the Buddha replies simply by listing these **3 elements**, thus:

- | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|
| (1) the sensual element, | <i>kāma,dhatu</i> | (the sense-world) |
| (2) the form element, and | <i>rūpa,dhatu</i> | (the 4 form-dhyana worlds) |
| (3) the formless element. | <i>arūpa,dhatu</i> | (the 4 formless-dhyana worlds) |
- M 115,8 (SD 29.1a)

2.2.4.2 When teachings are listed in this way, it means that they have been elaborated elsewhere or are taught orally from teacher to student. One of the unwholesome effects with learning is that knowledge alone tends to puff up the knower: he thinks he knows, others do not, even when he only knows without understanding. This is especially notoriously true with the study of the Abhidhamma. Hence, we are advised to learn from an experienced “spiritual friend” (*kalyāṇa,mitta*), one who is both able to teach us *what* is useful to know, and also *how* to know it. Learning should *better* our personality, bringing us closer to the path of awakening in this life itself. As this vision of the path grows clearer, we are uplifted with greater joy and freedom.

2.2.4.3 The Majjhima Commentary explains the 3 elements [2.2.4.1] as follows:

sense-sphere element (*kāma,dhātu*) = the 5 aggregates of the sense-sphere (*kāmāvacara-k,khandha*),
form element (*rūpa,dhātu*) = the 5 aggregates of the form sphere (*rūpāvacara-k,khandha*), and
formless element (*arūpa,dhātu*) = the 4 aggregates of the formless sphere (*arūpāvacara-k,khandha*).
 (MA 4:104)

Simple as this statement may be, it has a profound spiritual significance: all existence is related to the 5 aggregates. In their grossest form, the 5 aggregates—form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness—arise in **the sense-world**, our world where beings depend on the 5 physical senses (or at least some of them) and the mind. [1.1.1.5]

The human world is unique in the sense that we experience (suffer) both pleasure and pain, bodily and mental, and are also *able* to learn to see conditionality, to be free from the limitations of the senses. We are likely to be more willing to learn and change than **the subhuman beings** who lack the mind to learn and the spiritual capacity to better themselves.

The transhumans (the devas of the form worlds and the brahmas of the formless worlds) are able to do so too, but they are too caught up, or bogged down, by the very nature of their superior minds and forms. **The devas** are so caught up with their powerful light-based pleasures that they simply die out like toys that run out of battery power (the power being their good karma). **The brahmas** exist in a refined energy-based bliss that they are aware of little else or have no inclination to do more. They are like the rich and powerful who are so used to the fine living in the super-comfort of their celestial palaces, they have no inclination whatsoever to venture out into the seemingly unclean uncomfortable world outside.

2.2.5 Samsara and nirvana: The 2 elements

2.2.5.1 The Bahu,dhātuka Sutta (M 115) mentions altogether a total of 6 sets of elements [2.2.0], the last of which is the set of “the 2 elements,” that is,¹⁷⁹

- | | | |
|----------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| (1) the conditioned element, and | <i>saṅkhata,dhātu</i> | |
| (2) the unconditioned element. | <i>asaṅkhata,dhatu</i> | (M 115,9), SD 29.1a |

¹⁷⁹ On the conditioned and the unconditioned, see **Das’uttara S** (D 34,1.3(9)/3:274).

This makes good sense, since after mentioning all the different aspects of being and existence, the Buddha concludes by listing the 2 ultimate states of things: (1) the existential, and (2) the teleological, that is, what we are and what we can and should be or attain. **Existential** refers to our cyclic existence in **samsara** (*saṃsāra*), this cycle of rebirths and redeaths, caught in a loop of acting and reacting to habitual karma.

2.2.5.2 The Bahu,dhātuka Sutta (M 115,10) then goes on to state that we should be “**skilled in the sense-bases**” (*āyatana,kusala*), that is, we should know and understand the 6 internal and 6 external sense-bases, thus (SD 29.1a):¹⁸⁰

(1) the eye	and	forms	<i>cakkhu c’eva</i>	<i>rūpā ca,</i>
(2) the ear	and	sounds	<i>sotañ ca</i>	<i>saddā ca,</i>
(3) the nose	and	smells	<i>ghānañ ca</i>	<i>gandhā ca,</i>
(4) the tongue	and	tastes	<i>jivhā ca</i>	<i>rasā ca,</i>
(5) the body	and	touches and	<i>kāyo ca</i>	<i>phoṭṭhabbā ca,</i>
(6) the mind	and	mind-objects	<i>mano ca</i>	<i>dhammā ca.</i>

These are our cognitive faculties, that is, our bodily senses and the mind, collectively known as **the 12 sense-bases** (*dvādas’āyatana*).¹⁸¹ The “internal” bases are **the cognitive faculties** (sense-faculties and the mind). They are our ability to see, hear, smell, taste and touch; we are born with them; hence, they are said to be the result of our *past karma* (karmic fruition). In modern lingo, this is our **nature** aspect.

The “external” bases are **the cognitive objects** (the sense-objects and the mind-objects). They are said to be *external* because they are not always there, and we conceive or conjure them up depending on our conditioning or training. How we act—*see, hear, smell, taste, touch or think*—especially when done *consciously* and *intentionally* is our present karma: this is our **nurture** aspect.

In this sense, the set of 12 sense-bases is said to be a **conditioned element**. By nature, they are rooted in the past; we nurture them in the present; and both ways, we create our future state. Past karma and present conditions shape our present actions and state; these, in turn, as our actions and habits, shape our future state. Hence, they are said to be a conditioned element.

2.2.6 Dependent arising as a conditioned element

2.2.6.1 The conditioned element, that is the 12 sense-bases [2.2.5.2], refers to a distinct sphere of personal experience. These are the faculties that we each have, physical and mental—some lacking in them, others keener in them—that distinguish us as individuals. The workings of these faculties are explicated by another conditioned element, that of **dependent arising** (*paṭicca samuppāda*).

The conditioned element that is dependent arising is the essence and epitome of all conditionality: this is the bridge between our conditioned lives as conditioned elements of the 12 sense-bases that crosses over into the unconditioned death-free state that is nirvana [2.2.7]. This dependent arising comprises 2 aspects: its basic principle, called specific conditionality [2.2.6.2] and the principle of dependent arising itself [2.2.6.3 f].¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ The 12 bases are def at Vbh §§155-167/70-73 & explained in detail at Vism 15.1-6/481 f. The mind-base includes all types of consciousness, and thus comprises all 7 elements that function as consciousness. The mind-object is identical with the mind-object element. On the significance of being “skilled in the sense-bases,” see SD 50.1 (3.5.1.4).

¹⁸¹ On the 12 sense-bases, see **Sabba S** (S 35.23) SD 7.1; **Saḷ-āyatana Vibhaṅga S** (M 137,4+5) SD 29.5; SD 26.1 (3.2); SD 56.11 (2.1.2).

¹⁸² On dependent arising (*paṭicca samuppāda*), see **Dependent arising**, SD 5.16.

2.2.6.2 The Bahu,dhātuka Sutta (M 115,11.1) records the Buddha as teaching Ānanda the principle of **specific conditionality** (*idap,paccayatā*), as follows:¹⁸³

- (1) when this is, that is; with the arising of this, that arises;
 (2) when this is not, that is not; with the ending of this, that ends. (M 115,11.1), SD 29.1a

How the aspects (1)+(2) of this principle are applied and elaborated can be seen in **the Mahā Taṇhā,-saṅkhaya Sutta** (M 38), which describes both the arising of suffering and its ending,¹⁸⁴ the gist of which is stated below [2.2.6.3 f].

Specific conditionality characterizes any kind of existence, since to exist is to arise and pass away in terms of causes and effects. However, of special significance is the arising and passing away of conscious beings, that is, whatever that lives and dies (such as human beings, subhumans and devas). They are especially significant when they are able to understand what this conditionality really is, and with this understanding, they are able to be free of the cyclic existence that characterizes samsara.

Simply, specific conditionality means that every person or being that exists has arisen from some past conditions (past karma); they are sustained by present actions and conditions; and they will continue to be prodded on in samsara with future karma. Another important point to remember is that there is no one, but many, conditions at work as the causal conditions and their resultant conditions, which in turn become further causes, ad infinitum. This is the nature of samsara: it is dependently arisen.

2.2.6.3 The workings of **dependent arising**, when stated in full comprises the following 12 links, as recorded, for example, in **the Mahā Taṇhā,-saṅkhaya Sutta** (M 38), thus:

[DEPENDENT ARISING]

- | | |
|---|--|
| (1) with ignorance as condition, there are | (2) volitional formations; |
| (3) with volitional formations as condition, there is | consciousness; |
| (4) with consciousness as condition, there is | name-and-form; |
| (5) with name-and-form as condition, there are | the 6 sense-bases; |
| (6) with the 6 sense-bases as condition, there is | contact; |
| (7) with contact as condition, there is | feeling; |
| (8) with feeling as condition, there is | craving; |
| (9) with craving as condition, there is | clinging; |
| (10) with clinging as condition, there is | existence; |
| (11) with existence as condition, there is | birth; |
| (12) with birth as condition there arise | decay-and-death, sorrow, lamentation,
physical pain, mental pain and despair. |

—Such is the **arising** of this whole mass of suffering.

(M 38,17-19/261-263), SD 7.10¹⁸⁵

In the case of our own existence, **dependent arising** can be simply explained as follows:

- (1) We are born in **ignorance** (*avijjā*); out of ignorance, we act out of our karmic will to live by the rule of the survival of the fittest.
- (2) Through our **karmic will** (*saṅkhārā*), we act and react with others and our environment.

¹⁸³ For details on specific conditionality, see SD 5.16 (2).

¹⁸⁴ On the arising of suffering, see M 38,19/1:262 f; the ending of suffering, M 38,22/1:264 (SD 7.10); also see **Dependent Arising**, SD 5.16 (2).

¹⁸⁵ See also **Bahu,dhātuka S** (M 115,11.2/3:63 f), SD 21.9a.

- (3) As we interact with others and our environment, we become conscious that we are not alone, how different we are from others and from things around us: **consciousness** (*viññāṇa*). The view of self and selfishness arise in us.
- (4) As we become more conscious, we see external forms and give them names, thus sensing and making sense of them; hence, **name-and-form** (*nāma,rūpa*).
- (5) We make sense of them as visual objects, sounds, smells, tastes, touches, and behind all this is the mind (thinking): these are **the 6 sense-bases** (*saḷ-āyatana*).
- (6) Every time we come into **contact** (*phassa*) (through our senses), we recognize them, since we recall them and know them by the names we have given them.
- (7) We recall only those things (names and forms) that we have experiences with, that is, we recall how *good* we felt about them or because of them, or how *bad* they were. Thus, we have **feelings** (*vedanā*) for them.
- (8) Naturally, we want or crave for more of those things or states that make us feel good; we reject those that make us feel bad; we ignore what we make no sense of. This is **craving** (*taṇhā*).
- (9) When we get what we see as good, we cling to it, but unsatisfied, we always want more of it. This is called **clinging** (*upādāna*).
- (10) Because of our clinging, we feel alive, we are compelled to want to live on forever, and to enjoy better lives, but this **existence** (*bhava*) is dependent on clinging.
- (11) Because of this clinging to existence, we are stuck to just the way we are—craving for pleasure, rejecting pain, ignorant of what they really are and how they control us. And so we continue to become anew: we are reborn. In the new **birth** (*jāti*), we are still stuck in the loop of the same habitual lives.
- (12) Going through all this, we notice we age and we end as being (**decay-and-death**). Hence, we experience **sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain and despair**. As a result, we suffer from not understanding impermanence and nonself (nothing that we can identify with or own).¹⁸⁶

2.2.6.4 The term “**dependent ending**” is a convenient modernist neologism, and does not exist separately from dependent arising itself [2.2.6.3]. The 12-link dependent ending formula is given as follows:

[DEPENDENT ENDING]

But with the utter fading away and ending of **ignorance**,
 with the ending of volitional formations,
 with the ending of consciousness,
 with the ending of name-and-form,
 with the ending of the 6 sense-bases,
 with the ending of contact,
 with the ending of feeling,
 with the ending of craving,
 with the ending of clinging,
 with the ending of existence,
 with the ending of birth, there end

volitional formations end;
 consciousness ends;
 name-and-form ends;
 the 6 sense-bases end;
 contact ends;
 feeling ends;
craving ends;
 clinging ends;
 existence ends;
 birth ends;
 decay-and-death, sorrow, lamentation,
 physical pain, mental pain and despair.

—Such is the ending of this whole mass of suffering.

(M 38,21 f/263 f), SD 7.10¹⁸⁷

When we understand and accept **karma and rebirth**, it makes good sense to see dependent arising as referring to how we are conditioned over the 3 periods of time [2.2.6.3],¹⁸⁸ that is, we are con-

¹⁸⁶ For a traditional (technical) definition of the 12 links, see SD 5.16 (1.4).

¹⁸⁷ See also **Bahu,dhātuka S** (M 115,11.3/3:64), SD 21.9a.

¹⁸⁸ For easier understanding, read what follows with SD 5.16 (Table 8.3a).

ditioned by our **past** karma (links 1-2), that conditions our **present** (links 3-7), which in turn conditions (links 8-10) the **future** (links 11-12).

We are rooted in ignorance (link 1) going back into our evolutionary past. Our present life begins with the consciousness (link 3) we gain at birth. The feelings (link 7) we experience in life, feed it so that we continue living in a loop of habitual tendencies. Because of our present existence (link 10), we continue in time, maybe in a different body but with the kind of mind we have habituated in life.

This is our life-cycle that keeps going endlessly through samsara. After all, when plants (that lack human consciousness) are able to propagate themselves (through their genes) to grow and evolve, surely, humans are able to do the same (through our genes) in an even more sophisticated manner.

2.2.6.5 According to the **Bālena Paṇḍita Sutta** (S 12.19), this (conscious) body has arisen—that is, we exist in samsara—because we are “hindered by ignorance and yoked [connected] to craving” (*avijjā, nīvaraṇassa ... taṇhāya sampayuttassa*).¹⁸⁹ **Ignorance** (of the 4 noble truths) blinds us from seeing the true nature of things; thus, we are yoked to **craving**, prodding us on as it wills. The mention of these two links of the dependent arising cycle is very significant in our present study.¹⁹⁰

When we carefully look at the links of dependent arising [2.2.6.3], we will notice that ignorance is the very 1st link, and craving is the 8th link, just following **feeling**, the 7th link. When we destroy ignorance, as stated in the dependent ending formula [2.2.6.4], the whole dependent arising of suffering collapses and ends for us by our attaining arhathood. In other words, the arhat has fully understood the 4 noble truths, and thus awakens to nirvana.

For those of us who have not even reached the path yet, but still caught up in the arena of dependent arising, we are not capable of overcoming ignorance. How do we start to free ourselves from the power of dependent arising? Here is an open secret: we need to break the chains of dependent arising at its weakest link, the one just before craving, that is, **feeling**. This is an “open” secret because the Buddha has given us numerous teachings on feelings for just this reason.

The (Anicca) Vedanā Sutta (S 25.5), for example, clearly states that any kind of feeling, when sense-based (arising from any of the physical senses) or mental is “impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise” (*aniccam vipariṇāmiṃ aññathā, bhāvī*). The Sutta records the Buddha as stating that whether we accept this truth merely out of deep **faith**, or we investigate it with open **wisdom**—in other words, we make it a habit of reflecting on impermanence—we are *guaranteed* of attaining stream-winning within this life itself: we are “incapable of dying without having attained the fruit of stream-winning.”¹⁹¹

Once we have attained streamwinning, within 7 lives at the most, we are sure to attain arhathood and nirvana [3.3.4.1]. With streamwinning, we are thus on the way to breaking the chain of dependent arising for good.

2.2.7 Nirvana: the unconditioned element

2.2.7.1 When we fully understand the conditioned element that is dependent arising [2.2.6], we will free ourselves from the tenacious grip of our karmic habits and their bitter fruits called samsara: we attain **the unconditioned element**, that is nirvana. What can be said of this unconditioned element is what it is not, that is, to use apophatic language: it is not this, not that.¹⁹² It is *not* samsara (despite what later word-worn worldly Zennists and their tautologic talk try to delude us with).

Simply put, using a literary imagery, it is like Dorothy’s meeting the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman and the Lion and travelling together on the yellow brick road. After some adventures, they arrive at the Emerald City, where the Guardian of the Gates tells them to wear green tinted spectacles to keep

¹⁸⁹ S 12.19,2/2:23 f (SD 21.2).

¹⁹⁰ See SD 40a.8 (2.1.1.1).

¹⁹¹ S 25.5/3:226, SD 17.3(4.5.1).

¹⁹² On apophysis, see SD 40a.1 (6.3).

their eyes from being blinded by the city's brilliance. Each one is called to see the Wizard. He appears to Dorothy as a giant head, to the Scarecrow as a lovely lady, to the Tin Woodman as a terrible beast, and to the Lion as a ball of fire. Near the end the story, it is revealed that he is a mere humbug, an old man from Omaha in disguise! Dorothy is then able to return home, and her friends become true individuals.

We are each like Dorothy with our Dharma friends, travelling on the path of yellow bricks (learning the suttas). We reach the Emerald City (symbolizing spiritual study and meditation) and meet all kinds of challenges, such as false teachers and worldly Buddhisms. Seeing through them, we free ourselves from them and attain spiritual realization and awakening. Well, most of us are still walking on that yellow brick road, now wiser with this cautionary tale.

2.2.7.2 According to **the Abhidhamm'attha,saṅgha**, nirvana is said to be supramundane (not of this world), and is to be realized by the true knowledge of the 4 paths.¹⁹³ It is the object or goal of the paths and fruits, and is called nirvana because it is a turning-away (*nikkhantattā*) from craving, which is an entanglement or jungle (*vāna*).¹⁹⁴ (Abhs 6.30)

Nirvana is said to be supramundane because it is an ultimate reality. Etymologically, the word *nibbāna* (Skt *nirvāṇa*) is derived from a verb *nibbāti*, "to be blown out or extinguished." It thus signifies the quenching out of the worldly "fires" of greed, hate and delusion. The Pali commentators, however, prefer to treat it as the negation of, or "departure from" (*nikkhantatta*), the entanglement (*vāna*) of craving, the derivation offered here. For, as long as one is entangled by craving, one remains bound in samsara, the cycle of birth and death; but when all craving has been exterminated, one attains nirvana, liberation from the cycle of birth and death.

2.2.7.3 Though nirvana is **singular**, sub specie aeternitatis,¹⁹⁵ according to its intrinsic nature, by reference to a basis for distinction (*kāraṇa,pariyāya*), it is twofold, namely, *a nirvana-element with residue*, and *a nirvana-element without residue*. It is threefold, according to its different aspects, namely, it is void, signless and desireless. (Abhs 6.31)

In a manner of speaking, nirvana is **a singular undifferentiated ultimate reality**. It is totally supramundane with one intrinsic nature (*sabhāva*), that of being the unconditioned death-free element fully transcending the conditioned world (samsara). Hence, it is unwholesome and misleading to think or to say that "nirvana is samsara, and samsara nirvana." Are we saying that "suffering is joy, and joy suffering"? Before we numb our minds with our wordiness here, it's best we simply get back to basics.

2.2.7.4 The **twofold** bases for distinction that is nirvana as nirvana-elements (*nibbana,dhātu*)—as concepts —refers to the presence or the absence of the 5 aggregates. The nirvana-element experienced by arhats is said to be "**with residue**" (*sa,upādisesa*) because, though the defilements have all been extinguished, the "residue" of aggregates acquired by past clinging (past karma) remains for the rest of the arhat's life, supporting his being for the benefit of others.¹⁹⁶

The nirvana-element attained at the arhat's death is said to be "**without residue**" (*anupādisesa*), because the 5 aggregates have been exhausted and are never acquired again. In the Commentaries, the 2 nirvana-elements are also similarly called, respectively, the total quenching of the defilements

¹⁹³ The 4 paths (*maggā*) are those of the 4 noble ones (*ariya*), respectively, of the streamwinner, the once-returner, the non-returner and the arhat. Def (detailed) SD 10.16 (11-14); (**Catukka**) **Samāṇa S** (A 4.239), SD 49.14; **Alagaddûpama S** (M 22,42-47), SD 3.13; **Ānāpāna,sati S** (M 118,9-12), SD 7.13; **Samāṇa-m-acala S 1** (A 4.87), SD 20.13 + **S 2** (A 4.88) SD 20.14.

¹⁹⁴ KhpA 151, 152; DhsA 409.

¹⁹⁵ *Sub specie aeternitatis*, "under the aspect of eternity," something real without regard for time: SD 26.8 (1.1.3, 2.2.5); SD 50.13 (2.3.2.1).

¹⁹⁶ See **Nibbāna,dhatu S** (It 44), SD 50.13; SD 45.18 (2.5.2.2).

(*kilesa parinibbāna*) and the total extinction of the aggregates (*khandha parinibbāna*). Their meaning is the same in both pairs of terms.¹⁹⁷

2.2.7.5 Nirvana is to be **threefold** according to its different aspects (*ākāra*): It is called **the void** (*suññata*) because it is devoid of greed, hate and delusion, and because it is devoid of all that is conditioned. It is called **signless** (*animitta*) because it is free from the signs of greed, hate and delusion, and free from the signs of all conditioned things. It is called **undirected** (*appaṇihita*) because it is free from the prodding of greed, hate and delusion, and because it is not moved by craving.¹⁹⁸

2.2.8 Speaking of nirvana

2.2.8.1 The Buddha has, for our benefit, set a fourfold guideline when we examine and discuss the Dharma, especially a profound concept like nirvana. Since we are still unawakened, whatever we think, say or write may be like the childish babble about unicorns. There must come a time when we realize we are babbling about unicorns; then, we are progressing in our understanding of how our mind works with words.

This is the teaching of the 4 analytic skills or insights (*paṭisambhidā*), that is, those in:¹⁹⁹

(1) meanings,	<i>attha paṭisambhidā</i>
(2) teachings [truths, realities],	<i>dhamma paṭisambhidā</i>
(3) language,	<i>nirutti paṭisambhidā</i>
(4) ready wit.	<i>paṭibhāṇa, paṭisambhidā</i>

2.2.8.2 Firstly, in terms of words and meaning (as reflecting reality), we understand the difference between **connotative meaning** (*attha, paṭisambhidā*) and **denotative meaning** (*dhamma, paṭisambhidā*). While the latter, **to denote**, means “to signify directly, refer specifically (to),” the former, **to connote**, means “to suggest or imply (in addition to its literal meaning).” For example, “The word ‘river’ denotes a moving body of water (in nature), and connotes such things as the relentlessness of time and the changing nature of life.”²⁰⁰

To denote, then, is to predicate the subject; to connote is to imply or indicate its attributes.²⁰¹

Hence, we can say (or write) that *nibbana* denotes “full awakening from ignorance and craving, a death-free state.” Nirvana connotes “being free from the cycle of rebirths and redeaths, so that we are beyond impermanence and suffering, a state that is beyond time and space, beyond all dualities.” This is as far as *words* go, so that we can talk about it in some useful way (how we *use* ideas, that is). Yet, none of these actually *is* nirvana.

A clever teacher may say that “Nirvana *is*,” but then we can also say “Samsara *is*”: we are back in the uroboro’s jaw biting its own tail. After saying all this, we must still understand and accept that ultimately, nirvana is beyond words: it is ineffable. Of that which we cannot speak, we must be silent. What we speak of are only *words* related to an *idea* of nirvana, best used in connection with our study and understanding of the sutta teachings.

2.2.8.3 We have thus far noticed the difficulties and limits of **human language**, or perhaps any language (including computer language) or words. We can only say so much about nirvana. We can,

¹⁹⁷ See SD 45.18 (2.5.2.4).

¹⁹⁸ On *suññato ... animitto ... appaṇihito* (*samādhī*): S 43.4/4:360,17 [SD 54.5 (3.3.3)] = D 33,1.10(51)/3:219,-22 (*rāga, nimittādināṃ abhāvā appaṇihito*, DA); V 3:92,37 f = *rāga, dosa, moha, paṇidhīnāṃ abhāvato appaṇihito* (VA 2:493,26 ≈ MA 2:367,9 ≈ DhsA 222,23 ≈ DA 3:1004,15) = V 4:25,32 f; Pm 2:35,1, qu DhsA 223,5 ≈ Vism 658,9; DhA 2:172,12 ; Pm 2:36,12, 41,12, 59,10, 65,15; Abhs 44.6. See SD 54.5 (3.3.3).

¹⁹⁹ See SD 28.4 (4); SD 41.6 (2.2); SD 58.1 (5.4.2.13).

²⁰⁰ Based on the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 5th ed, 2011: sv denote.

²⁰¹ For J S Mill’s explanations (*Logic* 1846:1.2.5), see OED sv connote.

of course, imagine what nirvana is “like” against the impermanence and suffering of our world, that is, samsara. This is very useful in showing us that there is a way out of this cycle of lives and deaths.

While the arhat lives, we may say that nirvana is an experience: the arhat’s experience. This, however, seems to suggest that it arises from the arhat’s senses or mind, which is, of course, not the case at all. It is better, then, to speak of nirvana as **the state** of an arhathood. Now, “state” is lexically defined as “(countable) the mental, emotional or physical state that a person or thing is in.”²⁰²

An arhat surely has some kind of “mental, emotional or physical state” in terms of his “residue” (*upādi*) [2.2.7.4] of 5 aggregates. This is not part of his awakened “state,” which has freed him from acquiring any new karmic deeds. Although some past karma may act on him, he is free from any new karma. We can here notice an interesting aspect of meaning (as an analytic skill). The word “**state**” here refers to something *singular or unique*, that is, the nature of the awakened mind *sui generis*.²⁰³

3 The social construction of Buddhism

3.0 Although the theme of this volume, SD 60.1d, is “An evolutionary psychology of mindfulness,” I will here broadly discuss “Buddhism,” but, as a rule, relating it to the mindfulness and meditation aspects, which have indeed been the key theme of this whole series, SD 60.

In this section, **SD 60.1d (3)**, “The social construction of Buddhism,” we will examine Buddhism as a social reality in modern society, including the influences on its rise and evolution, and a social psychology of modern Buddhists, especially those from an ethnic Buddhist community. In other words, we will, where applicable, see this process as an evolutionary psychology of early Buddhism.

This exercise hopefully will help us better understand what limits our individual and social growth as Buddhists, and how we can overcome those limits.²⁰⁴

3.1 BUDDHISM AND RELIGION

3.1.1 Buddhism as self-development

3.1.1.1 Occasionally, during my Buddhist classes with university students of Malaysia and Singapore in the 1980s, I was asked whether “Is Buddhism a religion?” My usual answer was, in effect, that to take Buddhism as a religion is to see only its rituals, hierarchy or pantheon of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and deities. I see Buddhism as a path of **self-refuge** (*atta,saraṇa*), that is, practising *to know, to tame, to free the self* (that is, the mind). If we define religion in this way, as spiritual living, then, we can say that Buddhism, at least, early Buddhism, is a religion. Moreover, whether Buddhism is regarded as a religion or not is clearly less significant to me than that of keeping to the **training** in *moral conduct, mindfulness and wisdom*.²⁰⁵

3.1.1.2 This statement [3.1.1.1] not only reflects my personal commitment as a “non-religious” Buddhist, or better, follower of the Buddha’s teaching, but, more significantly, this is an “emic” definition [1.2.4.1] of “religion,” that is, by one from the inside, that of a practitioner. This would probably not interest the academic scholar, who prefers a “value-free” definition, an outsider’s or “etic” observation and analysis of Buddhism and religion. Such an approach keeps it open-ended so that

²⁰² Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 6th ed, 2000, 10 ed 2020.

²⁰³ On the distinction between the conditioned and the unconditioned, see SD 50.1 (3.5.1.4).

²⁰⁴ See esp **David L McMahan**, “Buddhism and the epistemic discourses of modernity,” in (ed) P D Numrich, *The Boundaries of Knowledge in Buddhism, Christianity and Science*, Göttingen, 2008:43-58 (ch 3); **Janine Schipper**, “Towards a Buddhist sociology: Theories, methods, and possibilities.” *The American Sociologist* 43,2 June 2012:203-222.

²⁰⁵ The traditional **3 trainings** (*sikkha-t,taya*) of early Buddhism are those in moral virtue (*sīla,sikkhā*), mental concentration (*saṃādhi,sikkhā*) and wisdom (*paññā,sikkhā*). I have here simplified the triad to accommodate the basic Buddhist training, both as monastics and laity [2.1.2.1].

other scholars may express their own views and engage in academic debate. Whichever way the debate goes, rightly or wrongly, it benefits both parties. This is what scholars must do to stay relevant and to advance their career well before retirement.

Being a true Buddhist practitioner, on the other hand, as in keeping to the precepts (as lay followers) and to the Vinaya (as monastics), is not a worldly career move. Hence, a Buddhist (like myself) does not worry about being relevant, unless we measure Buddhism in academic or worldly terms and numbers. After all, early Buddhism has been in vogue, replete with its own canon, for over 2500 years.

Scholarship, as a worldly profession, must keep changing and growing as the academic disciplines grow more interconnected with Buddhist studies. For example, we now have **evolutionary psychology**, which combines the skills of religious study, philosophy, psychology, biology and other fields to study religion, especially Buddhism. This remarkable advance in academic scholarship surprising—perhaps *not* surprisingly—noticeably brings us close to understanding Buddhism as taught by the historical Buddha.

3.1.1.3 When we carefully look at the metahistory of human progress, we will see that, since the 16th century Reformation in Europe, we are being given ever better opportunities to access and benefit from a more human-centred and life-affirming and futuristic vision of a better society, one that is religion-free.

Religion, as we see throughout history and almost everywhere in the world today, is a means of garnering power by the elite to control and exploit others. Religion, including Buddhism (as a religion), is rooted in ignorance, feeds on our fears, generates hate or distance towards “others,” and thrives by sowing delusion of its own false worth and sham goodness. Hence, it can only be rid of, or at least defanged, with *truth, humanity, freedom and wisdom*.

Good modern academic scholarship is able to give us **truth and humanity**; good scholarship thrives on freedom, promotes humanity. The ability and willingness to learn, to be well educated is to bring the best out of us. With this truth and humanity, students and practitioners of Buddhism will be able to free themselves from religion. Empowered with truth and humanity, we can proceed to focus on the Buddha’s teachings of **mental freedom and insight wisdom**. This is the best we have until our world is fully free of religion, when society thrives in humanity and wisdom, and we are spiritually free.

To best benefit from this essay (and others in the series), we should, at least for the moment, suspend all that we know or think we know about religion. We should read this like signposts on a journey in a fascinating new country and enjoy the journey as we move along. We should try our best to suspend any conclusions right after reading this whole essay. This is one of the best ways of learning with an open mind.

To facilitate our understanding of the significance of this study, I have focused on presenting the ideas **analytically**, so that we are able to see the rise of the western conception of “religion,” its impact in our own local (especially Asian) cultures, and what this means for us today, that is, to **synthesize**, put harmoniously together, what we see that we *are* now with what we see in Buddhism that can *better* us. Various scholars have contributed comparative studies and debates on the definition and nature of religion, many titles of which have been listed in the footnotes of this section.

3.1.2 Who invented religion?²⁰⁶

3.1.2.1 A number of scholars view that **religion** (how we practise it) and the concept of “religion” (how we think about it) are not a “cultural universal,” not found in all cultures. In fact, it does not refer to any objective reality “out there” in the world. “Religion,” as we know it, originated in the history and politics of Europe in the modern post-Reformation west. Religion, as claimed by these scholars, is a social construction [3.1.2.2] and a livelihood.²⁰⁷ Furthermore, it is also meaningless to speak of “world religions”²⁰⁸ when we don’t even understand or practise our own.

Scholars who view that religion is a social construction, see it as an ideologically motivated invention by European colonialists who sought powerful labels to distinguish its own modern, rational culture from those they regard as backward and superstitious: the former is labelled “religious,” the latter “secular.” These scholars argue, for example, that:

- (1) “religion” is a western colonialist social construction and has no local native word for it [3.1.2.2 f]
- (2) “religion” necessarily entails its opposite, the “secular” [3.1.2.4]
- (3) the religious-secular dichotomy was used to justify the colonial agenda [3.1.2.5]

3.1.2.2 Firstly, the concept of religion, some scholars say, is **a social construction**. This means that it was an idea or label invented by western colonialists to mislead others (especially the locals) for the colonialists’ own ends. Scholars who reject this sort of colonialist idea stress that there is no term for religion in Chinese or Japanese or Egyptian or in Native American languages; nor is there even a word for religion in the Hebrew Bible or in the Greek New Testament.²⁰⁹

A popular academic view was that the Europeans in the 17th and 18th centuries developed the concept of “religion” either because of the fragmentation of the Christian church in the wake of the Reformation, or because of the explosion of information about non-European cultures and religions.

²⁰⁶ See esp **K Schilbrack**, “Religions: Are there any?” *J of the American Academy of Religion* 78,4 2010:1112-1138; “The social construction of ‘religion’ and its limits: A critical reading of Timothy Fitzgerald,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 24 2012:97-117; **J Bulbulia**, “Are there any religions? An evolutionary exploration,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 17 2005:71-100.

²⁰⁷ Those who argue that “religion” is a “social construction,” a modern western invention incl:
Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 1962;
Jonathan Z Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, 1982; “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in (ed) M C Taylor, *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, 1998:269-284;
Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and power in Christianity and Islam*, 1993;
S N Balagangadhara, ‘The Heathen in His Blindness ...’: *Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion*, 1994;
Timothy Fitzgerald, “A critique of ‘Religion’ as a cross-cultural category.” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 9,2 1997; *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, 2000; “Introduction.” In (ed) Timothy Fitzgerald, *Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations*, 2007a; “Encompassing religion, privatized religions, and the invention of modern politics,” in (ed) *Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations* 2007b: 211-240;

Russell McCutcheon, “Definition,” in (edd) Braun & McCutcheon, *Guide to the Study of Religion*, 1997; *Critics not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion*, 2001;

William E Arnal, “Definition” in (ed) Braun & Russell McCutcheon, *Guide to the Study of Religion*, 2000;
Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*, 2003; and
Mark Owen Webb, “An Eliminativist Theory of Religion,” *Sophia* 48,1 Feb 2009.

²⁰⁸ On the “non-existence of world religions, see eg:
Murray L Wax, “Religion as universal: Tribulations of an Anthropological Enterprise.” *Zygon* 19,1 1994;
Brian C Wilson, “From the Lexical to the Polythetic: A Brief History of the Definition of Religion,” in (edd) Idinopulos & Wilson, *What Is Religion? Origins, Definitions, and Explanations*, 1998;

Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial theory, India and the “Mystic East,”* 1999; and
MASUZAWA Tomoko, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, how European Universalism was preserved in the language of pluralism*, 2005.

²⁰⁹ W C Smith, 1962 ch 2.

Anyway, it is only modern European Christians who generalized or abstracted from their own practices and developed the word “religion” as a term for referring to a certain kind of sociopolitical activity. This is **the social constructionist claim**.²¹⁰

3.1.2.3 Interestingly, there is no word for “religion” (as we normally take it in English) in classical Sanskrit, and so the term “religion” does not appear in any Hindu scriptures. There is also no word in Pali for it, and so it also does not appear in any Buddhist scriptures, early or late. However, in modern Theravāda societies of Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Khmer and Lao, the Pali term *sāsana* (teaching, dispensation) has been adopted by their respective local languages to mean what we understand as “religion.”²¹¹

Among the Muslim communities, especially Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei, the usual Malay word for “religion” is *āgama*, which comes from the Sanskrit/Pali word which literally means “that which has come down,” that is, “(received) tradition.”²¹² Through Arabic influence, with its alternative prefixes, we also have *ugama* and *igama*. The best-known colloquial Malay form is *ugama*, “religion” in its popular sense. The form *agama* is used in official documents and learned circles, especially in Malaysia. In Bali, the form *igama* refers to the precepts and practices one observes towards higher power, sacred (the gods) or profane (the ruler).

These terms and their senses developed with the arrival of Hinduism and Buddhism (7th century) and later Islam (Indonesia, 12th century; Malaysia 15th century). There is also the Indonesian/Malay word, *kepercayaan*, “(religious) belief/s.” Although such terms are often translated today as “religion,” they do not have the exclusive Church-based sense, except when used by the Abrahamic religions, especially Islam and Christianity, even since their earliest presence. Hence, we may surmise that this exclusivity is more a feature of the Abrahamic God-religions than of the Indian religions, that is, Hinduism and Buddhism.

3.1.2.4 Second, social constructionists tend to focus only on the emergence of “religion.” Fitzgerald, for example, distinctively claims that the conceptual boundaries of religion cannot be drawn without simultaneously drawing the boundaries of non-religion. Hence, the concept of “religion” emerged in contrast to the concept of “the secular” as the two are sides of a same coin.²¹³ This can be said to be **the reflexive claim**.²¹⁴

It is instructive to watch and learn from such scholarly debates, where we can see how scholars who label others either as religious or as lacking religion are at the same time engaged in the construction of their own status. In other words, we can also usefully speak of “**scholarly constructions**” of religion. There is always some vital truth or experience that inspired such scholars to propose such constructions. In a study of such roots of scholarly constructions of religion, we may even see our own hopes and visions echoed by them. Religion is a field of faith and study where we are likely to have strong views and agenda.²¹⁵

²¹⁰ Schilbrack 2012:98.

²¹¹ On this modern usage of *sāsana* in Sri Lanka [SD 60.1b (4.2.3)], Myanmar [SD 60.1b (2.4.10.4); SD 60.1c (13.1 f)] and Thailand [SD 60.1b (4.5.3.2)]; on “Religion and Buddhism”: SD 60.1b (1.1).

²¹² On the Pali term, *āgama*: SD 58.1 (5.2).

²¹³ T Fitzgerald, 2007a:6 f.

²¹⁴ Schilbrack 2012:98 f.

²¹⁵ Timothy Fitzgerald, eg, argues that “religion” is an ideologically motivated social construction, that “world religions” are not a discovery but the product of an expansionist colonial Europe that sought a terminology for distinguishing its own modern, rational, hence superior, culture from those it sought to label backward and superstitious, and to this end, invented and used the label “secular” and the label “religious” for others. Fitzgerald’s goal is no less than to “deconstruct” religion, to dissolve both the concept and the academic field of Religious Studies engineered by it. See Fitzgerald 2000a:12, 245; 2007a:8, 14; 2007c:15, 97.

3.1.2.5 According to Fitzgerald, the invention and usage of the new concept of “religion,” especially the dichotomy of **religious/secular**, was central to the western powers’ attempts to justify colonialism. Hence, we can call this **the colonialist claim**. The term “religion,” like the rise of anthropology²¹⁶ with the 1st wave of colonialism, an academic field exploited by the colonizers to closely study not only the behaviour of locals, but also their minds—for the purpose of more effective control and administration of their lands and resources.²¹⁷

Like Fitzgerald, David Chidester too, sees the label of “religion” as a justification by the colonialists for the subjugation of non-western people. However, unlike Fitzgerald, Chidester argues that European colonizers typically reserved the label “religion” for themselves, and regarded the Africans as being superstitious and backwards.²¹⁸ We can thus see that scholars do not always agree, even passionately contradicting one another, over the perception of something so universal as religion.

3.1.2.6 However, although the ideas of Fitzgerald and of Chidester, seemingly opposing one another, do not actually contradict one another. According to Schilbrack, “since both Fitzgerald and Chidester can be right and both may be needed to appreciate the variable uses of such a powerfully loaded term,” and he enumerates these 3 elements in Fitzgerald’s approach that we have noted: “religion” as a colonialist social construction, the religious entailing the secular, and the religious/-secular dichotomy exploited by the colonial agenda. [3.1.2.1]

Fitzgerald’s ideas, according to Schilbrack, implies (4) the concept of religion has no descriptive or analytical value. As Fitzgerald succinctly puts it: the word “religion” “picks out nothing and clarifies nothing” and should be abandoned.^{219 220} Fitzgerald’s vision is clearly ahead of his times, even our times: it is futuristic (as I have already noted) [3.1.1.3]. Most scholars are likely to find it very difficult to apply Fitzgerald’s ideas, since as Schilbrack himself admits:

Now, it seems clear to me that the first three claims do not in fact imply the fourth. That is, one can agree that the concept of “religion” is historically emergent and ideologically implicated in the way that Fitzgerald argues, with deep theological and imperialistic roots, yet one can nevertheless hold that the term has analytic or descriptive value. The limits of the social construction position therefore turn on this claim that the concept of “religion” is descriptively and analytically useless. (Schilbrack, 2012:99)

It is not my intention to go further into this interesting scholarly debate (which may be read separately),²²¹ since it will draw us away from the Dharma drift that I hope will flow with this essay. It is sufficient that I have stated what I need to: that “religion,” however we define it, is here to stay with us

²¹⁶ See eg Diane Lewis, “Anthropology and colonialism,” *Current Anthropology* 14,5 Dec 1973:581-602.

²¹⁷ The 1st wave of colonialism started with the (Roman Catholic) Portuguese and Spanish discoveries of a sea-route around Africa’s southern tip (1488) and of the Americas (1492), ending with the annexation of the kingdom of Kandy (1815) and the founding of Singapore (1819). The 2nd wave of colonialism (the New Imperialism) was the scramble for Africa and slicing it up amongst the British, French, German, Italians, the Dutch and Belgians (1881-1914). In **the US**, the treatment of the American Indians was just as horrifying. The Europeans who settled there generally did not care that indigenous people were already there before them. As they spread across the US, they pushed the indigenous tribes farther west. In 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act, which led to the forced removal, relocation, and mass death of thousands of Indians. Forced to walk thousands of miles, some 4,000 Cherokees died on what came to be called the “Trail of Tears.”

²¹⁸ David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa*. Charlottesville, VA: Univ Press of Virginia, 1996.

²¹⁹ Fitzgerald (1997:93) adds “deconstructively” that “the word has no genuine analytic work to do and its continued use merely contributes to the general illusion that it has a genuine referent. ... [A]ny kind of analytic study of the word [‘religion’] must be effectively abandoned” (1997:14, 104). On Fitzgerald’s deconstruction of religion, see 2000a:12, 245; 2007a:8, 14; 2007c:15, 97.

²²⁰ Timothy Also see K Schilbrack (2010, 2012) who writes to rebut Fitzgerald’s thesis.

²²¹ See esp K Schilbrack 2010, 2012.

(though, like Fitzgerald) I would wish otherwise. There are still too many of us who, in our ignorance and half-knowledges, are still drawn to its promise of power, plenty and pleasure, just as the colonialists intended. We are still being colonized by religion. We need to begin to understand what this means and what happens to us, our families and posterity, before we can give it up. We should try to really examine why we are following a religion.

3.1.2.7 Before closing this subsection, let us reflect on the disastrous effects that religion (Christianity) had on Western Europe at the height of its powers in the 16th-18th centuries: the age of **religious wars**. Although religion—coming from the Latin *religio*, means “that which connects,” religion effectively brought on mostly just the opposite in those centuries. In those turbulent times, the flourishing landscapes were devastated, entire rural communities vanished, and the survivors were scattered about.

The traumatizing centuries of war, unrest and intolerance left Europe, on the one hand, profoundly alienated, families broken up or lost, losing all trust in the social order. On the other hand, this social anomie created an urgent need for orientation to a strong group of wise and able persons sharing similar ideas, for social reconstruction and human progress.

Even in our days, genealogy research for the common citizens is extremely frustrating for those centuries because written documents of the parish registers were burned down with the churches. People desperately needed a sense of belonging to something more meaningful than their fragile personal lives. Those were the times when religion went viral overwhelming Europeans with a sense of insecurity, social and spiritual. This was the European setting before the dawn of the colonial age, when this insecurity was exported to other countries and communities.²²²

3.2 BUDDHISM AND ITS DEVELOPMENTS

3.2.1 What’s wrong with Buddhist modernism?

3.2.1.1 One of the defining characteristics of modern Buddhism is, not surprisingly, **Buddhist modernism**, which we have earlier addressed [SD 60.1c (7)]. It is a relatively recent ideology that selectively places those elements that are consistent with modern sensibilities at the core of Buddhism and dismisses all else. One of the most persuasive scholars who has written on Buddhist modernism is Berkeley professor of Buddhist Studies, **Robert Shaft** [1.2.4.1], whose critique of Buddhist modernism stems from a belief that we cannot reduce Buddhism to a simple set of propositions and practices without in some way distorting our sense of its wholeness and complexity.

For Sharf, understanding a religious tradition demands not only familiarity with contemporary practice and conditions, but also a willingness to understand both its Indian history and culture, as well as those of the countries in which it exists. He sees this exercise as “a dialogue” based on a knowledge of the context in which the tradition is embedded and an ability to see past the presuppositions of our own time and place. The task of scholarly criticism of Buddhism is that of clearing the ground, as it were, for this dialogue with tradition. At least, this is as far as academic scholarship goes.

Much of the materials here (unless otherwise stated) have been inspired by Sharf’s writings on Buddhist modernism.²²³

3.2.1.2 By the late 19th century, much of Asia was coming to terms with the rise of the modern Western worldview. Buddhist Asia—especially Sri Lanka and much of SE Asia (except Thailand)—was

²²² I think Dr Vera Ries of Germany for her ideas inspiring this subsection.

²²³ See esp **Robert Sharf**, “Buddhist modernism and the rhetoric of meditative experience,” *Numen* 42,3 Oct 1995; “The Zen of Japanese nationalism,” in (ed) Donald S Lopez, Jr, *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism*, Chicago: Univ of Chicago Press, 1995:107-160; “Losing your religion” (interview) *Tricycle* 2007b:44-49.

profoundly affected by colonialism and modernization. Since the early 19th century, Japan was going through urbanization, industrialization and other modernizing influences.²²⁴ Buddhist leaders adopted similar strategies for bringing their traditions into the modern world.

Many influential Buddhist teachers had received Western-style educations, some in missionary schools, and they were rethinking Buddhism from the ground up. Furthermore, they had to respond to the criticism that religion was just blind faith and superstition, that the clergy was self-serving and corrupt, that Buddhist teachings were ultimately incompatible with science and reason.

Buddhist modernism was a global phenomenon, a sort of cultural fusion in which the interests of Asian Buddhists and Western Buddhist enthusiasts converged. For Asians, the critiques of religion that originated in the West resonated with their own needs as they struggled with cultural upheavals in their homelands. For Westerners, Buddhism seemed to provide an attractive spiritual alternative to their own seemingly moribund religious traditions. The irony, of course, is that the Buddhism to which these Westerners were drawn was one already transformed by its contact with the West.²²⁵

3.2.2 Buddhism before religion, as a non-religious “path”

3.2.2.1 Ethnic Buddhism (those rooted in Asia or culturally defined) tend to present itself as being purportedly compatible with Western science and reasoning, and Western Buddhists too, tend to be drawn to Buddhism with this perception. Some Buddhist groups even claim that they are scientifically rational, or present itself as a “science of the mind.”

The Buddhist canon is so vast that we can always find passages to support the views and biases of our tradition. For over 2000 years, influential Buddhist teachers have read texts selectively, even compiled their own Buddhist texts to revise, justify and promote their own understanding of Buddhism. It is no different with those who want to show that Buddhism is compatible with science. One of the most influential of such modernist Buddhists was the Japanese Zen evangelist, D T Suzuki, who claimed that he was preaching Zen Buddhism as the “Religion of Science.” [SD 60.1c (8.4)].

Suzuki’s evangelism is a case in which a Western and non-Buddhist reading of Buddhism came to influence its Asian expression in a way that appealed to modern Westerners. In other words, part of Buddhism’s appeal in the West was that the Buddhism we were seeing had already been recast in a Western mould.

Buddhists, like Christians, have had little choice but to approach their tradition selectively. Zen Buddhists, for example, give preference to certain texts and commentaries, and they do this very differently from the way Theravāda Buddhists or Pure Land Buddhists do. The problem is not with the choice of reading (or misreading) Buddhism as a rationalist and scientific religion—it is a matter of what is lost in the process—what we have omitted from the Buddhism that we have packaged and are marketing.

3.2.2.2 Throughout premodern history, every civilization had been in some way dominated by some kind of religion, and *those who define and dispense the religion*, the priests and prophets, the elite who powerfully influenced the rulers (kings, emperors, pharaohs), or were themselves god-kings, worshipped and feared by the populace as living gods who lorded over their very lives. The position and power of these religious figures were rooted in their developed **language and writing**, which allowed them to preserve, present and propagate sacred knowledge that set them apart from the common people.

This ancient sacred knowledge existed alongside ancient wisdom and technology that constructed massive monuments—**images, pyramids, ziggurats, temples**—as memes²²⁶ that reminded the popu-

²²⁴ On modernization in these Buddhist countries, see: Sri Lanka SD 60.1b (4.2.3), SD 60.1b (8.2); Myanmar SD 60.1c (9.2); Thailand SD 60.1c (9.4); Japan SD 60.1c (10); and India SD 60.1c (11). On the Industrial Revolution, SD 60.1c (11.2).

²²⁵ Sharf 2007b:45.

²²⁶ See **Memes**, SD 26.3.

lace of the might and glory of their builders. The knowledge that envisioned and constructed these monuments also allowed the priests to systematize, record and spread their beliefs as **religion**, a system of beliefs and rituals to legitimize the power of the priests and the might of the rulers.

3.2.2.3 Significant changes to human history occurred with **the Iron Age**, which had reached its apex by the Buddha's time in India.²²⁷ The ancient Indians discovered iron and skilfully used it for better tools (such as ploughshare, better vehicles and stronger tools) and more effective weapons (including chariots) arming rulers and kings for campaigns to expand and rule larger territories. This period saw powerful kings (like Bimbisāra and Pasenadi) conquering large territories, and extending their hegemony over the ancient tribal confederacies (like the Sakyas).

This Iron Age was also the period of **the 2nd Urbanization** in the central Gangetic plains of northern India. The widespread peace favoured commerce and specialization of labour, which, in turn, brought greater wealth to more people, leading to the rise of towns and cities. People also had more time for learning, not just the practical technologies, sciences and trades, but also philosophy and religion. With more leisure time, many were drawn into philosophical and religious debates and speculations. This was the ambience that saw the rise of Buddhism in India.²²⁸

3.2.2.4 The rise of the Buddha and his teaching in northern India was phenomenal even in his own time. **Siddhattha Gotama**²²⁹—as he was known before becoming the Buddha—was a spiritually precocious person even since young (if we are to believe all the stories the Buddhist texts tell us about him), such as being able to do dhyana meditation at only 7 years old.²³⁰ In due course, at 29,²³¹ he renounced all the privileges, luxuries and connections of his life with the powerful tribal Sakyas in the north of India on the Nepal border to become a wandering ascetic, like many other religious seekers of his day. After a year of wandering, and studying with the leading meditation teachers of his times, and 6 years of painful yogic practice and meditation,²³² he discovered the Middle Way through breath meditation. He awakened as the Buddha.²³³

As **the Buddha**, Siddhattha, has, by his own self-effort, discovered and realized—awakened to—the true nature of our being and the reality that supports our life and constitutes existence. With this self-realization, he gains total freedom of the mind and spirit, overcoming suffering, that is, the inherent unsatisfactoriness of our body-mind existence. His awakening thus places him above all teachings and speculations, religious and secular, of his time. Even today, no one has been able to disprove truth of the natural and universal reality discovered by the Buddha.

He went on to formulate his meditative and awakening experiences in ways that are accessible to the listeners, so that those who listen to his teachings and keep to the practices of moral training, mental concentration and insight wisdom, are able to attain the very same awakening that he has

²²⁷ The Stone Age was divided into 3 periods: (1) **Palaeolithic** (Old Stone) Age, marked by the development of stone tools by hominins (early human ancestors) some 3.3 M years ago, lasting for a few thousand years. (2) **Mesolithic** (Middle Stone) Age, referring to the final period of hunter-gatherer cultures in Europe and W Asia; in SW Asia, roughly 20,000-10,000 years ago; (3) **Neolithic** (New Stone) Age characterized by a settled life of agriculture, husbandry, beginning some 12,000 years ago. In the Near East, **the Bronze Age** (or Chalcolithic, some 3300-1200 BCE) followed, with the use of bronze (basically copper + tin), some writing and other features of urban civilization. **The Iron Age** was marked by the use of iron for tools and weapons, throughout the Mediterranean Basin and S Asia (esp India) between 12th-11th cent BCE, and slowly spreading to Central Asia, Eastern Europe and Central Europe, and later to N Europe (5th cent BCE). See SD 60.1c (15.6.3).

²²⁸ On the Iron Age in India, see SD 52.1 (2.2.1.11); ; SD 60.1c (17.3).

²²⁹ Skt Siddhārtha Gautama.

²³⁰ See **The Miraculous Life of the Buddha**, SD 27.5b.

²³¹ **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16,5.27.4/2:151), SD 9.

²³² On his time with the 2 leading meditation teachers, see **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26,15 f), SD 1.11. On his 7 years of spiritual quest, see **Satta Vassa S** (S 4.24), SD 36.5. For the Bodhisattva's self-mortification, see **Mahā Saccaka** (M 36,17-44), SD 49.4, & **Mahā Sīha,nāda S** (M 12,44-63), SD 49.1.

²³³ On the Buddha's teaching on the breath meditation, see **Ānāpāna,sati S** (M 118), SD 7.13.

discovered. His practices and teachings, along with the community, monastic and lay, that formed around him keep to these 3 trainings [2.1.2.1], without any ritual prayers,²³⁴ without tenets of blind faith or unquestioning belief,²³⁵ without looking up to him as a prophet or cult guru,²³⁶ without any religious dogmas, especially a God-idea²³⁷ or an external agency for succour or salvation [2.1.2.4].

Hence, we can say that the Buddha has not started any religion, but teaches a self-reliant path (*magga*) or method of personal and spiritual development. Looking back from our own time at the Buddha's teaching, we may even say that it is **an ideal self-education** in life and reality. "Education," after all, literally means, "bring out" (Latin, *ē-dūcēre*, to lead out) the good in us.

3.2.3 Buddhism and the Axial Age²³⁸

3.2.3.1 The Buddha's advent in India may be a phenomenal event in terms of human history, but a number of French and German scholars in 18th and 19th centuries had noted similar developments in other parts of the ancient world. This idea was forgotten in the 20th century, that is, until it was revived and explained by Karl Jaspers, who thought that in significant parts of the Old World (Eurasia), the middle centuries of the 1st millennium BCE—between 800-200 BCE—marked a significant transition in human cultural history, especially in philosophy and religion.

It was a time when the founders of the great world religions today arose: such as the ancient Greek philosophers, ancient Indian metaphysicians and thinkers (especially Jainism and Buddhism), Persian Zoroastrianism, the Hebrew Prophets, the "Hundred Schools" (most notably Daoism and Confucianism) of China. Technically, Zoroaster (1000 BCE) lived *before* the Axial Age, and the Buddha (died between 410 and 400 BCE) lived and taught right at the end of the Axial Age. The duration of the Axial Age clearly needs to be extended by at least a few centuries before and after Jasper's estimates.²³⁹

3.2.3.2 We do not know whether any of these great thinkers or their systems influenced each other, or what the nature of such influences were, except by way of speculative conjectures. Scholars notice, however, that all these great systems are characterized by one common feature: they all teach some kind of what the scholars refer to as "**transcendence**," literally meaning, "to go beyond." The Canadian philosopher and sociologist Charles Taylor, thinks that, in the case of the Axial Age the phrase, "going beyond" has several meanings in terms of human thought.

One important sense of transcendence in connection with the Axial Age was a preoccupation with thinking about the cosmos and the way it works, rather than merely taking for granted that it works, as often was the case with the pre-Axial Age religions. This rise of "second-order thinking" about the ways that human beings even think about the universe in the first place and come to know it. This was a shift away from propitiating tribal or local deities (which Taylor characterized as "feeding the gods") toward speculation about the fate of humanity, about human beings' relationship with the cosmos, and about "the good" and how human beings can be "good."²⁴⁰

²³⁴ On prayers, see **Te,vijja S** (D 13,24), SD 1.8; (**Pañca**) **It̐tha S** (A 5.43), SD 47.2; **Alabbhaniya T̐hāna S** (A 5.48), SD 42.1; SD 2.1 (3 f); SD 12.4(2).

²³⁵ On the Buddhist conception of faith, see Sariputta, SD 40a.8 (5.6.2); Citta Gaha,pati, SD 40a.8 (5.6.3).

²³⁶ On the teaching being above the teacher, see **Gārava S** (S 6.3), SD 12.3. On the sameness of awakening of the Buddha and the arhats, see **Sambuddha S** (S 22.58), SD 49.10.

²³⁷ God-idea refuted: **Te,vijja S** (D 13,2-39) + SD 1.8 (1.2; 5).

²³⁸ On the Axial Age, see also SD 60.1c (17.2).

²³⁹ Traditional Buddhists and academic scholars differ on the Buddha's dates. The Theravādin dates are 624-544 BCE (Sri Lanka) or 623-543 BCE (Myanmar, Thailand, Khmer and Laos). The current consensus amongst modern scholars is that the Buddha dies some time between 410 and 400 BCE. See Oxford DB: date of the Buddha.

²⁴⁰ C Taylor, "What was the Axial Revolution?" in (edd) Bellah & Joas, *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, 2012:30-46.

With early Buddhism, the historical Buddha elevates transcendence to an even higher level. Not only does the Buddha teach that the gods (including God and similar ideas) are themselves caught in the time-bound cycle of samsara (the cycle of births and deaths), humans, by training the mind can become **god-like** even now, or be reborn as gods as a result of living a life of moral good. That is not all, if we are determined enough, we can practise the Dharma, his teaching of seeing true reality, to rise even *beyond* God/gods to be free of samsara by gaining **nirvana**.²⁴¹

3.2.3.3 Despite teaching a distinct **training path** leading to awakening, ideally for the renunciants (those who train to transcend the physical senses and fully master their minds), the Buddha openly accepts others who are still “outsiders” at their own levels (to begin with). Here are some significant examples of the “bridges” that he provides for these **interested outsiders**, thus:

- (1) Worldly welfare and spiritual training for the laity: **Dīgha,jānu Sutta** (A 8.54), SD 5.10.
- (2) Financial management for the laity (including those who still worship ancestors and gods): **Ādiya Sutta** (A 5.41,5 + closing verses), SD 2.1 (2); **Patta Kamma Sutta** (A 4.61,12), SD 37.12.
- (3) Helping meditation for God- and god-believers: **Devatānussati** (SD 15.13 & SD 52.1 (18.3.2.4).
- (4) Interfaith dialogue, along with meditation training: **Udumbarikā Sīha,nāda Sutta** (D 25,23.2), SD 1.4 [SD 60.1c (11.44)].
- (5) Cultivation of the positive emotions—love, ruth, joy and peace— or **divine abodes** for wholesome leadership, management and society: **Brahma,vihara** (SD 38.6).

Such followers probably regarded themselves as what we would today call “**Buddhist**” (adjective). However, there was no such category in the Buddha’s time or even up to pre-modern times, that is, before Buddhism is regarded as a “religion” in the modern Western sense [3.2.2]. Instead of imagining such followers as “Buddhists,” we should see them as “**practitioners**” who have taken the 3 refuges [3.1.1, 3.2.5.1], and keep to 5 precepts [3.3.2].

A vital significance of such teachings shows that the Buddha is not interested in converting followers, but in providing mind-training for anyone interested in personal and spiritual development beyond religion, that is, by liberating self-understanding to enjoy true happiness individually and as a community.

3.3 BUDDHISM AS LAY PRACTICE

3.3.1 The lay discipline (*gihī.vinaya*)

3.3.1.1 As a compassionate and wise teacher, the Buddha always obliges them with some instructive teachings from which they benefit, especially moving closer to the path, even reaching it. In fact, the numerous and wide-ranging teachings the Buddha gives to the laity (*gahaṭṭha*), that is, the male followers (*upāsaka*) and female followers (*upāsikā*),²⁴² are collectively known as **the lay discipline** (*gihī,vinaya*).

The key suttas in this collection of the lay discipline are as follows:²⁴³

Discourse	Reference	Key topic	
Sigāl’ovāda Sutta	D 31/3:180-193	The layman’s code of discipline	SD 4.1
Bhadd’eka,ratta Sutta	M 131/3:187	Living in the present	SD 8.9

²⁴¹ On the nature of nirvana, see SD 45.18 (2.5); SD 50.1 (3.3.2). See DEB: nibbana, etc.

²⁴² On conversion and the Buddhist laity, see SD 60.1c (12.1.6).

²⁴³ Most of these trs can be found in Prayudh Payutto, *Buddhism: A Layman’s Guide to Life* (Bangkok: Mahā-chulalongkorn Buddhist Univ, 1966, 1969). Free download: <https://wbu.world/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Buddhism-A-Laymans-Guide-to-Life.pdf>. [* A prefixed asterisk denotes a partial translation.]

Aputtaka Sutta 1	S 3.19/1:89-91	Wealth is to be wholesomely enjoyed	SD 22.4
Aputtaka Sutta 2	S 3.20/1:91-93	Wealth is to be enjoyed	SD 22.5
Subhāsita Sutta	S 8.5/1:188 f		
	Sn 450-454	Right speech	
Āḷavaka Sutta	S 10.12/1:213-216		SD 15.12(1)
	Sn 181-192	True happiness and spirituality	
Anaṇa Sutta	A 4.62/2:68	Worldly happiness free from debt	SD 2.2
(Bhoga) Kula Sutta	A 4.255/2:249	A successful family life	SD 37.10
Ādiya Sutta	A 5.41/3:45 f	How to enjoy one's wealth	SD 2.1
Ṭhāna Sutta	A 5.48/3:54-56	Being strong-willed	SD 42.1
Gihi Sutta	A 5.179/3:211-214	The 4 qualities of a streamwinner	SD 70.20
Sappurisa Sutta 2	A 8.38/4:244	The ways of the virtuous	SD 30.10(3.2b)
Dīgha,jānu Sutta	A 8.54/4:281-285	Worldly and spiritual welfare	SD 5.10
Maṅgala Sutta	Kh 5; Sn 258-269	Blessings or the causes of one's success	
Parābhava Sutta	Sn 91-115	The causes of one's downfall	
Vasala Sutta	Sn 116-142	Qualities of a true outcaste	
Hiri Sutta	Sn 253-257	True friendship	*SD 13.1(3.5.2.2)
(Animitta) Salla Sutta	Sn 574-593	Drawing out the dart of suffering	*SD 11.8, 19.13

3.3.1.2 Lay disciples feature quite prominently in early Buddhism. Here are a few key names reflective of those who have been uplifted by the Dharma's truth and beauty. The best-known of the Buddha's laymen disciples—the wisest of them—is **Citta the houselord** (*citta gaha,pati*), renowned as a Dharma teacher even amongst the monks.²⁴⁴ His progress as a lay disciple is spectacular. Upon listening to the elder Mahānāma (one of the first 5 monks) teach Dharma, Citta attains streamwinning. Then, when Sāriputta and Moggallāna visit him, he hears Dharma from the former, and attains once-returning. He was by then already a good meditator who is able to attain dhyana. In due course, listening to another teaching by Sāriputta, Citta becomes a non-returner. On account of his wisdom and faith, Citta has a whole chapter of suttas to his name, that is, **the Citta Saṃyutta** (S 41).²⁴⁵

The seth **Anātha,piṇḍika** (original name Sudatta), the chief supporter of the Buddha, is not only a disciple with great faith and generosity towards the sangha, and a philanthropist, but is also a proficient teacher who defends the Dharma. Despite often attending the Buddha's teaching sessions, Anātha,piṇḍika is careful not to make the Buddha feel obliged to answer his questions: he never asks any questions.²⁴⁶ The Buddha, however, reads his mind and teaches a topic that would clear his doubts.²⁴⁷

Among the wisest of **laywomen disciples** is **Nakula,mātā** (the monk Nakula's mother), who skilfully counsels her sick husband, Nakula,pitā (Nakula's father) as he lies sick in his bed. Reassured by Nakula,mātā's bedside ministry, Nakula,pitā fully recovers. Not only are this husband-and-wife couple streamwinners, but are also declared by the Buddha to be the foremost of the laity who are lovingly close (*vissāsa*) to one another, that is, they are the ideal couple.²⁴⁸

Another remarkable laywoman disciple is queen Sāmavati's handmaid, **Khujj'uttarā** (Uttarā the hunchback). She starts off as a dishonest servant of the queen who pockets part of the money she is given to buy flowers to offer to the Buddha. Upon meeting the Buddha, faith arises in her and hearing the Dharma from him, becomes a streamwinner. She returns to the queen and teaches her and her

²⁴⁴ SD 8.6 (8.3.4). For a list of foremost lay disciples, see SD 8.6 (7).

²⁴⁵ SD 8.6 (8.3).

²⁴⁶ Does not question the Buddha, SD 23.9 (1.2.2), SD 44.2 (2.7).

²⁴⁷ Anātha,piṇḍika hears the Buddha's name, **Buddhōti Sudatta S** (S 10.8) SD 87.10. **Arakkhita S** (A 3.105).

Ānaṇa S (A 4/62), SD 2.2. Death-bed teachings to **Anātha,piṇḍik'ovāda S**, M 143 @ SD 23.9 (1).

²⁴⁸ SD 5.2 (3).

500 handmaidens present, all of whom became streamwinners too. She is declared the foremost of those laywomen who are deeply learned (*bahussuta*).²⁴⁹

3.3.2 The laity and moral training

3.3.2.1 Traditionally, followers of the Buddha's teachings joyfully "go for 3 refuges" (*ti, saraṇa, gamana*). However, in none of the "refuge pericopes" are they reported to be taking up the 5 precepts. Notice that in all sutta reports where the audience goes for refuge, there is no accompanying mention of the precept-taking pericope. It is possible that those who only go for the refuges are not *fully* committed followers of the Buddha Dharma, that is, as *upāsaka* and *upāsikā*. This may well be in many cases, such as that of Jāṇussoṇī, who is recorded to have gone for refuge at least a dozen times! However, there is no mention that he or any protagonists, in other sutta accounts, who go for refuge are also taking up precept observance.²⁵⁰

Apparently, the notion of lay Buddhists formally going for refuge by reciting the 3 refuges and the 5 precepts formula is a modern one. However, this practice is well rooted in the sutta teachings on precepts as part of our moral training. While the refuge-going is a declaration of faith in the 3 jewels, the taking up of the 5 precepts is *an on-going and unbroken practice* like the way we breathe.

3.3.2.2 We may say that such individuals who go for refuge without reciting the precept-taking formula to be those who are well disposed to the 3 jewels, and accept the Buddha's teachings (at least those highlighted in the sutta that record their refuge-going). They may be said to be "**partial followers**" (in the modern sense). However, we must note that there is no special Pali term for "partial followers" (which is actually a modern category).

That the suttas mostly mention refuge-going without precept-taking does not mean that they do not have to observe them, but rather that there is no need for such public declaration of faith or approval of the Buddha's teachings. Rather, it means that precept-taking is a natural part of **moral training**, the first of the 3 trainings [2.1.2.1], and that this goes without saying.

In fact, we do have clear teachings on **the refuge-goer** as *also* living a morally virtuous life by keeping to the 5 precepts recorded in the following suttas (S = Sutta):

Gandha, jāta S	A 3.79/1:226	both men and women	SD 89.13
(Upāsaka) Mahānāma S	A 8.25/1:414-420	laity with 3 refuges, 5 precepts etc	SD 3.10
Abhisāṇḍa S	A 8.39/4:246 f	the 8 streams of merit (3 refuges + 5 precepts)	SD 59.9
(Aṭṭhaka) Anuruddha S	A 8.46/4:266	wholesome family life for a woman	

Not only is **the lay follower** one who has gone for refuge, lives a moral life, keeps the precepts, and is joyfully charitable, but he also inspires others to live likewise (A 3.79, 8.25).

3.3.3 Evolution of the 5 precepts

3.3.3.1 It is vitally important for us not to misconstrue that the refuge-going without any precept-taking means that Buddhists (in the broad sense of those who follow the Buddha's teachings) do not have to keep **the 5 precepts**, that is, the code of conduct in natural morality (karmically potent), which are actually formulated as follows (as a personal undertaking):

I undertake the training-step to abstain from:

- | | |
|---|----------------------------------|
| (1) <i>pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhā, padaṃ samādiyāmi</i> | destroying life [killing]; |
| (2) <i>adinnādānā veramaṇī sikkhā, padaṃ samādiyāmi</i> | taking the not-given [stealing]; |
| (3) <i>kāmesu, micchācārā veramaṇī sikkhā, padaṃ samādiyāmi</i> | sexual misconduct; |
| (4) <i>musā, vādā veramaṇī sikkhā, padaṃ samādiyāmi</i> | falsehood [telling lies]; |

²⁴⁹ Khujj'uttarā: SD 8.6 (8.2); SD 15.11 (1.3.3.1); SD 57.19b (1.2.2). For other foremost lay disciples: SD 8.6 (7).

²⁵⁰ SD 44.2 (2.4).

- (5) *surā,meraya,majja,pamāda-ṭ,ṭhānā veramaṇī* taking strong drinks, brews, intoxicants,
sikkhā,padam samādiyāmi the bases for heedlessness.²⁵¹

These 5 precepts, in their most developed form as we know them today, are listed as a list of practice in moral conduct in the following suttas:²⁵²

Dakkhiṇa Vibhaṅga Sutta	M 142,3.4/3:253	Mahā Pajāpati Gotamī as a virtuous woman	SD 1.9
Gandha,jāta Sutta	A 3.79/1:226	moral virtue goes with and against the wind	SD 89.13
Samvāsa Sutta 1	A 4.53/2:57-61	a virtuous couple are 2 devas living together	SD 70.10
Patta Kamma Sutta	A 4.61,5/2:66	the accomplishment of moral virtue	SD 37.12
Atta,hita Sutta 4	A 4.99/2:98 f	be morally virtuous, inspire others to be so	SD 64.9
(Catukka) Sikkhā,pada S	A 4.201/2:217	the good keeps to the training-rules	SD 47.3b
(Catukka) Sikkhā,pada S 1+2	A 4.234.1+2/2:230 f	the 4 kinds of karma (dark and light)	SD 89.14
(Pañcaka) Niraya Sutta	A 5.145/3:170 f	enjoying heaven, suffering hell	SD 59.5
Sāraṇja Sutta	A 5.171/3:204	the immoral is fearful, the moral confident	SD 84.13
Gihī Sutta	A 5.179/3:211 f	moral training and faith: streamwinning	SD 70.10
(Pañca,sīla) Bhikkhu Sutta	A 5.286/3:275	the 5 precepts apply to monastics too	SD 84.16
Dīgha,jānu Sutta	A 8.54,13/4:284	the accomplishment of moral virtue	SD 5.10

Significantly, all the above suttas are located in the Aṅguttara Nikāya, the 4th sutta collection, and they are addressed to the lay practitioners. Hence, some teachings are about monastics or for monastics, but, in due course, the laity are informed of the proper conduct in connection with such teachings.

3.3.3.2 The earliest form of the laity's training precepts (*sikkhā,pada*) clearly comprises **the 4 precepts**, ending with the precept against false speech. This tetrad of precepts (1st-4th precepts) is mentioned in the following suttas:

- Sigāl'ovāda Sutta** D 31,4/3:181 the 4 karmic defilements (*kamma,kilesa*) SD 4.1
Veḷu,dvāreyya Sutta S 55.7,6-12/5:353-355 the golden rule + limbs of streamwinning SD 1.5 (1+2)

The Sigāl'ovāda Sutta (D 31) states that breaches of these 4 precepts constitute "the 4 karmic defilements" (*kamma,kilesa*) (D 31,3.2). This is another way of saying that they constitute **natural morality** (*pakati,sīla*).²⁵³ In other words, whether we formally undertake them or not, consciously killing, stealing, misconducting sexually or lying entails bad karma. For this reason too, we do not see any practice of keeping "partial precepts," a tradition introduced in later forms of sectarian Buddhism.²⁵⁴

Another important point to note here is that **the Sigāl'ovāda Sutta** clearly explains **the devotion to strong drinks, distilled drinks, fermented drinks, a basis for heedlessness**²⁵⁵ (*surā,meraya,majja,-pamāda-ṭ,ṭhānānuyoga*) as entailing 6 dangers or disadvantages (*ādinava*):

- (1) the immediate (and visible) loss of wealth; *sandiṭṭhikā dhanāñjānī*
 (2) an increase of quarrels; *kalaha-p,pavaḍḍhanī*
 (3) one is prone to illnesses; *rogānaṃ āyatanam*

²⁵¹ The 5th precept was omitted in the earlier formulation of the basic lay precepts, but was later included. As laid out in **Sigāl'ovāda S** (D 31.7 f) n, SD 4.1, for example, getting drunk has negative karmic consequences, esp by way of inducing us to break any or all of the other precepts.

²⁵² See also **Sīlānussati**, SD 15.11 (2.2); SD 21.6 (1.2); SD 37.8 (2.2).

²⁵³ On morality, natural & prescribed, see SD 37.8 (2.2).

²⁵⁴ On the keeping of "partial precepts," see SD 59.6.

²⁵⁵ Alt tr "taking strong drinks, brews, intoxicants, that which are the bases for heedlessness."

- (4) a source of disgrace [disrepute]; *akitti,sañjananī*
 (5) indecent exposure of oneself; *kopīna,niddamsanī*
 (6) it weakens one's wisdom. *paññāya dubbālī,karaṇī* D 31,9/3:183), SD 4.1

Point (6) is very significant: when we are inebriate, we are more likely to be emboldened to act and speak with neither restraint nor respect for others, and we are also more disposed to breaking any or all of the other precepts. A man takes a drink, the drink takes a drink, the drink takes the man.²⁵⁶

<u>unwholesome courses of action</u> ²⁵⁷	<u>expressed through</u> ²⁵⁸	<u>wholesome courses of action</u> ²⁵⁹
(1) killing	the body (bodily karma)	(1) not killing (compassion)
(2) stealing		(2) not stealing (charity)
(3) sexual misconduct		(3) bodily restraint (respect)
(4) false speech	speech (verbal karma)	(4) truthfulness (truth)
(5) divisive speech		(5) unifying speech (fellowship)
(6) harsh speech		(6) pleasant speech (right speech)
(7) frivolous chatter		(7) useful talk (wise counsel)
(8) covetousness	the mind (mental karma)	(8) contentment (renunciation)
(9) ill will		(9) non-violence (lovingkindness)
(10) wrong view		(10) right view (wisdom)

Table 3.3.3.2 THE 10 COURSES OF ACTION [KARMA]

3.3.3.3 The next stage in the evolution of the basic lay precepts **the 4 precepts**, that is, with the 4th precept (against false speech) laid out in terms of the abstention from the 4 kinds of wrong speech, that is, *lying, slandering, harsh speech and frivolous chatter*. We see just this structure laid out in **the Veḷu,dvāreyya Sutta** (S 55.7) which records the Buddha teaching as follows:

- (1) The 4 precepts and elaborating the 4th precept as abstaining from the 4 wrong speeches: *false speech, divisive speech, harsh speech, and frivolous chatter*; and practising the 4 right speeches: truth-telling, unifying speech, pleasant speech and beneficial talk.
- (2) He then explains why we should practise respect for life, for property (happiness of others), for the person of others, for truth (that is, right speech) and for wisdom—by appealing to **the golden rule**: *just as we do not want others to harm or disrespect us, so we too, should neither harm nor disrespect others*.

The Buddha concludes his instruction by stating that these **7 virtuous qualities** (*satta saddhamma*)—*the 4 precepts and faith in the 3 jewels*—will bring us to the path as streamwinners. [3.3.3.2]

3.3.3.4 The 5 precepts, especially the first 4, constitute the basic practice of **wholesome moral conduct** (*kusala kamma*), that is, those of bodily action (*kāya,kamma*) and speech (*vacī,kamma*). The 5th precept, against intoxication, is the essential practice to prevent the breaching of the other precepts and the arising of covetousness, ill will and wrong view, which is more likely take hold of the mind when it is intoxicated and clouded up.

²⁵⁶ On this 5th precepts, see SD 59.5 (2.5).

²⁵⁷ On how each of the unwholesome courses of action is unwholesomely rooted, see Table 2.2.1 (SD 5.7), also at Table 2.3 (SD 59.10).

²⁵⁸ On the 3 karmic doors (*dvāra*), see SD 5.7 (2.2.2).

²⁵⁹ The wholesome courses of action are usu stated in apophatic (negative) language. This last column refers to the positive actions that can be expressed here: this is based on **(Tad-āh') Uposatha S** (A 3.70), SD 4.18, and the teaching of the "5 values" (**pañca,dhamma*) [SD 1.5 (2)]. See also SD 56.1 (4.2.1.5).

The 2 kinds of karmic courses (*kamma, patha*) and their karmic doors (*dvāra*) are listed in **Table 3.3.3.2**. Both the 10 unwholesome courses of karma and the 10 wholesome courses of karma are listed as precepts in **the Esukāri Sutta** (M 96) and defined in **the Sāleyyaka Sutta** (M 41).²⁶⁰

The 5 precepts thus form the bodily karma (1st-3rd precepts) and verbal karma (4th precept) portions of the 10 unwholesome courses of karma (*dasa akusala kamma, patha*) (to abstain from) and the 10 wholesome courses of karma (*dasa kusala kamma, patha*) (to cultivate). These are laid out in the following suttas.²⁶¹

Aggañña Sutta	D 27,5 f/3:82	karma applies to everyone regardless of class
Pāṇātipātā Sutta etc	A 4.264-273/2:253 f	each of the 10 courses of action treated as a sutta

3.3.3.5 We see in some exceptional situations where a lay practitioner or disciple keeps to a stricter version of the 5 precepts. For example, the lay non-returner, Ugga of Hatthi, gāma [3.3.4.2]—as stated in **the (Hatthi, gāmaka) Ugga Sutta** (A 8.22)—declares to the Buddha that he is one who keeps to **the 5 training rules with celibacy** (*brahma. cāriya, pañcama sikkhā, pada*).²⁶² This is clearly understandable because a non-returner has overcome all the 5 lower fetters, which include those of sensual lust and repulsion; hence, he has risen above any need or inclination for any kind of sexuality. [3.3.4.2]

Another special extended version of the 5 precepts is that with the 4th precept consisting of abstention from the 4 wrong speeches [3.3.3.3]—thus totalling 7 precepts—and the 8th is that of abstaining from wrong livelihood. This special extended moral code is called by Buddhaghosa (Vism 1.27/11) as **the 8 precepts of right livelihood** (*ājīv'atṭhamaka sīla*). He theorized that such a moral code reflects the conduct of one who has fulfilled the moral training of the path. Clearly, this then refers to the natural lifestyle of a streamwinner and so on: they would never take up any kind of wrong livelihood.²⁶³

3.3.4 Laity as saints

3.3.4.1 Anyone who keeps the precepts joyfully with lovingkindness and is mindful (especially of impermanence) will be able to attain the path. By breaking the 3 fetters—self-identity view, doubt and attachment to vows and rituals [2.1.2.2]—one becomes **a streamwinner**, that is, one who is able to attain arhathood within 7 lives at the most.²⁶⁴ When a streamwinner further weakens the 3 unwholesome roots of greed, hate and delusion,²⁶⁵ he becomes **a once-returner**, that is, one who is reborn one last time as a human to finish his past karma. These saintly stages are not difficult for lay practitioners to attain since they do not need the attainment of dhyana. [7.7.2.1]

In summary, then, **the streamwinner** has uprooted the first 3 mental fetters (*saṃyojanā*), namely:²⁶⁶

- | | |
|-------------------------|------------------------|
| (1) personality view, | <i>sakkāya, diṭṭhi</i> |
| (2) spiritual doubt and | <i>vicikicchā</i> |

²⁶⁰ **Esukāri S** (M 96,8/2179), SD 37.9; **Sāleyyaka S** (M 41,7-14/1:286-288), SD 5.7 (2).

²⁶¹ On the wholesome courses of action and the noble eightfold path, see Table 3.5 (SD 59.10).

²⁶² **Hatthi, gāmaka Ugga S** (A 8.22,6.5), SD 45.15.

²⁶³ SD 37.8 (1.6.2.2).

²⁶⁴ There are **3 kinds of streamwinners** (*sotāpanna*): (1) the “single-seeder” (*eja, bījī*); “having taken only 1 more human rebirth, (he) makes an end of suffering” (A 9.12,8); (2) “clan-to-clan goer” (*kolani, kola*), “having re-arisen and wandered amongst 2 or 3 families, (he) makes an end of suffering” (A 9.12,9); (3) “seven-at-most,” (*satta-k, khattu, parama*), “having re-arisen and wandered amongst gods and humans for 7 lives at the most, (he) makes an end of suffering” (A 9.12,10). See **Sa, upādi, sesa S** (A 9.12,8-10), SD 3.3(3).

²⁶⁵ The 3 unwholesome roots and the 3 wholesome roots are mentioned, eg, in **Mahā Vaccha, gotta S** (M 73,4/1:489), SD 27.4. On the 3 unwholesome roots (*akusala, mūla*), see **Mūla S** (A 3.69), SD 18.2; SD 4.14 (1.5); SD 50.20 (3.1.3).

²⁶⁶ On breaking the 3 fetters, See SD 10.16 (1.6.6); overview: Table 1.1.2 (SD 50.19).

(3) attachment to rituals and vows. *sīla-b,bata,parāmāsa*

The once-returned too, has destroyed the first 3 fetters and also diminished the 3 unwholesome roots of greed, hate and delusion.

The non-returned has destroyed all the 5 lower fetters, that is, the first 3, and lust and ill will, thus:²⁶⁷

(4) sensual lust and *kāma,rāga*
(5) repulsion. *paṭigha*

And one becomes **an arhat** with the destruction of the 5 higher fetters (that is, having destroyed *all* the 10 fetters), that is:²⁶⁸

(6) greed for form existence, *rūpa,rāga*
(7) greed for formless existence, *arūpa,rāga*
(8) conceit, *māna*
(9) restlessness and *uddhacca*
(10) ignorance. *avijjā*

According to early Buddhism, our human birth and human state are rare indeed, and also rare is the availability of the Buddha's teaching (Dh 182).²⁶⁹ As humans, then, we should at least work to attain **streamwinning** in this very life; if not, we should still be able to attain the path at the time of dying. According to **the (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1) and the other 9 suttas of the same Okkanta Saṃyutta (S 25), we should constantly practise the perception of impermanence for this purpose (SD 16.7).

3.3.4.2 The Buddha is recorded to have declared that, even in his own time, there were thousands of lay disciples who are **streamwinners, once-returned and non-returned**,²⁷⁰ such as in these suttas:

Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta	D 16,2.6 f/2:91-93	SD 9
Mahā Vacchagotta Sutta	M 73,5/1:489 f	SD 27.4

Suttas that record accounts of laity who have attained **streamwinning, once-returning and non-returning** include the following:

Dhamma,cetiya Sutta	M 89,18/2:124	Isi,datta and Purāṇa ²⁷¹ (A 6.44/3:348)	SD 64.10
Thapataya Sutta	S 55.6,25/5:352	streamwinners	SD 42.7
(Chakka) Miga,sālā Sutta	A 6.44/3:348	once-returned [M 89]	SD 3.2
(Sekha) Uddesa Sutta 2	A 3.86/1:232	once-returned: detailed definition	SD 80.13
Sa,upādi,sesa Sutta	A 9.12/4:380 f	once-returned: brief definition	SD 3.3(3)
(Majjhima) Ghāṭikāra Sutta	M 81,18.14/2:52	non-returned	SD 49.3
(Vesālīka) Ugga Sutta	A 8.21/4:211	non-returned	SD 70.3; SD 8.5 (11)
(Hatthi,gāmaka) Ugga Sutta	A 8.22,65/4:216	non-returned	SD 45.15; SD 8.5 (11)

For a study of the 4 kinds of saints, see **SD 10.16** (11-14).

²⁶⁷ See SD 10.16 (13); on fetters broken for non-returning: SD 10.16 (1.6.7), SD 23.16 (1.1) n.

²⁶⁸ On breaking the 10 fetters, See SD 10.16 (1.6.8); Table 1.1.2 (SD 50.19).

²⁶⁹ On Dh 182, see SD 29.6a (4.1.4).

²⁷⁰ Streamwinning may be attained without dhyana: SD 3.3 (0.3), SD 55.15 (1.3.1.2).

²⁷¹ At their death, the Buddha declares that they are both once-returned (A 3:348).

3.3.4.3 Layman arhats are rarer than renunciant arhats for the simple reason that one must have mastered dhyana in order to break the 5 higher fetters [3.3.4.1]. Most lay disciples may either be too busy with their lives to be able to meditate and master dhyana, or may still be attached to their spouses, families or sense-pleasures, to progress beyond attaining once-returning. However, we do have a significant number of lay **non-returns** [3.3.4.2] during the Buddha's time.

This means that they have been able to attain dhyana, but are unable to develop insight strong enough to be able to fully penetrate into nonself or to fully understand the 4 noble truths in all their aspects. They may not be able to do so in this world; but they are reborn **in the pure abodes** (*suddh'-āvāsa*), which conduces to their continued mental development for attaining arhathood in less time than a streamwinner would take, that is, within 7 lives [3.3.4.1].²⁷²

There is at least one famous case of a layman arhat: that of the naked wanderer Bāhiya Dāru,-cīriya, as recorded in **the (Arahatta) Bāhiya Sutta** (U 1.10).²⁷³ The Commentaries tell us that he does not become a monk due to his premature death. In due course, the tradition arose that any layman attaining arhathood has either to join the order, or will attain final nirvana that same day, a view that first appeared in **the Milinda,pañha** (Miln 264).²⁷⁴

The mind of an arhat is fully free from any attachment—which makes the institution of the Vinaya, especially the monastic routine of renunciants to live on almsfood, wear rag-robles, resort to simple forest or outdoor dwelling and use simple medication. So long as a renunciant arhat keeps to such a routine, he will live and benefit those who meet them to learn the Dharma. Since layman arhats are not bound by such rules, they need to ordain soon enough (tradition says on the same day); otherwise, they would die, one imagines, in some deep meditation.²⁷⁵

4 Buddhism: religion or path?

4.1 BUDDHISM AS A RELIGION

4.1.1 Minding our own Buddhism

4.1.1.1 Ask any scholar or teacher of Buddhism, “**Is Buddhism a religion?**” and we are likely to get as many answers as those who answer the question. Somehow the word “religion” will always be used in some personal way. When we search for “world religions” online or in some encyclopaedia, we will find Buddhism in every listing. Let's take a step back and ask: “What is a religion?” and there we go again: every scholar or writer is likely to define it in some unique or different way.

We simply must get used to the understanding that important words (like “religion”) are, technically, defined by their user. This understanding must lend us the curiosity to always know or be open to how the word is used by others in some scholarly writing or in a conversation. The fact that most people or most Buddhists use “religion” without really knowing what it means only underscores the need for this investigative habit of knowing how words are defined and used, especially when we use them ourselves. It is also interesting to study why they use the word “religion” in the way they do, but that will open up another area of study for us.

4.1.1.2 Modern scholars and thinkers (beginning in the 18th century) have written classics on the nature of religion. German Reformed thinker and biblical scholar **Friedrich Schleiermacher** (1768-

²⁷² On why there seems to be no mention of laymen arhats in the suttas, see SD 8.6 (13-20).

²⁷³ U 1.10/6-9 (SD 33.7).

²⁷⁴ On laymen arhats, further see **Laymen saints**, SD 8.6 (13) Why no mention of lay arhats? On destiny of laymen arhats, see SD 8.6 (13 + 19) & **Sabba Kamma Jaha S** (U 3.1) @ SD 39.3 (1.4.4). Also SD 37.4 (4); SD 4.9 (5.3.5); also Somaratne, “White-clothed celibate arahants in early Buddhism,” in *Buddhist and Pali Studies in Honour of the Ven Prof Kakkapalliye Anuruddha*, Hong Kong, 2009:151-167.

²⁷⁵ An arhat must ordain or die: see SD 39.3 (1.4.5). On the lay follower as meditator, see SD 8.6 (9).

1834) defined religion as *das schlechthinnige Abhängigkeitsgefühl*, usually translated as “the feeling of absolute dependence.”²⁷⁶ This is understandable since he came from a God-believing background. However, his contemporary, the German philosopher **Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel** (1779-1831) rightly disagreed, defining religion as “the Divine Spirit becoming conscious of Himself through the finite spirit.”²⁷⁷

British anthropologist **Edward Burnett Tylor** (1831-1917) defined religion simply as “the belief in spiritual beings” (1871).²⁷⁸ Understandably, as he argued, narrowing the definition to mean the belief in a supreme deity, judgment after death, idolatry, and so on, would exclude many people from the category of the religious, and thus “has the fault of identifying religion rather with particular developments than with the deeper motive which underlies them.” He also argued that the belief in spiritual beings exists in all known societies. Even then, Tylor’s definition of religion only highlights one aspect, an unimportant one at that, and omits its more salient and significant aspects.

American pioneer psychologist **William James** (1842-1910) in his classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), defined religion as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (1902:29 f). By “divine,” James meant “any object that is godlike, whether it be a concrete deity or not” (32) to which the individual “feels impelled to respond with solemnly and gravely” (35). James was, as we know, very impressed with Buddhism, and his definition points to a few more innate features of early Buddhism, highlighting that it is more strongly characterized by *inner states* of mind than “the divine.”

The pioneer sociologist **Émile Durkheim** (1858-1917), in his seminal book *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (French 1912),²⁷⁹ defined religion more broadly as a “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things” (1912:44; 1915:47). By sacred things, he meant things “set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.” The sacred, according to Durkheim, are not merely gods or spirits, but may be “a rock, a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word, anything can be sacred” (1915:37, 1995:28). Religious beliefs, myths, dogmas and legends are representations that express the nature of these sacred things, and the virtues and powers which are attributed to them (1915:40 f).

Hence, for Durkheim, Buddhism is a religion, since “in default of gods, Buddhism admits the existence of sacred things, namely, the four noble truths and the practices derived from them” (1915: 37, 1995:28). The translator’s footnote adds: “Not to mention the sage and the saint who practise these truths and who for that reason are sacred.”

The definitions of religion by James and Durkheim still widely influence modern scholars. **Frederick Ferré** (1933-2013), a professor of philosophy and specialist in metaphysics, for example, defined religion as “one’s way of valuing most comprehensively and intensively.”²⁸⁰ The German-American Lutheran theologian **Paul Tillich** (1886-1965), similarly defines faith as “the state of being ultimately concerned,”²⁸¹ which is thus itself religion, that is, “the substance, the ground, and the depth of man’s spiritual life.”²⁸² Religion that seeks and sees the sacred, divine, and deep values or ultimate concern,

²⁷⁶ Hueston E Finlay. (2005). “‘Feeling of absolute dependence’ or ‘absolute feeling of dependence’? A question revisited,” *Religious Studies* 41 2005:81-94.

²⁷⁷ Max Müller, “Lectures on the origin and growth of religion, as illustrated by the religions of India,” New York, 1879.

²⁷⁸ E B Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the development of mythology, philosophy, religion, art, and custom*, vol 1, London, 1871:424.

²⁷⁹ E Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life: A study in religious sociology*. [French, *Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, 1912] Tr J W Swain. London, 1915. New tr Karen E Fields, NY, 1995.

²⁸⁰ Ferré, *Basic Modern Philosophy of Religion*, Scribner, 1967:82.

²⁸¹ Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, Harper Perennial, 1957:1.

²⁸² Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, Oxford, 1959:8.

thus profoundly gratifies the seeker and seer. Such a joyful faith is unshaken and untroubled by scientific findings and philosophical criticisms (such as those of the atheist, Richard Dawkins).²⁸³

4.1.1.3 We have already noted that outside of Europe before colonial times, there is no word, especially in the vocabulary of Buddhism or of Buddhist communities that is equivalent to the Western notion of “religion” [3.1.2]. As a quick reminder, we may look at W L King’s note on the definition of religion in his entry in the MacMillan Encyclopedia of Religions:

The very attempt to define religion, to find some distinctive or possibly unique essence or set of qualities that distinguish the religious from the remainder of human life, is primarily a Western concern. The attempt is a natural consequence of the Western speculative, intellectualistic, and scientific disposition. It is also the product of the dominant Western religious mode, what is called the Judeo-Christian climate or, more accurately, the theistic inheritance from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The theistic form of belief in this tradition, even when downgraded culturally, is formative of the dichotomous Western view of religion. That is, the basic structure of theism is essentially a distinction between a transcendent deity and all else, between the creator and his creation, between God and man.

(“Religion” in *The Macmillan Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1st ed 1987; 2nd ed 2005:7692.)

The word “dichotomous” has been underscored to highlight a key characteristic of monotheistic religions, where there is only one truth, that is, God, and you are with it or against it. If you are against it, you will be punished eternally; if you are with it, you will be rewarded eternally.

4.1.1.4 For Buddhism, however, there is neither “I” nor “you” out there except in our own mental construction: instead, there are only the essenceless conditions arising and passing away in all things. **The middle way** is a *not* choice that we must make; rather, it is that there are extremes or *dualities* we should avoid, whether they be good and evil, heaven and hell, Self and Other, God and Devil, or 1 and 0. “The Zen error” is to take samsara and nirvana as dualities, that samsara *is* nirvana, nirvana samsara: imagine saying “good is bad, bad is good” or “light is darkness, darkness light”! This is the cost of playing with words, not outgrowing them. The darkness glares back!²⁸⁴

The Buddha teaches that it is the very idea of *a dichotomy or duality* that keeps us caught in wanting and not wanting. The way out is to transcend this dichotomy, not to identify with either side.²⁸⁵ When we know and see that truth and reality are ultimately numberless and boundless, then we are closer to nirvana, the unconditioned.²⁸⁶

The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ, | Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line, | Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.”²⁸⁷

Buddhists would smile heartily with the sentiment set forth by the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, except that there is neither finger nor pen that writes nor words written, *only the writing moving on*.

²⁸³ P A Pecorino, *Philosophy of Religion*, 2001: ch 10, sect 5.

https://www.qcc.cuny.edu/socialsciences/ppecorino/phil_of_religion_text/CHAPTER_10_DEFINITION/Final-Thoughts.htm.

²⁸⁴ Nietzsche writes: “He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And when you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.” (*Beyond Good and Evil*, tr R J Hollindale, London: Penguin, 1973: 102). See SD 24.10b (2.4.3.2).

²⁸⁵ On non-identification, see *Atammayatā*, SD 19.13.

²⁸⁶ On middle way of transcending extremes, see SD 1.1 (2.1.4.3).

²⁸⁷ Edward Fitzgerald (1809-1883), *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, quatrain 51 (1st ed 1859; 1861, 3rd ed 1872).

4.1.2 Out of the Buddha's hands?

4.1.2.1 It is fine and fun when we, supposedly, as connoisseurs of antique furniture, discern and discuss the different kinds of chairs, tables and woodwork before us. In daily life, however, we would rather sit on chairs, work at a desk, dine at a table, store up the cupboards and use the wooden fixtures so that we live better lives and produce great works. So too, collecting books and materials on Buddhism can give us a gratifying sense of “owning” some Buddhism; but reading and studying these precious works, and practising and reflecting on the Buddha's teachings bring us even greater benefits of joy and wisdom, even freedom from suffering—whether we see it as a religion or not.

We are free to practise Buddhism as a religion, in its ethnic form or as a world religion. We may even benefit from Buddhism as a science of the mind, healing others and yet unhealed ourselves. Or, we can preach Buddhism as a philosophy of life and boast of being the wisest or happiest person in the world. We have thus, as it were, taken Buddhism out of the Buddha's hands, and conscripted it as our obsequious handmaid or sacred cash cow. It is many things to many people.

But the Buddha teaches none of these things. On the contrary, the Buddha teaches that we let go of the *many* for the one: freeing ourselves from sense-based distractions and thought explosions, we settle with mental oneness, inner focus and peace. Rising above even the one, we taste the zero, the empty space that embraces all, and yet is free from it all. Where language fails, we must be silent—this is nirvana. The Buddha teaches this.

4.1.2.2 Modern scholars of Buddhism who have a deep respect for it have broadened and deepened the definition of religion to include Buddhism, or should we say, include Buddhism more comprehensively. If religion were a huge mountain, then Buddhism would be the gradual paths, rocky crags and clouded heights. Most definitions of religion tend to envision only one level or one face of this huge mountain. Scholars who have spent decades studying and practising Buddhism are likely to tell us more about the mountain.

According to **Charles Prebish** (1944–), a US Buddhist studies scholar specializing in early Indian Buddhism, “A religion is a philosophy that posits an ultimate reality, a path towards experiencing ultimate reality, and the potential for personal transformation.”²⁸⁸ As a practising Buddhist scholar, he clearly had Buddhism in mind with this definition. Prebish himself recommends the definition of Buddhist-Christian studies scholar, **Frederick J Streng** (1933-1993), who, in his classic work, *Understanding Religious Life*,²⁸⁹ writes that “Religion is a means to ultimate transformation” (1984).

Streng, in one of his last public appearances, was at the Krost Symposium on “Salvation” at Texas Lutheran College (2 Feb 1993), where he saw in all the participating traditions—Catholic, Jew, Hindu, Muslim and Zen—a “shared religious intent,” that is, a transformative power that transcends biological, social or psychological life, and a freedom of choice which is not a result of physical, biological or social forces, but makes the ultimate transformation of religious salvation possible.²⁹⁰ This sentiment echoes the Buddha's call to interfaith dialogue in the Udumbarikā Sīha,nāda Sutta (D 25).²⁹¹ [3.2.3.3 (4)]

4.1.2.3 Streng, applying his definition of religion [4.1.2.2] to Buddhism, adds, “Buddhism offers an ultimate reality. Some forms of Buddhism may call this nirvana, others buddhahood, and so forth, but all schools and sects of Buddhism do have a notion of ultimacy.”²⁹² The message here is clear: a religion must teach a clear and distinct ultimate reality, which can be a God or gods, an impersonal

²⁸⁸ Charles Prebish, Dzongchen Ponlop Rinpoche & Joan Sutherland, *Lion's Roar* (magazine), “Is Buddhism a religion?” Jan 4 2019: <https://www.lionsroar.com/is-buddhism-a-religion-november-2013/>.

²⁸⁹ Frederick J Streng, *Understanding Religious Life*, Wadsworth, 3rd ed, 1985; digital 2009.

²⁹⁰ Randall Nadeau, “Frederick Streng, Mādhyamika, and the comparative study of religion,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 16, 1996:65.

²⁹¹ D 25,23.2/3:57 (SD 1.4); SD 60.1c (11.44).

²⁹² Qu by Prebish (et al), *Lion's Roar*, Jan 2013; see Streng 1985:190 f.

absolute, a force of nature, a ground of being, or some entity or state. Without this ultimate state or highest good—beyond which it is impossible to go—the system at hand is not a religion.

Furthermore, adds Streng, in order to be considered a religion, the system must offer some clear and distinct path, or choice of paths, to the experience of that ultimate reality. While it doesn't matter whether that path is prayer, ritual, yoga, meditation, or some other method or combination thereof, there must be a clear way for the religious aspirant to gain the experience of that ultimate reality.

Finally, for something to be a religion, there must be a personal transformation that results from the individual's experience of ultimate reality. This is most usually demonstrated by a positive change in morality and/or ethics, expressions of compassion, kindness or similar forms of conduct. If we apply this definition, it's clear that Buddhism is a religion. First of all, Buddhism absolutely offers an ultimate reality. Some forms of Buddhism may call this nirvana, others buddhahood and so forth, but all schools and sects of Buddhism do have a notion of ultimacy.²⁹³

In fact, all schools and sects of Buddhism offer a clear path to the attainment of ultimate reality. There is the eightfold path in Theravāda, the Bodhisattva path of Mahāyāna, or Sukhavati (Western Paradise) in Pure Land Buddhism. This is not saying that all these ultimate goals are the same: they are clearly not. When we have made an informed choice (or not), we should make every effort to understand what that path and goal really constitute, and to practise accordingly. As we better understand our practice, we should examine any transformation that we have experienced, if any, and be open and brave to challenge ourselves to move on to seek the right path and goal. We have this **free choice**: if we do not use this freedom wisely, we would have been caught like a beast leashed to the sunken pillar of dogma, looping it fiercely or docilely, blinded by ignorance, hand-led on by craving.

4.1.2.4 How do we know we have attained the ultimate reality, or even reached the path heading for that reality? Later Buddhism used the term "**Buddha-nature**," usually rendered in Sanskrit as *buddha, dhātu* (ts). The term refers to the Mahāyāna doctrine of the inherent potential of all sentient beings to attain Buddhahood. The term *buddha, dhātu* is also widely used in Sanskrit with the sense of "buddha-relic." In the Pali texts, only this sense as "buddha-relic" is found, and even then, only in very late texts (eg, ApA 266). Otherwise, neither the term nor the idea exists at all in the Pali text.²⁹⁴

The notion that "anyone" can become buddha²⁹⁵ is not mentioned at all in early Buddhism. It is clearly imaginative at best, and meaningless at worst. It may have a negative effective effect in making us indolent, not asserting our self-reliance for awakening. Even saying "*every human*" can become *buddha* is as presumptuous as declaring that "anyone can run the Marathon or the Olympics." Such a notion is imaginative in that we are likely to view of potential as the attainment itself: we repeat this view so often that we begin to mistake *the status for the state*!

Or worse, we misconstrue that we are already "enlightened" (hence, conducting ourselves with an air of grandiosity or licence). It is also meaningless in that it distracts us from understanding and asserting ourselves in the real purpose of Buddhist practice.

²⁹³ Streng, *Understanding Religious Life*, 1985: chs 5-13. See also (edd) F Streng, Charles L Lloyd & Jay T Allen, *Ways of Being Religious: Readings for a New Approach to Religion*, Prentice-Hall, 1973; Streng's "Truth," in Macmillan Ency of Religion 15:63-72.

²⁹⁴ Princeton DB: Buddhadhātu.

²⁹⁵ I use the lower-case "buddha" to mean "the awakened one" in general, and the initial-capitalized "Buddha" to refer to Gotama Buddha, or in some context, to the Mahāyāna idea. The same principle works for other terms like the Pali, bodhisatta (not used in Mahāyāna texts), anglicized as bodhisattva.

4.1.3 Buddhism as a path

4.1.3.1 In my 5 decades (from 1970s onwards) as a Buddhist (in the broad sense of the term), I notice (as also noted by Prebish, 2013) that I started off with the assumption of Buddhism as a religion. Beginning around 2000, I began to see Buddhism as a “way of life,” **a path** (that is, practice and growth) and began rejecting or ignoring its religious (ritual, belief and ethnic) aspects. In my years of full-time sutta work (since 2002), I see Buddhism, early Buddhism to be sure, as a path that I aspire to follow, and with the discovery of the teaching of **the (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1), I see it meaningful to aspire to attain streamwinning in this life itself. Since then, my study has been constantly deepened and broadened by an understanding of the suttas and discovering the historical Buddha. This is the path that I aspire to follow.

Here, I will attempt to explain what I understand and live by as the meaning and purpose of a Dharma-spirited life, that is, as **a path** (*magga*) [2.1.2.1] of the *ethical, psychological and philosophical training*, or more exactly, training in moral virtue, mental concentration and insight wisdom, as follows, with an overview in **Table 4.1.3.1**:

the 3 aggregates	the 8 path-factors	basic method of practice
moral virtue (<i>sīla</i>) <i>taming the body</i>	right speech (<i>sammā vācā</i>)	<u>the 5 precepts</u> : abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and intoxication
	right action (<i>sammā kammantā</i>)	
	right livelihood (<i>sammā ājīva</i>)	
mental concentration (<i>samādhi</i>) <i>taming the mind</i>	right effort (<i>sammā vāyāma</i>)	(1) <u>mindfulness</u> of the body, feelings, the mind and realities, <i>or</i> (2) developing and dwelling in <u>the 4 dhyanas</u> (<i>jhāna</i>)
	right mindfulness (<i>sammā sati</i>)	
	right concentration (<i>sammā samādhi</i>)	
wisdom (<i>paññā</i>) <i>renouncing self-view</i>	right view (<i>sammā diṭṭhi</i>)	practical understanding of: (1) <u>impermanence</u> and (2) <u>noble truths</u> 1 + 2
	right intention (<i>sammā saṅkappa</i>)	

Table 4.1.3.1 THE 3 TRAININGS (BASIC PRACTICE) FOR LAITY AND RENUNCIANTS

4.1.4 The dynamics of Buddhist moral ethics

4.1.4.0 Background pre-reading for a fuller and better understanding of this section:

The evolution of the 5 precepts	<i>please read this section if you have not done so</i>	(3.2.6)
Adhipateyya Sutta (A 3.40)	the 3 priorities in our Buddhist life	SD 27.3
Sīla samādhi paññā	the 3 trainings: moral virtue, concentration, wisdom	SD 21.6
The 5 values	1. life, 2. happiness, 3. freedom, 4. truth, and 5. wisdom ²⁹⁶	

4.1.4.1 Why does Buddhist training begin with **moral training** (*sīla, sikkhā*), that is, the cultivation of moral virtue or moral ethics [Table 4.1.3.1], rather than faith or belief in some higher agency (like

²⁹⁶ See SD 1.5 (2.7+2.8); SD 51.11 (2.2.3.4); SD 54.2e (2.3.2.5).

God or Amitābha) in whom we have full faith, or to whom we fully surrender, or perhaps simply cultivate love rather than rules and rituals? The simple answer is that (as for the former)—religion as other-power—invariably gets used by the powerful and leads to social intolerance, religious violence and wars, as Western history shows [SD 60.1c (15.1)]. As for the latter—the religion of love—is all well and good as an underlying principle of practice, but as a principal idea, that love, as we have seen, is more likely to be shown to believers, and rarely shown to non-believers or outsiders [SD 60.1c (5.2)].

These are, however, modern explanations, that is, in contemporary historical terms. To better understand why the Buddha introduced moral training, we should see it as part of a bigger picture on **self-reliance** (*atta, saraṇa*) [1.2.2.2 (1); 3.1.1.1]: we can save ourselves, and must do so. To put the fate of our salvation in the hands of any “other” is to enslave ourselves to religion, to allow others to domesticate our mind so that we end up as others’ beast of burden, a subhuman state of mental slavery.

4.1.4.2 Using a bit of **evolutionary psychology**, we can perhaps better understand why it is better we train to be a good person rather than depend on others to dispense or “bless” goodness upon us. This goes back to the reality that we live other with *others*, in a society, an interconnected world. What I did in the past affects me now, what I do now affects others too. For example, I spent 5 years in Thailand as a monk learning Buddhism and Pali, which now helps me understand the suttas better to be able to translate and teach them. Since 2002 (for the last 20 years) I have been a full-time translator of the suttas so that someone like you can read and benefit from them. By the time you read this, many more years have passed.

My point is that the good that I do now will, in some way, follow and benefit me, and others. But it has to start with me. So it is with keeping the precepts for the sake of cultivating moral virtue. I do not need to depend on others to do this, but in doing so, I will benefit *both* myself and others, here and hereafter. On a broader scale, it is because most people everywhere, in some way, love and respect *life, property, freedom, truth and a clear mind* (for learning): these are the values underpinning the 5 precepts, that characterize our modern society, with its progress in education, technology, medicine, science, and amenities.

4.1.4.3 Now, for something good (or bad) to happen, it starts with me (for example), when (1) I *intend* something good (like writing this essay) (2) that you will *know* (3) it to be something worth *reading*, (4) so that you actually *read* and (5) benefit from it. This is what an evolutionary psychologist calls a “5-order intentionality.” This sounds logical since I enjoyed writing this essay, and you (hopefully) enjoy and benefit from reading it too.

However, this “5-order intentionality” becomes problematic when we apply it to religion, or even moral training. Let’s say (1) I *intend* (2) that there is an omnipotent *God* or some powerful gods (3) who *know* (4) that I *want* him/them to punish you (5) if you *don’t* accept this belief. This also sounds illogical when we apply, say, the teaching of karma, thus: (1) I *intend* (2) that there is *karma* (3) that *shapes* our present and future (in every way); (4) that will *punish* you (5) if you do *not* believe in it.

Now if this belief stops at the 3rd order, that is, with me, then, there is almost no issue: it is my personal belief, which I do not impose on you or anyone else. Even then, the notion that karma controls everything is *not* taught by the Buddha. According to early Buddhism, **past karma** is only *one* of 5 conditions that act on us [4.4.6.2]. In terms of time, karma itself is also only *one* of the conditions that shape us; the other force that shapes us (ie, our mind and body) is present conditions. In short, there is *nature* (past karma) and *nurture* (present conditions).

With moral living, we can weaken, even prevent, the fruits of past karma from acting on us, and by cultivating good present karma through a moral life of precept-keeping, we create new good karma. Moreover, it does not end here: this is merely the refining of our bodily actions (non-killing, non-stealing and no sexual misconduct) and speech (no wrong speeches), and cultivating compassion, charity, restraint and right speech. Strengthened with this wholesome karma of body (*kāya*,-

kamma) and speech (*vacī,kamma*) [Table 3.3.3.2], we go on to practise **mindfulness**, even cultivate *dhyana*, if possible, and go on with mental training [4.1.5]—without imposing our views on others or letting them to learn this self-cultivation as we have done.²⁹⁷

4.1.4.4 Even at this early stage of Buddhist training, we can see twin processes at work: those of self-benefit (*atta,hita*) and of other-benefit (*para,hita*), that is, how we desire to better ourselves and to inspire others to do likewise, as taught, for example, in **the Chavālāta Sutta** (A 4.95) and **the Atta,-hita Sutta 1** (A 4.96).²⁹⁸ In fact, the Sutta speaks of 4 kinds of persons and an exemplar each, thus:

- | | |
|---|--|
| (1) benefits himself but not others | the monk Vakkali, morally virtuous but does not exhort others; |
| (2) benefits others but not himself | the monk Upananda, himself immoral, but exhorts others to be moral; |
| (3) benefits neither himself nor others | Devadatta, immoral but exhorts others in the same way; |
| (4) benefits both himself and others | Mahā Kassapa, who is morally virtuous, exhorts others in the same way. (DA 3:1025) |

Understandably, we should at least begin by training ourselves to be morally virtuous. Once we are clear and certain about the precepts, we should inspire others to be morally virtuous too, either by exhorting them or simply by our own example. Since this is not some blind belief (dependent on faith in others) but a personal effort, we can and must always learn from our own efforts, as we have discussed [4.1.4.3].

4.1.4.5 The proper moral cultivation by way of precept-keeping benefits oneself and can also benefit others [4.1.4.4]. In other words, the more people in a community live moral lives, the more wholesome that society becomes. Now we have what are known as **the “3 supremacies”** (*ādhipeyya*), by which we can examine the moral rightness and quality of our life:

- | | |
|--|--|
| Am I doing this rightly and wholesomely? | (Putting <i>self</i> first in terms of practice.) |
| Am I inspiring others by my example? | (Giving a thought to the benefit of <i>others</i> .) |
| Is all this in keeping with the true Dharma? | (Making sure that <i>we</i> are doing all this rightly.) |

The 3 supremacies are taught in **the Ādhipeyya Sutta** (A 3.40), SD 27.3, that is, self-supremacy, other-supremacy and Dharma-supremacy. Basically, **self-supremacy** (*attādhipeyya*) refers to our own examination of our “conscience” (in a non-theistic sense),²⁹⁹ that is examining whether an act we are going to commit would result in self-blame or remorse.

Secondly, we act morally, not only because it is good to do so, but because the wise (*viññū*) say so, that is, public opinion (in the wholesome sense) agrees with it. Hence, those who are wise would clearly see our conduct as morally good and support it: we have been “praised by the wise” (*viññū-pasaṭṭha*) and, conversely, what is morally reprehensible is said to be “censured by the wise” (*viññū-garahita*).

Thirdly, our actions, and those of others inspired by us, are not something based on personal opinions, or even “popular opinion,” which is often wrong. Our action conforms with what is right and good as set out in the Dharma, the Buddha’s teaching of natural morality. By “natural morality,” is meant not only that such a moral conduct flows truly and harmoniously with the “nature of things”—

²⁹⁷ See R Dunbar et al, *Evolutionary Psychology: A beginner’s guide*, OneWorld, 2007:177 f.

²⁹⁸ A 4.95/2:95 f (SD 64.6); A 4.96/2:96 f (SD 64.6).

²⁹⁹ Broadly, the word “conscience” may apply here, but technically it is either a theistic concept (related to the God-idea) or psychological (a learned response), both of which are alien to early Buddhism. See SD 27.3 (3.2.1).

respect for life, for property (happiness of others), for the person of others, for truth and for wisdom —but also that it is good (wholesome) for all alike.³⁰⁰

4.1.5 Buddhist spiritual psychology as mental health

4.2 McMINDFULNESS [SD 60.1c (1.9.2)]³⁰¹

4.2.1 Marketing mindfulness

4.2.1.1 The so-called modern **Mindfulness Movement** or “Mindful Revolution” (as the Time magazine called it, 2014)³⁰² that is sweeping the world now has been criticized for drowning the public, especially the corporate world, with its spiritual materialism (ie, religion for worldly benefits). “But anything that offers success in our unjust society without trying to change it is not revolutionary,” Ron Purser stresses, “it just helps people cope.”³⁰³ There are 2 big issues with the Mindfulness Movement: (1) in promoting so called “self-help,” it really distracts us from seeing and dealing with the real conditions of our stress and lack; and (2) after pilfering the idea from Buddhism, it now claims to have nothing to do with Buddhism.

Employers and entrepreneurs strongly support the Mindfulness courses and training because their employees are able to take more stress and learn to look within themselves for solutions to any issues, especially those related to their work. In other words, they are conditioned not to find fault with their work, working conditions or employers by learning to “be with the present,” accepting what comes, “just as they are,” by giving an ironic Procrustean twist and trim to the Buddhist teachings.

4.2.1.2 “What remains,” warns Purser, “is a tool of self-discipline, disguised as self-help. Instead of setting practitioners free, it helps them adjust to the very conditions that caused their problems. A truly revolutionary movement would seek to overturn this dysfunctional system, but mindfulness only serves to reinforce its destructive logic. The neoliberal order has imposed itself by stealth in the past few decades, widening inequality in pursuit of corporate wealth. People are expected to adapt to what this model demands of them. Stress has been pathologised and privatised, and the burden of managing it outsourced to individuals.” (id)³⁰⁴

The promoters of modern Mindfulness training, unwittingly at first, then helplessly, are bolstering up the status quo. Rather than warning us how attention is monetized and manipulated by corporations such as Google, Facebook, Twitter and Apple, they instead locate the crisis and its causes in our own minds. The capitalist system, it seems, is inherently unproblematic. Rather, the failure is ours in not being mindful and resilient in a precarious and uncertain economy. Then, they sell us solutions that make us contented, mindful capitalists. This, in fact, sounds just like the evangelists who proclaim, “You are sinners!” and then claim to have the salvation for us!

³⁰⁰ Containing both *viññu-p, pasattha* and *viññu, garahita*: **Aggañña S** (D 27,5/3:82 f), **Kesa,puttiya S** (A 3.65/-1:190×2, 191×3, 193, 196×3), **Bhaddiya S** (A 4.194/2:190, 191, 193×2). Containing only *viññu-p, pasattha*: **Pañca,vera,bhaya S** (S 12.41/2:70), **Sakka S** (S 40.10/4:272, 279), **Cakka,vatti,rāja S** (S 55.1/5:343); **Puññābhisanda S 2** (A 4.52/2:57), **Gihī S** (A 5.179/3:213), **Vera S 1** (A 9.27/4:407), **Vera S 2** (A 9.408/4:407).

³⁰¹ I would like to thank Jaryl Lim Zhi Wei of Singapore for a number of interesting suggestions in this section.

³⁰² See SD 17.8c (Fig 1.).

³⁰³ R Purser, “The mindfulness conspiracy,” *The Guardian*, 14 June 2019: [The mindfulness conspiracy | Mindfulness | The Guardian](#). Adapted from Purser, *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality*, London, 2016:6 pdf (ch 1).

³⁰⁴ Implicitly, this is also a warning for us as Buddhists not to be extremes in our practice until it hurts us, in the end, preventing us to continue with it, or negatively affecting others who are significant to us.

4.2.2 Why McMindfulness is so successful

4.2.2.1 According to Purser, the term “**McMindfulness**” was coined by Miles Neale, a US Buddhist teacher and psychotherapist, who described “a feeding frenzy of spiritual practices that provide immediate nutrition but no long-term sustenance” (“McMindfulness and Frozen Yoga,” 2016:13).³⁰⁵ The contemporary mindfulness fad is veritably the entrepreneurial equivalent of McDonald’s.

The successful fast-food industry, **McDonald’s**, was started by US businessman Raymond Albert Kroc (1902-1984). At the start, when Kroc was selling milkshakes, he noticed the franchising potential of a restaurant chain in San Bernadino, California. He made a deal to serve as the franchising agent for the McDonald brothers. He bought them out and transformed the chain into a global empire. Kroc saw his chance to provide busy Americans with instant access to food that would be delivered consistently through automation, standardization and discipline.

4.2.2.2 US professor of medicine, **Jon Kabat-Zinn** (1944-), on the other hand, started off with a deep interest in Buddhism and meditation. During a retreat, he had a vision of how he could adapt Buddhist teachings and practices to help hospital patients deal with physical pain, stress and anxiety. His masterstroke was the branding of mindfulness as a secular spirituality.

Like Kroc, Kabat-Zinn saw the opportunity to give stressed-out Americans easy access to his own instant meditation brand, Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR), through an 8-week mindfulness course for stress reduction that would be taught consistently using a standardized curriculum. Basically, this is a clever application of the principle of the specialization of labour that is the foundation and heart of the Industrial Revolution that continues to feed modern capitalism and all its ills.

MBSR teachers would gain certification by attending programmes at Kabat-Zinn’s Center for Mindfulness in Worcester, Massachusetts. He continued to expand the reach of MBSR by identifying new markets such as corporations, schools, government and the military, and endorsing other forms of “mindfulness-based interventions” (MBIs).

Both Kroc and Kabat-Zinn took measures to ensure that their products would not vary in quality or content across franchises. Burgers and fries at McDonald’s are the same whether one is eating them in Dubai or in Dubuque. Similarly, there is little variation in the content, structure and curriculum of MBSR courses around the world.

4.2.3 What’s wrong with McMindfulness?

4.2.3.1 What’s wrong with McMindfulness? What’s wrong with fast food? In principle, the problem is the same: “a feeding frenzy of spiritual practices that provide immediate nutrition but no long-term sustenance” [4.2.2.1]. The McMindfulness Gurus claim that “individual freedom” is found within our “pure awareness,” undistracted by and unconcerned with external corrupting influences. This *sounds* Buddhist, but it is not so.

The Nibbedhika Pariyāya Sutta (A 6.63), has this instructive *kāma verse* that is also found in **the Na Santi Sutta** (S 103):

The thought of lust is a person’s sensuality:

These varied wonders in the world are not desires.

The thought of lust is a person’s desire.

The varied wonders in the world remain just as they are.

Hence, here, the wise remove desire (for sensuality). A 6.63,3.4 ≈ S 103 (SD 6.11 (2.2.2))

This verse basically teaches us self-accountability: don’t blame the world out there, that is, both other humans and the society itself. We may not be able to change others or the world, but we can

³⁰⁵ M Neale, “McMindfulness and Frozen Yoga”: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a8e29ffcd39c3de866b5e14/t/5b5303d91ae6cf630b641909/1532167130908/McMindfulness.pdf>.

change ourselves. Taken by itself, this may actually support what McMIndfulness is doing. However, we need to read this verse along with **the 3 points of utter purity** (*ti,koṭi parisuddhi*) in terms of wholesome moral action, that is, our action or speech, as laid out in **the Amba,laṭṭhika Rahul'ovāda Sutta** (M 61):

- (1) should not harm ourselves;
- (2) should not harm others;
- (3) should not harm both (society in general). (M 61,9-17/1:425-419), SD 3.10

4.2.3.2 Another set of “**3 points of utter purity**” (*ti,koṭi parisuddhi*) of moral actions (of body and speech) was explained in, for example, **the Veḷu,dvāreyya Sutta** (S 55.7), in terms of keeping the 5 precepts, in connection with the golden rule (as in M 61), as follows:

- (1) we should keep the precepts ourselves,
- (2) we should encourage others to do so too, and
- (3) we should “speak in praise” of keeping the precepts.³⁰⁶

The first 2 of the threefold purity of moral action also form the first 2 of the 4 accomplishments of a lay follower, as laid out in **the (Upāsaka) Mahānāma Sutta** (A 8.25):

- (1) a lay follower is one who takes the 3 refuges (the Buddha, the Dharma, the noble sangha) [3.3.2.1];
- (2) he keeps himself morally pure by keeping to the 5 precepts [3.3.2.2];
- (3) he lives for his own welfare; and
- (4) he lives for the welfare of others. (A 8.25), SD 6.3

This wealth of references clearly stands to show how vitally important all our actions should be not just for our own benefit, but also to benefit others and society as a whole, and that we should not merely be insular in doing good, but be proactive for the good of others too. Furthermore, we have at least 2 expositions of **dependent arising**, the first showing how widespread strife arises, and how it ends, shown in **the Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda Sutta** (D 26).³⁰⁷ A similar dependent arising of social strife, due to self-centredness, is mentioned in **the Mahā,nidāna Sutta** (D 15).³⁰⁸ In short, our actions affect society, and as the laity, we should be wholesomely and morally engaged with society.

4.2.3.3 Engaged Buddhist thinkers and activists have severely criticized McMIndfulness. This packaged Mindfulness that we practise is found within “pure awareness,” undistracted by external corrupting influences [but see 4.2.3.1]. Just close our eyes and watch our breath: that’s the crux of the supposed revolution; the world is slowly changed, one mindful individual at a time. This political philosophy is oddly reminiscent of George W Bush’s “compassionate conservatism,” writes Purser (2016:8 digital).

Mindfulness becomes a very private, limited enterprise—a religion of the self, where we do not need to engage with the world outside with any wisdom or compassion. As a result, notes the political theorist Wendy Brown, “the body politic ceases to be a body, but is, rather, a group of individual entrepreneurs and consumers.”³⁰⁹ Instead of getting healed, the patients are convinced and conditioned to live with their disease, even enjoy it.

³⁰⁶ These threefold purities elaborate on the golden rule, ie, the rationale for moral virtue or ethics: **Veḷu,-dvāreyya S** (S 55.7,6-12) + SD 1.5 (3).

³⁰⁷ On the arising of widespread social strife (D 26,9.1-21.3), and the ending of social strife (D 26,21.4-26): SD 36.10.

³⁰⁸ D 15,9/2:58 f (SD 5.17).

³⁰⁹ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*, MIT Press, 2015:15.

4.2.3.4 According to **Purser**, Mindfulness is said to be a US\$4bn industry in the US alone. More than 60,000 books for sale on Amazon have a variant of “Mindfulness” in their title, touting the benefits of Mindful Parenting, Mindful Eating, Mindful Teaching, Mindful Therapy, Mindful Leadership, Mindful Finance, a Mindful Nation, and Mindful Dog Owners, just to name a few. “The Power of Mindful Sex” was a TEDx talk (2018). There is also The Mindfulness Colouring Book, a best-seller for the young who may otherwise miss out on this Mindfulness Revolution. Besides books, there are workshops, online courses, glossy magazines, documentary films, smartphone apps, bells, cushions, bracelets, beauty products and other paraphernalia, as well as a lucrative and burgeoning conference circuits. Mindfulness programmes have made their way into schools, Wall Street and Silicon Valley corporations, law firms, and government agencies, even the US military. (2016: 10, digital)³¹⁰

By deflecting attention from the social structures and material conditions in a capitalist culture (like that of the US), Mindfulness was easily co-opted. Movie stars and celebrity role models endorsed it, while Californian companies, including Google, Facebook, Twitter, Apple and Zynga, embraced it as an adjunct to their brand. Google’s former in-house mindfulness tsar TAN Chade-Meng had the actual job title “Jolly Good Fellow.” His best-selling course and book were “Search inside yourself” (2012)—for there, not in corporate culture—lay the source of your problems.³¹¹

At Google’s Search Inside Yourself (SIY) mindfulness programme, emotional intelligence (EI) figured prominently in the curriculum. The programme was marketed to Google engineers as instrumental to their career success—engaging in mindfulness practice and managing emotions, it was said, would generate surplus economic value, equivalent to the acquisition of capital.

This was the **mood economy**, the “science of happiness,” that pronounced we should have the ability to bounce back from any setback to stay productive in a precarious economic situation. Packaged in this way, Mindfulness sold like hot cornmeal cakes as a technique for personal life optimization, disengaging individuals from their social contexts.

4.2.3.5 One of Mindfulness’ sharpest marketing hooks is its relationship with Buddhist teachings, from which it was excised. Buddhism was a hot selling point in the US, but the market included non-Buddhists too. Hence, Buddhism was dismissed as a “foreign religion” and “cultural baggage.” Even the word “meditation” was switched to “**Mindfulness**” to give a sense of novelty and efficacy of “Buddhist meditation without the Buddhism,” or “the benefits of Buddhism without all the mumbo jumbo.”

Management professor and long-time Buddhist practitioner, **Ron Purser** (1956-), felt a moral duty to start speaking out when large corporations with questionable ethics and dismal track records in corporate social responsibility began introducing mindfulness programs as a method of performance enhancement. In 2013, he published an article with David Loy in the *Huffington Post* that called into question the efficacy, ethics and narrow interests of mindfulness programs. What they wrote surprisingly went viral, perhaps helped by the title: “Beyond McMindfulness” (2013).³¹²

³¹⁰ See eg M Stone, “Abusing the Buddha: How the US Army and Google co-opt mindfulness.” *Salon* 17 Mar 2014, https://www.salon.com/2014/03/17/abusing_the_buddha_how_the_u_s_army_and_google_co_opt_mindfulness/

³¹¹ In July 2018, Tan abruptly stepped down as chair of the Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute (SIYLI), apparently over some precept-breaking issue in some relationship. In due course, he returned to Singapore as a local celebrity. On Tan’s return to Singapore, the local daily published a bowdlerized version of this NY Times article: [Opinion | The Morality of Meditation - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#). Also [Google’s former mindfulness guru steps down from nonprofit over ‘inappropriate behavior’ – ThinkProgress](#).

³¹² [Beyond McMindfulness | HuffPost Religion](#).

4.3 ASPECTS OF MODERN LAY BUDDHISM

4.3.1 Modern Buddhism in the US

4.3.1.1 After a bewildering survey of how McMindfulness exploits Buddhism and markets it as a sophisticated but ersatz Mindfulness Psychology, a watered-down version of Buddhist meditation, let us now get down to examine actual **meditation**—the “mindfulness” (*sati*) and the “concentration” (*samādhi*) of early Buddhism that has come down to us to this day.

Now, although we do have textual records of lay Buddhism in the Buddha’s time [3.3.1], we have very scanty records of lay practice in the Theravāda countries of Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Khmer, Laos or the eastern Himalaya communities (such as in Nepal or amongst the Chakma people). Traditionally, some of these lay communities go back to the earliest times, when Buddhism was introduced into their lands, or, in the case of the Himalayan communities, even as far back as to the Buddha’s time itself.

4.3.1.2 Other than the reports from local traditions, we have little reliable knowledge of the history of lay Buddhist meditation in Asia. Although we today often identify **meditation** as Buddhism, modern scholars claim that historical or ethnographical evidence shows that only a small minority of specialist monks and an insignificant number of laypeople and female renunciants have taken up serious meditation practice. It does, however, hold an important symbolic place in the local Buddhist traditions. This situation, however, does *not* account for the recent revival of meditation among monastics laity across the traditions, and its popularity globally.

Apparently, **lay practice of meditation** was rare until the revival movements beginning in the late 20th century in Myanmar and other Theravāda countries like Thailand,³¹³ when they began promoting meditation and setting up centres where lay Buddhists could learn and practise meditation based on the suttas and traditional Buddhist texts. Teachers who developed this new laicized approach to meditation, like Mahasi Sayadaw,³¹⁴ the Goenka Vipassana Movement,³¹⁵ and Ajahn Chah³¹⁶ were very influential in the West.

Around the same time, Japanese Zen teachers (technically they are laymen or those living lay lifestyles)³¹⁷ were also influential in the west, especially in the US, but were mostly unknown or ignored back in Japan. American seekers, especially those from the post-Hippie era of the 60’s, were drawn to Japanese Zen for 2 reasons: (1) the evangelizing efforts of D T Suzuki³¹⁸ [4.4.8.1], and (2) Zen rituals and exotic uniforms that gave seekers an aura of mystique and power status. Understandably, such groups in the US became, over time, more independent from the religious, institutional, social and ethical contexts in which the practices were once situated.

4.3.1.3 Scholars studying modern Buddhism in the US have noted that its social, ethical and political nature “so resemble those of mainstream consumer culture that they go largely unnoticed.”³¹⁹ Unlike most British Buddhists,³²⁰ American Buddhists tend to be drawn to a secularized (Vinaya-free)

³¹³ There is practically no revival of meditation among the Sri Lanka clergy, who are mostly devoted to academic Buddhism, “social engagement” (in worldly business), and overseas “missionary” work to get sponsors for their university career and vihara residence: see H L Seneviratne, *The Work of Kings*, Princeton, Princeton Univ Press: 1999; also SD 60.1c (8.2).

³¹⁴ On Mahasi Sayadaw, see SD 60.1b (2.4.5).

³¹⁵ On Goenka Vipassana, see SD 60.1b (2.4.10 f, 2.5); SD 60.1c (12).

³¹⁶ On Ajahn Chah and his global network of forest monastery, see SD 60.1b (5.12).

³¹⁷ On the laicization of Buddhism in Japan during the Meiji Reformation, see SD 60.1c (10), esp (10.4.3); on Suzuki (1.2.4; 8; 19.3).

³¹⁸ On D T Suzuki, see SD 60.1c (8.4).

³¹⁹ Sharf 2017:209.

³²⁰ See esp the case of the Samatha Trust and its branches: SD 60.1ab (6.2).

Buddhism, especially to charismatic teachers. Hence, US Buddhist groups, both the Zen and the Vajrayana, used the traditional term *saṅgha* (monastic community) loosely to mean what we would understand as “church,” “religious community” or both.

They were also known to freely use the terms “monks” and “nuns” even for their non-celibate lay teachers. This “open” attitude often meant that a teacher’s authenticity or acceptability was not his spirituality, but rather how well he drew and held his audience’s attention. As in the local Christian groups and communities, they tended to be drawn to a Buddhist teacher mostly by his **charisma**. Understandably, such an attitude often allowed cavalier, even licentious, conduct between teachers and students, often inviting improprieties and scandals (such as those of the 1990s) [4.3.1.4].

4.3.1.4 In the Buddha’s time, and certainly in the Buddhist texts of almost all the traditions, the term *saṅgha* always referred to a renunciant community of celibate monks and nuns. Robert Sharf was especially critical of this usage of *saṅgha* and its implications in other aspects of US Buddhism:

Note that, in the early period at least, the Buddhist institution—known as the *saṅgha*—comprised a renunciate community that embodied, quite literally, a critique of mainstream social values and cultural norms. For the sangha, liberation required “letting go,” and letting go did not mean to merely adopt a particular attitude or psychological frame, however important such a frame may be. Rather, it necessitated a radical change in the way one lived; one was required to opt out of family ties and worldly pursuits, and opt into an alternative, communal, celibate, and highly regulated lifestyle.

Modern teachers of mindfulness rarely make such demands of their students; the liberating—or if you will, therapeutic—benefits apparently do not require dramatic changes in the way one lives. Rather than enjoining practitioners to renounce carnal and sensual pleasure, mindfulness is touted as a way to more fulfilling sensual experiences. Rather than enjoining practitioners to renounce mainstream American culture, mindfulness is seen as a way to better cope with it.

There may be no better exemplar of this ethically dubious and politically reactionary stance than Tricycle Magazine, with its advertisements for expensive meditation gear, for dharmic dating services, dharmic dentists and accountants, and its implicit authorization of the entrepreneurial and commercial activities of countless dharma centers and self-styled Buddhist masters. The packaging of mindfulness in programs such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) is arguably a variant on the same theme.

(Sharf, “Is Mindfulness Buddhist? (And why it matters),” 2017:209)

The remarkably honest and true assessment of popular Buddhism in the US was written within a decade when American Buddhists, especially the women, were still reeling from the effects of the tragic and disastrous years when their highest leaders, the Zen senseis—Richard Baker and Eido Shimanō—and the Vajraguru Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and his Vajra Regent, Osel Tendzin, were embroiled in multiple sexual and financial scandals.³²¹

4.3.2 Our real task as lay Buddhists

4.3.2.1 The lesson from all this is very clear: if we want to live the Buddhist life, we must accept **the 3 jewels**—*the Buddha, the Dharma and the noble sangha*³²²—with wisdom and compassion. Accepting the 3 jewels with wisdom means that we must seek to well know the historical Buddha

³²¹ For a study, see **Bad friendship**, SD 64.17.

³²² The “noble sangha” refers to the spiritual community of streamwinners, once-returners, non-returners and arhats, who uphold the Dharma, and have wise faith in the Buddha: we go to them for refuge, meaning that we work to emulate them, and aspire to gain streamwinning.

Gotama, and follow his example of renouncing worldliness and seeking the Dharma suitable for us to the best of our ability. The Buddha is our one and only true teacher of the Dharma, but everyone and everything are teaching us, so long as we are wisely open to learning.

To be **wise** is to seek the true Dharma in the carefully coded oral teachings of the suttas of early Buddhism. To be **compassionate** is to share these suttas (their texts and translations) with others who may benefit from them. When the Buddha or his teaching is misrepresented, we should, with courage and wisdom, stand up to set things right, whether to gently and skilfully admonish others, or write an inspiring defence of the Dharma. To do all this, we must first be willing to learn the suttas and know our own mind.

4.3.2.2 Even though most of the Sangha members today are worldly, there are still some who are serious renunciants. These rare individuals are those who should be wholesomely supported and encouraged to teach Dharma. A Buddhist community's wholesome attitude to Sangha members is often vital in encouraging and upholding their moral conduct. For example, expensive or luxurious gifts and "red packets" [4.5.1.4] by devotees may be a display of faith, but this will only send the wrong signal to the Sangha members and condition them to become magnets for such gifts.

How we should inspire and encourage them in the Dharma to work to attain the path in this life itself? We too should diligently seek to understand how to aspire for streamwinning for ourself, while we are blessed with our humanity. The Dharma is still present in our world and life; but the law of change can derail us at any time. Now is the time for us to (re)turn to the Buddha Dharma.

4.3.2.3 Sangha members who see Buddhism as a huge market of opportunities often prepare themselves by attaining some academic qualification, attracting wealthy lay supporters, and setting up their own centres or house Viharas. Such set-up is little more than that of a privately owned "sole proprietorship" for a Buddhist business without need for keeping to the Vinaya.

The proper way is to form a registered trust or an elected council of capable Dharma-spirited lay Buddhists to manage the funds and assets, with a number of qualified Sangha members and trainees as resident teachers. Such Viharas should also have trained lay teachers who teach Dharma and also know how to conduct Buddhist rites, popular with the laity, such as marriage solemnization (monastics are not allowed to do this) and funeral rites.

If blessing rites are allowed, lay elders who are able to recite the blessing verses should be allowed to "bless" others too.³²³ In this way, *the teaching is put above the teacher*; where the Dharma-teacher is sacred, not simply because one wears a robe. In this way too, the Dharma work is assured of continuity, and not be a business enterprise in the "old style." This is the proper way of setting up a **Buddhist Vihara**.

4.4 BUDDHISM AND MODERN SCIENCE

4.4.1 Is Buddhism scientific?

4.4.1.1 Lay Buddhists, unlike good monastics, are, as a rule, engaged with the world. Lay Buddhism, however, is often more than just engaging with the world: it is engaged in with the world in specific and interesting ways. Since the laity is more connected with the world, they are more likely to see the challenges to Buddhism that arise from this engagement. One of the key engagements that lay Buddhism has with the world is through education and modern learning, especially through science.

An informed lay Buddhist, for example, sees early Buddhism—unlike most of later Buddhism, especially ethnic Buddhism—as being scientific in an **empirical** sense. Lay Buddhists are constantly reminded during Dharma talks and in their sutta readings that, for example, as Buddhists we should

³²³ As the congregation matures and is weaned away from priestcraft (such as those of the Sinhalese priests), there will be less, even *no*, need for this brahminical practice.

not blindly accept any teachings: we should investigate the teaching or claim in the manner as prescribed in the 10 doubtful points of **the Kesa,puttiya Sutta** (A 3.65).³²⁴

4.4.1.2 One of the attractive features of early Buddhism, also one of its key teachings, is that of **nonself** (*anattā*), that principle underlying all beings, states and things in this world as lacking any fixed or eternal essence [7.7.2]. On the contrary, everything that lives or exists is interconnected and changing. The ideas of quantum mechanics, even on a simple level, help us appreciate such a profound and futuristic vision. Since all existence is caught in a loop (*saṃsāra*), there is no question of a first beginning or Prime Mover. The notion of a Creator God, whether as an ineffable cosmic presence or as a first beginning would be redundant. Our mind is that supreme creator! (Dh 1.1 f)

It should be noted, however, that the Buddha accepts the existence of “**gods**” (*devas*) and non-humans, such as those of ancient Indian religions and mythologies. In the early Buddhist pantheon, these gods, spirits, even Māra (Death personified and the most violent of them), lose almost all their negative qualities and assume some level of humanity. The stories of these gods and Māra inspire us to be moral humans and to live Dharma-spirited lives.³²⁵

Those who still feel an attraction to the notion of some “other” power (mainly due to cultural or childhood conditionings) may continue to venerate, even worship, these deities as “powerful forces” or “ancestors.” In other words, these are provisional beliefs for those who still need them, but they act as spiritual bridges for such believers to be wise and compassionate (like the gods they worship). In other words, these are not dogmas, but once they have crossed such bridges, they see inner peace and truth.³²⁶

4.4.1.3 When we read the stories of gods, demons and non-humans, and how, as aliens, they are depicted in science fiction stories and space fiction movies, we can’t help noticing how remarkably alike they are. Indeed, even in the early Buddhist texts, they are depicted as beings inhabiting other realms of the universe, even in time-zones that are different from that of our own universe.³²⁷ In other words, even over 2,500 years ago, the Buddha speaks of **the relativity of time** in different parts of the inhabited universe, or should we say, universes.³²⁸

What’s even more interesting is that such stories in the suttas and commentaries seem to suggest that it is possible for us to communicate with these alien beings, that they are already in communication with some of us, such as the Buddha himself, the ancient arhats, even devout lay Buddhists. The common denominator in all these alien-human communication seems to be a deeply moral character and a good command of our mental powers through meditation. This is all speculative, of course, but, then again, in the (not too) distant future, you may be knowingly smiling as you read this. One wonders if our neck of the universe is like a wild jungle, red in tooth and claw, less evolved than the more cultured, kind and wise aliens in their distant quadrants.

4.4.1.4 The Buddhism that we most often see when we visit any of the ethnic Theravāda temple whether in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Khmer (Cambodia) or Laos, or any other country, is far from that of being a “scientific religion.” We are likely to see a bewildering array of images of Bud-

³²⁴ This text is popularly known as **the Kālāma Sutta** (A 3.65). On the 10 doubtful points, see A 3.65,3/1:18 (SD 35.4a).

³²⁵ **Brahmā**, the highest of the Brahminical Trinity (Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva) became the Buddha’s disciple and a non-returner: **Āyacana S** (S 6.1), SD 12.2; SD 54.18 (2.1.1.1). **Sakra**, the most violent hero yet lovable of the Vedic gods became a streamwinner: **Sakka,pañha S** (D 21), 54.8; SD 54.2 (3.2.3.6). Māra is overcome by knowledge, see (**Māra**) **Samiddhi S** (S 4.22), SD 36.11.

³²⁶ The recollection of deities (*devatā’nussati*) is a special meditation that even streamwinners habitually do to recollect how moral virtue and good actions are what make us gods and enjoy heavenly bliss.

³²⁷ On such allusions to aliens: SD 54.2 (4.1.4.3); SD 57.10 (1.3.3.2 passim).

³²⁸ On allusions to the relativity of time: **Pāyāsi S** (D 23,11.1-4), SD 39.4; **Pati,pujikāya Vatthu** (DhA 4.4), SD 54.15.

dhas, deva shrines, believers wearing Buddhist amulets and pendants they think have the power of protecting them from harm and bad luck, blessing chants and fortune-telling from the monks, even status of monks who are said to have miraculous powers (usually from their meditation), and so on.

On the other hand, an unsigned article in the International Encyclopaedia of Buddhism (edited by N K Singh, New Delhi, 1996), entitled “Religion without Speculation” contrasts Buddhism to “unscientific or speculative religion, the sort which is almost entirely the only kind known to the West” (18:45).

[Buddhism is] intellectual enlightenment, supreme intuition. And it is this which differentiates it from all other religions or philosophical systems: it is nonspeculative, scientific.

What Gotama did was not to devise a law or formulate a system, but to discover a law, to perceive a system. His part may be compared to that of Copernicus or Galileo, Newton or Harvey, in physical science

Buddhism extends the natural laws, the laws of causality to the mental or psychic domain, or, more exactly, perceives their operation in this sphere, and thereby disposes of the idea of supernatural or transcendental agencies working independent of or in contravention to the natural laws of the universe. (1996 18:47 f)

McMahan, in his essay, “Modernity and the early discourse of scientific Buddhism” (2004b), quotes this passage as exemplifying “one of the most important ways that Buddhism gained cultural currency in the West when it was introduced in the nineteenth century: through its representation as a religion uniquely compatible with modern science.”³²⁹

4.4.1.5 As we have already seen [4.4.1.3] these loud claims for Buddhism may not reflect ethnic Buddhism in general, but it certainly describes the “original” teachings of the Buddha, especially those preserved in the suttas. In fact, this is the vital textual Buddhism that the Buddhist reform movements in Asia, such as those in Sri Lanka and in Japan claim to champion. McMahan calls this **“the discourse of scientific Buddhism,”** on which Buddhist writers, mostly Westerners, have produced countless titles, popular and academic, with impressive references and sophisticated writings, from the late 20th century into our own times.³³⁰

The Dalai Lama, in an interview with The New York Times (Washington), famously declared:

“If science proves some belief of Buddhism wrong, then Buddhism will have to change. In my view, science and Buddhism share a search for the truth and for understanding reality. By learning from science about aspects of reality where its understanding may be more advanced, I believe that Buddhism enriches its own worldview.” (NY Times, 12 Nov 2005)

The Dalai Lama has voiced the minds of countless modern Buddhists, especially those who are aware of the progress of modern science. Indeed, the compatibility of Buddhism and modern science has not only become a highlight of popular Buddhist literature, but has also become a hypothesis in a large number of quite sophisticated experimental studies of the mind and meditation.³³¹

³²⁹ D L McMahan, “Modernity and the early discourse of scientific Buddhism,” *J of the American Academy of Religions* 72,4 2004b:897 f.

³³⁰ Amongst these works are: J W Hayward & F J Varela (eds), *Gentle Bridges: Conversation with the Dalai Lama on the Sciences of the Mind*, 1992; J Varela (ed), *Sleeping, Dreaming, and Dying*, 1997; D Goleman, *Healing Emotions* 1997, “Taming destructive emotions,” *Tricycle*, 2003; J H Austin, *Zen and the Brain*, 1998; Z Houshmand, R B Livingston, & B A Wallace (eds), *Consciousness at the Crossroads*, 1999; R J Davidson and A H Harrington (eds), *Vision of Compassion: Western scientists and Tibetan Buddhism examine human nature*, 2001; B A Wallace & A P Lutzker (eds), *Buddhism and Science*, 2003; Zajonc, *The New Physics and Cosmology*, 2004.

³³¹ See B A Wallace (ed), *Buddhism and Science: Breaking new ground*, Columbia, 2003. For a range of modern scientific studies of mindfulness, see F Didonna (ed), *Clinical Handbook of Mindfulness*, Springer, 2009. For other refs: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism_and_science.

4.4.1.6 Modern informed Buddhists readily reinterpret various ethnic or outdated teachings regarding Buddhism. Those familiar with the suttas understand that the Buddha himself has instructed us to discern the teachings as “**explicit**” (*nī’tattha*), that is, the essence of the early Buddhism, and as “**implicit**” (*neyy’attha*), teachings based on worldly conventions that have to be reinterpreted for our proper understanding and practice.³³² [7.5.2.1]

It is the second type of teaching that should be “updated” in accordance with modern science and learning. In this spirit, some Buddhists not only see Buddhism as being compatible with modern science, but even claim that it was a “scientific” teaching since the beginning. McMahan, in his 2004 paper, has usefully examined the “genealogy” of this idea, but here we will take only a glimpse of this development for a better understanding of our main theme: *an evolutionary psychology of mindfulness*. [4.4.6]

4.4.2 The Chicago World Fair: Race and religion

4.4.2.1 The World’s Parliament of Religions (Chicago, 1893) was the centre stage in the history of the discourse of scientific Buddhism. It was there that a young lay Buddhist missionary and reformer, **Anagarika Dharmapala** (1864-1933)³³³ articulately presented a modern and scientific Buddhism before a world audience. The Buddhism he presented there was in due course dubbed “Protestant Buddhism,”³³⁴ both for its strong anti-Christian rhetoric (especially against their missionizing) and its appropriation of ideas and values derived from Protestant Christianity. [4.4.4.1, 4.5.1.1]

After declaring that the Buddha rejected the notion of a “supreme Creator,” he went on to add that the Buddha accepted “the doctrine of evolution as the only true one, with corollary, the law of cause and effect.” His rejection of the God-idea was clearly in defiance of his largely Western Christian audience. Allying Buddhism with evolution he impressed those scientifically inclined in his audience to see Buddhism as a modern religion. He further mentioned that the Buddha was familiar with the idea of “infinite sum of total energy,” embodied by unconditioned space (*ākāśa*), 2,500 years ago but only recently discovered by the West.

4.4.2.2 Dharmapala’s strategy in harmonizing Buddhism with science, should be appreciated in the light of two historical realities. **The first reality** was that Dharmapala, educated in British-run schools, was quite familiar with the characterizations of Asians prevalent in the West in the 18th and 19th centuries. Virtually all western literature of that period that made reference to non-Anglo-Saxon peoples tended to see them as being inferior and heathen. The typical Victorian characterization of the “Oriental mind” was that it lacked intellectual ability, was plagued by an excess of imagination, and was indolent and childlike.

Of the Sinhalese, British army surgeon and Victorian polymath, John Davy (1790-1868)³³⁵ wrote: “In intellectual acquirements, and proficiency in arts and sciences, they are not advanced beyond the darkest period of the middle ages. Their character, I believe, on the whole, is low, tame, and undecided: with few strong lights or shades in it, with few prominent virtues or vices.”³³⁶

³³² See SD 60.1c (20.1.1): <http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/60.1c-The-rhetoric-of-Buddhist-experience-piya.pdf>

³³³ SD 60.1c (1.2.2). The other Buddhist proponent was the Zen teacher Soyen Shaku, who also presented Buddhism in similar tone, ie, by countering Christian influence and promoting Buddhism as being scientific. However, Soyen (and his protégé D T Suzuki) had an agenda of their own: to promote Zen Buddhism and Japan as the ideal religion and culture respectively. See SD 60.1c (10.4).

³³⁴ See Gombrich & Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed*, Princeton, 1988:202-239 & SD 60.1c (7.1).

³³⁵ Younger brother of British chemist, Humphrey Davy

³³⁶ John Davy, *An Account of the Interior of Ceylon and of Its Inhabitants, with Travels in That Island*. [1821] 2nd ed. Ottawa, 1990:41; qu in P Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism*, Cambridge, 1988:43.

Such condescension was used to justify colonial control over Asia, a takeover seen to be the only hope for the redemption of the Oriental, that is, through Christianity and Western culture. Dharmapala was understandably inflamed by such characterizations, particularly of his own people, and he wrote and spoke prodigiously to combat them.

Buddhism itself was often characterized in 19th-century western literature as pessimistic, nihilistic, devoid of any power for promoting goodness, and in a state of degradation and decline. Buddhism of the time was viewed as “idolatry, benighted superstition, and mechanical ritualism,” and “the nihilistic nadir of Indian pessimism.”³³⁷ Hence, presenting Buddhism as being modern and scientific was a fitting strategy at refuting this negative view.

4.4.2.3 The 2nd reality we should carefully note for understanding Dharmapala’s presentation of Buddhism as a modern and scientific religion lays in the very nature of the World’s Parliament of Religions itself. Chicago’s World Fair (1 May 1882-30 Oct 1893)³³⁸ was to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’s arrival in the New World in 1492; hence, it was formally known as the World’s Columbian Exposition.³³⁹

Both Robert Rydell (1984) and Richard Seager (1995)³⁴⁰ have convincingly described the exhibitions and their activities as projecting a liberal Utopian vision of late-19th-century America in which white America was vividly contrasted with “exotic” and “less civilized” peoples. The Fair’s physical layout were divided between the “White City,” a neoclassical Utopia celebrating the triumphs of Columbus and White America, and the Midway Plaisance, comprising exhibits representing the non-western world.

The latter included large-scale cameo recreations of far-away places: a north African village; “Cairo Street,” with a bazaar, dancing girls, and camel rides; a Chinese theater featuring a Confucian play and a fortune teller. Victorian ladies and gentlemen could meander through the exhibition and gaze at the spectacle of the world’s “primitive cultures,” complete with natives specially shipped in for the event, right in the heart of Chicago.

The ideology behind such notions was the evolutionary model of religion, according to which all the world religions were but stages leading up to the most highly evolved form of religion and society, that is, Christianity and the West. Although the Christian organizers of the Fair were liberal and enthusiastic about representing non-western cultures, their notion of progressive revelation compelled them to relegate these cultures well *below* their own culture and religion (Seager: xxii-xxiii).

Hence, it is especially ironic and unexpected that the 2 Buddhist contributors to the Parliament presented Buddhism to the contrary. Buddhism was instead shown not only to be in accord with what educated Westerners believed to be the most advanced scientific thinking of the day, but also as having anticipated such thinking by over 2,500 years. This is the start of the western love affair with modern Buddhism.

4.4.3 The doctrine of evolution

4.4.3.1 Despite the Christian bias of the organizers of the World Fair, the presentation of Buddhism actually aroused the curiosity of most of its patrons.³⁴¹ However, their interest was not in the living tradition (which was far from being modern or scientific), but in the romantic figure of the

³³⁷ McMahan 2004b:904.

³³⁸ Chicago’s World Fair (1882-1893): <https://www.loc.gov/item/98687181/>.

³³⁹ It actually marked the start of European occupation of N America, resulting in the displacement of the native Indian tribes from their own lands, and the exploitation, enslavement and massacre of thousands of them by the White settlers. In the 130 ensuing years following first contact, Native America lost some 95% of its native population.

³⁴⁰ Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair*, Chicago, 1984; Seager, *The World’s Parliament of Religions*, Indiana, 1995.

³⁴¹ The whole Fair covered an area of 690 acres (280 hectares), and attracted 27,300,000 visitors. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World%27s_Columbian_Exposition.

Buddha, popularized by Victorian poet, Edwin Arnold's poem, *The Light of Asia* (1879), and to the Buddha's original, "pure" teachings, which they believed had later become obscured by time and adulterated by the ignorant.

Some scholars, more interested in Buddhism as some field of their study, seemed disappointed at this choice of Buddhism, that, as if it was unnatural for them to see Buddhism for the best it can offer them. The West's long tradition of philosophical and scientific quest, and centuries of suffering at the hands of Christian powers, more than well prepared them for this happy surprise: that there was a religion that teaches peace for all beings (not just humans) and wisdom for all. Any informed Buddhist reading this today is likely to be impressed at the Westerner's penchant for seeking the best in humanity.

In the mid-19th century, Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace (the latter working in Singapore and the regions nearby)³⁴² formulated **the theory of evolution**—that is, biological evolution by natural selection—for modern science. Now, the West is offered **the doctrine of evolution by natural selection**, that is, early Buddhism, which as it were, leads us on where biological evolution seems to have stopped—with our human evolution—Buddhism leads us on the path of an inner, spiritual evolution by our naturally selecting what is good, the real and true, that frees us even beyond religion itself.

4.4.3.2 The 60 over years of the Victorian age was the 2nd longest era in British history.³⁴³ Charles Dickens clearly felt the Victorian Zeitgeist when, at the opening of his novel, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), he writes:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.

For us, looking back at the rise of Buddhism in the West, we would perhaps switch the two ending clauses around, and happily end with: "It was a spring of hope" with the advent of Buddhism. This, however, would yet take its time to blossom. At its worst, it was a time of moral standards, attitudes, or conduct that would be considered stuffy, prudish, hypocritical. At best, the Victorians had a passion for documenting, cataloguing and classifying the world around them, and this was helpful for open learning and social progress.

The Victorians were beginning to document, catalogue, edit, translate and publish the early Buddhist texts.³⁴⁴ However, even by the end of the 19th century, there were very few suttas available in reliable English translations, and books of Buddhism were mostly skewed writings by unsympathetic non-Buddhists (such as Christian missionaries) or imaginative, at best, idealistic, accounts of a faith which the writers did not practise anyway.

A few more generations of oddball Buddhism and their charlatan Gurus would have to pass before we reach our own time. In some ways, they were the best for those times: they did what the natives could not do, but not because they had mastered Buddhism—but simply because they had white skin and blinding visions. So conditioned by the colonial colours were we, the natives, that we continued to instinctively react to them like lost deer before oncoming traffic lights in the blinding night.

³⁴² John van Wyhe, *Dispelling the Darkness: Voyage in the Malay Archipelago and the discovery of evolution by Wallace and Darwin*, Singapore: NUS, 2013.

³⁴³ Victoria (r 1837-1901) reigned for 63 years and 7 months; Elizabeth II (r 1952-2022), for 70 years and 214 days: the longest of any British monarchs, and the longest verified reign of any female monarch in history.

³⁴⁴ This was done by the Pali Text Society, founded in 1881 by Thomas William Rhys Davids, who discovered and learned Pali while serving in the British civil service in Ceylon (British Sri Lanka).

4.4.4 Protestant Buddhism?

4.4.4.1 The kind of modern Buddhism that we, as a rule, see Sinhalese monks and their followers preach today, has been labelled “**Protestant Buddhism**” [4.4.2.1]. Its story goes back to the late 19th century with the arrival of 2 Western Buddhists: US military officer, journalist, lawyer and Freemason Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907) and Russian aristocrat occultist and writer Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891). They were reportedly the first 2 best-known Westerners to have formally embraced Buddhism, which, in its own way, gave a boost, to the popularity of Buddhism in the West.

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891) became famous as a spirit medium. She claimed to have met some spiritual adepts, “the Masters of the Ancient Wisdom,” who transported her to Tibet, where she supposedly gained wisdom that was a synthesis of religion, philosophy and science! In 1873, she moved to the US, where she met Olcott. They co-founded the Theosophical Society (1874), with Olcott as its first president, and Blavatsky as its ideologue.³⁴⁵ (Prothero 1996:48 f)

Theosophy (“God-wisdom”) is an obscure (hence, convenient) term for whatever its preachers believe to be right or true, and can thus become authorities on any religion, including Buddhism. In due course, Blavatsky and Olcott were invited to Ceylon by Buddhist monks. There they officially converted to Buddhism in May 1880³⁴⁶—apparently the first from the United States to do so.³⁴⁷ Touring the island, they were thronged by crowds intrigued by these unusual Westerners who embraced Buddhism rather than proselytize Christianity. Their presence proved a boost to Sinhalese nationalist self-esteem.

4.4.4.2 Blavatsky never became an active member of the Buddhist faith, but Olcott went on to promote Buddhism in Japan, South Asia, Europe, and North America. Even for Olcott, his Buddhism was really a creolization still deeply rooted in American Protestantism, with a vocal veneer that was South Asian and Buddhist (Prothero 1995:281 n). Prothero, in his book, *The White Buddhist* (1996) reveals that:

Olcott’s Buddhism was a nominal Buddhism, shorn of ostensibly peculiar beliefs and rituals that Olcott thought were extraneous to “real” Buddhism. Second, and perhaps more importantly, Olcott’s creole faith combined Protestant and Buddhist elements in a distinctive way. While the lexicon of his faith was almost entirely Buddhist, its grammar was largely Protestant. If you think of the religious beliefs and behaviors of Olcott as a form of discourse, it will become apparent that at the more superficial lexical level, Olcott echoed his Asian Buddhist acquaintances both in words and in actions. At this level, Olcott was able to leap out of his American Protestant past, to utter the correct words, perform the appropriate actions, and thus to pass not only as a Buddhist but also, at various times, as a Hindu, a Muslim, a Jew, and even a Zoroastrian! But at the more enduring grammatical level of deep structural and unconscious assumptions, Olcott remained an American Protestant. Glimpse Olcott for a moment and he looks like a Buddhist apologist; but survey him more carefully and you will discern a Protestant missionary. (Prothero 1996:9)

Olcott’s Buddhism was a “creole” version of the original, “heavily edited and revised version.” Although for him, Buddhism was the best window into the universal or highest Truth, but like Paul

³⁴⁵ Stephen Prothero, *The White Buddhist*, Indiana, 1996:48 f.

³⁴⁶ Marion Meade, *Madame Blavatsky: The woman behind the myth*, NY: Putnam, 1980:214 f; Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, Albany: State Univ of New York Press, 1994:321 f; Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Helena Blavatsky*, Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2004:12; Gary Lachman, *Madame Blavatsky: The mother of modern spirituality*, NY: Jeremy P Tarcher/Penguin, 2012:193 f.

³⁴⁷ Lori Pierce, “Origins of Buddhism in North America,” in (edd) Keller, Ruether & Cantlon, *Ency of Women and Religion in North America*. Indiana, 2006:637.

Carus,³⁴⁸ Olcott saw no tradition (not even Buddhism) as having exclusive possession of it. Even though he had taken refuge in the 3 jewels (it was fascinating and ego-boosting being at the centre stage of the adoring native Buddhist public), but “this identity was subsumed under his allegiance to the more universal vision of Theosophy.”³⁴⁹ Buddhism was, for him, the best representative of the primal, perennial tradition:

Our Buddhism was that of the Master-Adept Gautama Buddha, which was identically the Wisdom Religion of the Aryan Upanishads, and the soul of all ancient faiths.

(Olcott 1974-75,³⁵⁰ vol 2:168 f)

4.4.4.3 Olcott also gave a 3rd sense to the term, “Protestant Buddhism,” that is, he was still profoundly Protestant at heart despite the magisterial Buddhist exterior that attracted respect and adoration from Asian Buddhists wherever he went. Clearly, it was the charisma attributed to him that moved him to work so dearly not only to unite the clergy of Ceylon, divided by sect and caste, but to reform their Buddhism from its pagan and superstitious ways to the Buddha’s true path (as he saw it).

He travelled throughout SE Asia and Japan, hoping to unite the various schools of Buddhism, especially the Mahāyāna and the Theravādā. Through the Theosophical Society, he attempted to reform Buddhism and Hinduism, and at times, even Zoroastrianism and Islam. In due course, he even worked to hold a world conference to unite all the races and religions into a single “Brotherhood of humanity” he dreamed of in his vision to uplift mankind itself.

Perhaps, Olcott, in his overenthusiasm, was unaware that this task was already done by Unitarianism, whose well-known credo was: “the Fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of Man, the Leadership of Jesus, Salvation by Character, and the Progress of Mankind Onward and Upward Forever.”³⁵¹ Clearly, the Sinhalese Buddhists and other Asian Buddhists who knew and admired Olcott never really knew what kind of Buddhist he was. Then, again, do we really know what kind of Buddhist we are ourselves?

4.4.5 Meditation and science

4.4.5.1 There are at least 2 highly significant developments in the history of human knowledge in recent years. **The 1st most significant development** is the engagement between science and Buddhism at the highest levels—between leading scientists and the Dalai Lama, learned monks and lay Buddhist practitioners—in “Dialogues” or conferences discussing topics of common interest such as the mind, consciousness, emotions, mental health and related topics. In important ways, these Dialogues allowed further and deeper engagements of the scientists, especially the mind and behaviour specialists, in the scientific study of experienced and proficient Buddhist meditators, exploring the final frontier: consciousness.

The most significant development at this early stage in the engagement between modern science and Buddhism was a total of 33 **Mind and Life Dialogues** between mind scientists and Buddhists led by the Dalai Lama (1987-2019), and the founding of the Mind & Life Institute in 1991, based in Charlottesville, VA.³⁵² At the forefront of its activities, the Mind and Life Institute³⁵³ hosted conferences and sponsored empirical researches on the scientifically discernible effects of Buddhist

³⁴⁸ On Paul Carus, see SD 60.1c (1.2.4).

³⁴⁹ McMahan, 2004b:920-922.

³⁵⁰ Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves: The history of the Theosophical Society*. [1895-1935] 6 vols. Adyar, IN: Theosophical Publishing House, 1975-75.

³⁵¹ Prothero 1996: ix, 6, 28.

³⁵² <https://www.mindandlife.org/>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mind_%26_Life_Institute.

³⁵³ For a summary of the Conferences procedures, see SD 17.8c (9).

meditation and contemplative practices.³⁵⁴ Participants have published a number of books on the Institute's Conferences with the Dalai Lama and on the results of empirical research.³⁵⁵

4.4.5.2 The 2nd significant development in the modern engagement between science and Buddhism is that **meditation** itself has come to be described as a kind of scientific technique. This draws on the rather widespread epistemic assertion that Buddhism (that is, meditation) studies "natural law" or the "law of causality" as they operate in the psyche. Buddhist meditation is presented as an interior science parallel to—and in some ways superseding—empirical science, one that not only brings peace of mind and greater awareness, but also aspires to verifiable knowledge. This interpretation goes back at least to the work of Dharmapala at the World's Parliament of Religions (Chicago 1893) [4.4.2.1] and continues to be popular among modern Buddhists too.

Contemporary scholar and Dharma teacher of Tibetan Buddhism, B Alan Wallace, for instance, asserts that "Buddhism, like science ... posits a wide array of testable hypotheses and theories concerning the nature of the mind and its relation to the physical environment. These theories have allegedly been tested and experientially confirmed numerous times over the past twenty-five hundred years, by means of duplicable meditative techniques."³⁵⁶ (2003:8).

He characterizes advanced meditators as investigators performing repeatable experiments, making "discoveries ... based on firsthand experience," then subjecting them to "peer review by their fellow contemplatives, who may debate the merits or defects of the reported findings" (2003:9).

4.4.5.3 As a rule, religion and science are fundamentally incompatible. They disagree profoundly on how we know ourselves and the world. Science is based on observation and reasoning through observation. Religion, or most religions, assume that human beings can access a deeper level of information that is available by neither observation nor reason.

As far as the Buddha's teachings on the physical world (animate and inanimate) goes, they are clearly empirical when we compare them with the ideas of other religions. The Buddha refuses to speculate on the first cause, rejects the Creator-idea (not because it favours atheism but simply because there is no such Creator), and refuses to speculate on issues that are beyond reasoning and thought. The early Buddhist teachings characterize all existence, living and non-living as being impermanent, unsatisfactory and nonself [4.1.5.0].

Despite teaching such empirical ideas, we should not say that Buddhism, even early Buddhism, is "scientific." It is simply anachronistic to do so: it's like saying Shakespeare composed his play with a word processor. The most significant difference between early Buddhism and modern science (we often forget to specify the kind of science we mean) is that early Buddhism has a clear set of effective practices (moral precepts, mindfulness and concentration methods), and profound wisdom (such as the 4 noble truths, the noble eightfold path, dependent arising and the 5 aggregates).³⁵⁷

4.4.5.4 Science, even modern science, on the other hand, is always revising itself and seeking new information about the world, even the nature of knowledge, the mind and consciousness. In other words, science and Buddhism (especially early Buddhism) have different purposes: **science** seeks to know the material world in empirical and measurable ways; **Buddhism** seeks to know the mind, which is experienced as immeasurable, yet empirical, and this quest is the basis for self-discipline, self-knowing and self-liberation. [4.4.1.5]

On account of the investigative and empirical nature of early Buddhism, whatever wholesome learning we can get from philosophy and science often helps us in a better understanding of it. On

³⁵⁴ On how scientists study the living brain, incl CAT scans, MRI, SPECT, etc: SD 17.8c (6.7).

³⁵⁵ See eg: Hayward & Varela 1992. Goleman 1997, 2003a. Varela 1997; Houshmand, Livingston & Wallace 1999; Davidson & Harrington 2001; Zajonc 2004. [4.4.1.4 n]

³⁵⁶ Introduction, in Wallace (ed), *Buddhism and Science*, 2003.

³⁵⁷ On the issues behind some Buddhist leaders promoting Buddhism as being "scientific," see eg D L McMahan, "Buddhism and the epistemic discourses of modernity," 2008a:45-47.

the other hand, early Buddhism, especially its teachings on morality, mind and meditation are being used and studied by philosophy specialists and mind scientists. Although this engagement is mostly academic, it benefits both parties by an openness and common curiosity for understanding the mind and mind-healing that are vital aspects of early Buddhist training and human progress in general. This is also a remarkable development in the dialogue between Buddhism and science, preparing ourselves for a futuristic level of learning and understanding of life and the universe. This is the kind of progress described by scientists like Albert Einstein when he says:

The religion of the future will be a cosmic religion. It should transcend a personal God and avoid dogmas and theology. Covering both the natural and the spiritual, it should be based on a religious sense arising from the experience of all things, natural and spiritual, as a meaningful unity. Buddhism answers this description.

(Einstein, *Los Angeles Times*, 1954)³⁵⁸

It is uncertain whether this attribution is correct or true, but the sentiment expressed clearly reflects what Einstein possibly saw as early Buddhism.

4.4.6 Where Buddhism and science may meet

4.4.6.1 In matters regarding the world, even our inner world—the mind and consciousness—Buddhism (that is, the modern Buddhists) tries to be compatible with modern science, or should we, with some care, say: good modern science. Yet, Buddhism, in the hands of those still touched by greed, hate and delusion, will spawn a Buddhism of greed, a Buddhism of hate, a Buddhism of delusion, as we keep seeing throughout history. Similarly, science in the wrong hands, misused by the powerful, can be disastrous and deleterious to society. Buddhism may then be merely a more polite, pleasant justifiable way of harming ourselves!

While science looks *outwards* and *measures* the world (here meaning our 6 senses and their respective objects), Buddhism (as the Buddha Dharma) teaches us to look *within* and experience **the immeasurable** beyond our senses. Quantum physics seems to be heading the way of the early Buddhist vision of the immeasurable. But this is not nirvana (it is best not to compare what we have not experienced with a worldly discipline): this is the principle of **nonself**. Perhaps, the discoveries and explanations of quantum physics will, in time, help us better explain and understand this profound key Buddhist principle, this natural law of the universe neither well understood nor fully recognized by science.

4.4.6.2 There is an interesting commentarial teaching that suggests early Buddhism accepting the idea that there are other forces in the universe, which the Buddha considers to be spiritually significant, and which are purely, in the modern sense, said to be “physical” or even “natural,” that has nothing to do with spiritual development. The fact that there is such a teaching, even if it is commentarial, is itself a remarkable development in religious history.

The Sīvaka Sutta (S 36.21) records the Buddha as rejecting the notion that “everything is due to past karma,” which is a form of determinism. In simple terms, what we are is the result of *both* past karma and present conditions: which means that we can modify, even prevent, the fruition of at least some of our karma. The Commentary to this Sutta then explains that karma is only *one* of **the 5 natural orders** (*pañca,niyāma*),³⁵⁹ which are as follows:³⁶⁰

³⁵⁸ Further, see SD 17.2a (1.1.1).

³⁵⁹ *Niyāma* means “constraint, certainty,” referring to the certainty of what is to come or the fixedness of things, ie, the natural laws of the universe. In Mahāyāna, however, the BHS cognate *nyama* has a theological sense, referring to the development of compassion that overcomes the faults of the Hīnayāna, and is unique to the Bodhisattva Path. It is “the fixed condition” of a Bodhisattva, ie, his “distinctive way of salvation.” (Princeton BDict: *niyāma*).

- (1) The natural order of heat (or energy) (*utu,niyāma*), that is, temperature (heat and cold) conditioning our being as well as nature. In modern terms, this would include all the laws of physics.
- (2) The natural order of heredity (*bīja,niyāma*), literally, “the order of seeds,” that is, living things (conscious and non-conscious) propagate themselves, and their continuing resemblance (genetics).
- (3) The natural order of karma (*kamma,niyāma*), that is, “the order of volition (or will),” concern all actions, past, present and future, in the form of thought, word and deed, and the potentiality of producing good or bad effects in similar manner. In early Buddhism, karma is a kind of evolutionary mechanism by which the mind evolves or devolves in a human (mixture of pleasure and pain), subhuman (mostly suffering) or divine state (mostly pleasure), a cycle that continues even after death, that is, with rebirth. This cyclic existence only ends with the attaining of nirvana, the death-free.
- (4) The natural order of mental processes (*citta,niyāma*), literally, “the order of thought,” governs the orderly sequence of the cognitive process, and shapes our action, speech, and health (or ill-health). Included here are psychic phenomena, such as telepathy, teleportation, telekinesis, teleaesthesia, retrocognition, premonition, clairvoyance, clairaudience, materialization and thought-reading.
- (5) The natural order of nature itself (*dhamma,niyāma*), which is basically “causal conditionality” (*idap,paccayatā*), that is, the principle behind dependent arising (SA 2:40).³⁶¹ It includes other events connected with nature, such as the natural phenomena occurring at the birth, in the life and at the death of buddhas. It includes the “act of truth” or asseveration (*sacca,kiriya*), and also gravity, instincts, plant tropisms and nature itself.

(DA 2:432; DhsA 272)

Such teachings, understandably, gives early Buddhism great latitude in accommodating scientific theories and discoveries to explain, even reconstruct, the material or non-mental aspects of existence and reality, all of which are regarded as “implicit” (*neyy’attha*) [4.4.1.5] or “provisional” (*pariyāyena*)³⁶² teachings, whose senses need to be interpreted or reinterpreted according to the contexts and the times.

4.4.6.3 Why do some Buddhists see the need for Buddhism to be “compatible” with science?

Before answering this question, let us examine it more closely and ask: What is the implication or cost of holding such a view?

In order to make Buddhism compatible with science, Buddhist modernism, it seems, must accept a Cartesian dualistic view of the world—that the body and the mind are separate entities. Theoretically, most modern scientists find it difficult to defend Cartesian dualism. Empirically, when they conduct experiments, or actually speak of the mind, they find that often, covertly at least, they have to make dualistic statements, especially on the possibility of understanding neural mechanisms of human consciousness. This difficulty exists, and is compounded by the reality that even modern science is still unclear and divided on what really is the mind. Descartes’ idea still haunts much of modern Western learning.³⁶³

Scientifically inclined Buddhists thus have to see the world as comprising two contrasting realities: the immaterial, spiritual world of the mind, on the one hand, which is the proper domain of religion, and the physical or material world on the other hand, a world governed by mechanistic laws, which is the domain of science. Even when we accept this world-view, Buddhism is compatible with science only insofar as it is relegated to the realm of *inner experience*.

³⁶⁰ See SD 5.6 (2).

³⁶¹ See **Paccaya S** (S 12.20) @ SD 39.5 (1.1.2.3).

³⁶² Opp *nippariyāyena*, “non-relative, specific”: SD 3.9 (7.5.1); SD 50.25 (1.4); SD 56.11 (3.1); **Pariyāya nip-pariyāya** SD 68.2.

³⁶³ See his *Discourse on Method* (1637). For details, see SD 2.16 (3.1.1); SD 56.4 (3.3.9).

4.4.6.4 As Sharf has noted,³⁶⁴ religion (including Buddhism), understood this way, has no purchase in the empirical world. Buddhist rituals, for example, have value only indirectly—as a way to bring about psychological change and spiritual growth. Hence, many Western Buddhists are suspicious of religious **rituals**, or they turn to non-religious rituals (that perhaps reflects some kind of mental pathology).³⁶⁵ Yet, when we downplay rituals, we risk weakening our bonds to community and tradition—this entails a great loss in human and social terms.

Sharf thinks that most Buddhist teachers throughout history would have found the Cartesian view of the world to be untenable. In discarding everything that doesn't fit with our modern view, we compromise the tradition's capacity to critique this modern view. After all, Buddhism developed in a very different historical and cultural context from modern society, whether oriental, westernized, southern or African. Traditional Buddhist epistemology, for example, simply does not accept the Cartesian notion of an unbridgeable gap between mind and matter. Most Buddhist systems hold that the mind and its objects arise interdependently, so there is no easy way to separate our understanding of the world from the world itself.

We will now examine how far this last statement is true, if at all.

4.4.7 Non-duality in early Buddhism

4.4.7.1 Now, back to the question: What is the cost of attempting to see Buddhism as being compatible with science? It has to do with seeing the world in terms of a duality [4.4.6.3], which actually works against the drift of the Buddha Dharma. **The Kaccā(ya)na,gotta Sutta** (S 12.15) records the Buddha as making this statement on the duality of worldly views, thus:

“This world, Kaccāna, mostly depends upon a duality: upon (the notion of) **existence** and (the notion of) **non-existence**. (S 12.15/2:17), SD 6.13 (2)³⁶⁶

Although this statement does not exactly use the words “mind” and “matter,” yet it actually goes deeper than that. It underpins the whole notion of ontology as a **duality**: to hold that “all exists” (*sabbam atthi*) is one extreme wrong view; to hold that “nothing exists” (*sabbam n’atthi*) is the other extreme. They are the extreme views of eternalism (*sassata*) and of annihilationism (*uccheda*), respectively.

According to the Kaccā(ya)na,gotta Sutta, “Not following either of these extremes, the Tathagata teaches the Dharma by the middle” (*ete te ubho ante anupagamma majjhena tathāgato dhammam deseti*). The “middle” here refers to dependent arising (*paṭicca samuppāda*): body and mind arise by way of mutual conditioning, that is, as “name” (*nāma*) and “form” (*rūpa*).³⁶⁷

The Nidāna Vibhaṅga Sutta (S 12.2) defines “name-and-form” (*nāma,rūpa*) as follows:

11 And what, bhikshus, is **name-and-form** (*nāma,rūpa*)?

Bhikshus, feeling, perception, volition, contact, and attention: this is called **name**.

11.2 And the 4 great elements and the material form derived from the 4 great elements: this is called **form**.

Thus, this is name and this is form, and (together) they are called name-and-form.

(S 12.2,11/2 3 f) + SD 5.15 (12)

³⁶⁴ Robert Sharf, interview, “Losing our religion,” *Tricycle*, 2007b:46.

³⁶⁵ We will examine this fascinating aspect of Buddhism and religion in SD 60.1e Delusion and experience.

³⁶⁶ This statement recurs in **Acela Kassapa Sutta** (S 12.17/2:20), SD 18.15; **Aññātara Brāhmaṇa Sutta** (S 12.46/2:75 f), SD 83.9; **(Sabba) Jāṇussoṇī Sutta** (S 12.47/2:76 f), and **Lokāyatika Sutta** (S 12.48/2:77), SD 17.15.

³⁶⁷ See **Dependent arising**, SD 5.12.

Very simply, “**name**” (*nāma*)—how we perceive—consists of sense-experiences (based on the 5 senses), and “**form**” (*rūpa*) comprises whatever that is perceived, that is, the sense-objects. Now, the (Nidāna) Vibhaṅga Sutta (S 12.2) above, says that *nāma* is an aggregate of mental factors involved in cognitive processes: feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), volition (*cetanā*), contact (*phassa*) and attention (*manasikāra*). They are called “**name**” because “they contribute to the process of cognition by which objects are subsumed under the naming designations.” [1.2.8]

In other words, while *nāma* is centred on the mind (*citta*), *rūpa* is centred on the 4 primary elements of “matter,” earth (solidity), water (cohesiveness), fire (heat) and wind (motion). In such a scheme of things, there is no dualism of a mental “substance” versus a physical “substance”: *nāma* and *rūpa* each are thus interacting clusters of impermanent processes.³⁶⁸

It should further be noted that, in the suttas, *nāma, rūpa* does not include consciousness (*viññāṇa*), which is actually its condition, and the two are mutually dependent, like 2 sheaves of reeds leaning against one another.³⁶⁹ Consciousness, then, is our awareness, experiencing whatever that is going on in the mind. The mind perceives some kind of external form (sense-objects), and conceives mental objects [1.1.1]. In either case, the mind then “names” these experiences through the 6 sense-bases (the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind). Following a feeling, “contact” (*phassa*), that is, actual “sensing,” then arises, from which arises craving, and so on in the dependent arising cycle.³⁷⁰

4.4.7.2 A bit of imagination will help us to understand how early Buddhism works, how the Buddha teaches us to experience the mind and understand it. He is like a musical maestro who is teaching us how to play a profound piece of musical work. Some discussion may help, but this only goes so far; we need to play and feel the music for ourselves. The Buddha guides us with his teachings, and we get better as we practise (mindfulness) and perform (meditation) ourselves. Scholars may carefully observe us, and even know some technical terms on how the music works; they write and publish books on the technique and performance, and the music scholars discuss and debate the finer points. But none of these come even close to actually playing and listening to the music itself.

In this spirit, we should study the Kaccā(ya)na, gotta Sutta with **the Puppha (or Vaddha) Sutta** (S 22.94), which opens with this passage:

Monks, I do not quarrel with the world; rather, it is the world that quarrels with me.
A proponent of the Dharma does not quarrel with anyone in the world.
Of that which the wise in the world agree upon as not existing, I too say that it does not exist.
And to that which the wise in the world agree upon as existing, I too say that it exists.
(S 22.94,3/3:138)

Generally speaking, this passage means that, to facilitate discussion (what if or as if situations), we employ ideas and terms. We cannot define anything into existence. No matter how well we define such terms, it does not mean that those states or things exist. We should study and agree upon what we all see as universal qualities, and from such common and true experiences of reality, we then formulate universal principles, or at least have some useful discussion of that reality.

4.4.7.3 The Buddha goes on to explain that “what the wise in the world agree upon as not existing” are **the 5 aggregates** as being “permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change” (*niccam dhuvaṃ sassatam avipariṇāma, dhammam*), but that what the wise in the world agree as existing” is that **the 5 aggregates** (form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness) as being “impermanent, suffering, subject to change” (*aniccam dukkhaṃ vipariṇāma, dhammam*). Both the body

³⁶⁸ See P Harvey, “The Mind-Body Relationship in Pali Buddhism, A Philosophical Investigation,” *Asian Philosophy* 3,1 1993b:31-33.

³⁶⁹ **Nala, kalāpiya S** (S 12.67/2:114), SD 12.67; also **Mahā Nidāna S** (M 12,21-22/2:63), SD 5.17.

³⁷⁰ See **Nidāna Vibhaṅga S** (S 12.2,3), SD 5.15. See also **Dependent arising**, SD 5.16.

and the mind are impermanent; being impermanent, they interact with one another, which is what we really are: a conscious body (*sa,viññāṇaka kāya*).³⁷¹

We may speak of mind *and* body to facilitate discussion, but when we see them as a duality, we imagine that they each have some kind of essential existence, and this creates language problems when we try to see how they exist or work together. The early Buddhists see mind and body as working together and not as separate entities.

There is an interesting example from science, when we see mind and matter as “energy,” that is, they interact with one another. Dualism does not work here because it violates the well-established principle of the conservation of energy. Interactionists argue that mind and matter causally interact. The early Buddhists would fully agree with this.

4.4.8 The teacher or the teaching?

4.4.8.1 Often enough, we can see how a celebrity teacher or well-known writer of Buddhism, resting on their laurels, so to speak, feel entitled to speak of Buddhism (such as the suttas, meditation and Vinaya) “as it should really be,” that is, as revised in accordance with their fiat and fancy. Often too, these over-confident figures failed to see how wrong they were, until some conscientious scholars, putting the teaching above the teacher, carefully and helpfully explain why such arrogance and hubris do not pay.

Criticizing D T Suzuki,³⁷² Sharf writes:

There is also a kind of arrogance in claiming that Buddhism is not so much a religion as it is the path to the truth behind all religions. In other words, when Suzuki and other contemporary Buddhist teachers argue that all religions emerge from and point toward a single truth, they also imply that Buddhism, properly understood, is the most direct expression of that truth. I have been present at any number of Buddhist-Christian “dialogues” in which Buddhist teachers lecture respected Christian leaders about the ultimate meaning or essence of Christianity, which strikes me as arrogant, to say the least.

(Sharf, interview, “Losing our religion,” *Tricycle*, 2007b:47)

Such a defining experience (as *kenzo*) has been very influential in Buddhism’s development in the West. The modern Japanese Zen master Hakuun Yasutani, for example, teacher to some of the leading Western teachers, including Philip Kapleau Roshi, Taizan Maezumi Roshi, Robert Aitken Roshi, and Eido Shimano Roshi, was famous for his striking emphasis on *kensho*, a Japanese term suggestive of Zen enlightenment.

The Cult Guru’s charisma lies in the incomprehensibility of his words—“The Guru is so profound, no one understands him!” **Charisma** is the truth and power we attribute to a teacher that we presume we will never attain. The Zen master’s charisma is in its hyper-tautology: “Wherever you go, there you are!” (and its counter-tautology: “Wherever you go, there you aren’t!”) is meant to liberate you from words, Zen words, that is. When we fight fire with fire, we only get a bigger fire, that consumes us in the end. The Buddha’s teaching is about putting out this first, that coolness on inner truth and beauty called **nirvana**.³⁷³ [6]

Oddly, most modern Japanese don’t really care for such inscrutability, nor do they even know Yasutani: he was, in fact, simply ignored by the Soto and Rinzai masters in Japan.

³⁷¹ In terms of the 5 aggregates, “the body” is *form* (*rūpa*); and “conscious” refers to feelings (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), formations (*saṅkhārā*), and attention (*manasikāra*). See SD 17.8a (12.3); SD 56.1 (4.3.2.2) n.

³⁷² On D T Suzuki, see SD 60.1c (8.4).

³⁷³ See **The teacher or the teaching?** SD 3.14.

4.4.8.2 Similarly, when we practise Vipassana or Insight meditation, we are likely to either follow the methods established by Mahasi Sayadaw³⁷⁴ or by Goenka,³⁷⁵ two well-known 20th-century Burmese Theravāda meditation teachers. Yet both these teachers were each controversial each in their own way, even within the Theravāda itself. The Mahasi tradition had been criticized for placing emphasis on the ease and speed of gaining streamwinning, the first stage of the path of awakening. Amongst Zen teachers, the notion of *kensho* too, is said to be a first glimpse of nirvana, but the Zen tradition regards “streamwinning” as a Hīnayāna teaching.

Unfortunately, these experiences look clearer and seem easier in theory than they do in actual practice. It is rare that we will ever find two meditation masters who will agree on exactly what constitutes such an experience. Their meditation writings are often dogmatic or polemical, “arguing over what constitutes such experiences, who really has had them, who is genuinely qualified to judge such things, whose method leads to the authentic experience, and whose leads to some ersatz version, and so forth.”³⁷⁶

The lay teacher Goenka trained in Vipassana from another lay teacher, U Ba Khin, who himself was a lay-teacher who continued the Vipassana tradition taught by Saya Thetgyi, who learned it from Ledi Sayadaw.³⁷⁷ With Goenka, however, Vipassana was taught as a “lifestyle,” that is, as a method unto itself, almost as an independent religion, a new Buddhism, which confused the more discerning students who had a good understanding of early Buddhism.³⁷⁸

“But these controversies are not really the point,” explains Robert Sharf, a UC Berkeley professor of Buddhist studies, “I think it’s one thing to view meditation as a serious religious discipline that can help overcome craving and attachment. This approach is perfectly consistent with many Buddhist teachings. But it is quite different from viewing meditation as the be-all and end-all of Buddhism, and it is also different from seeing meditation in utilitarian terms—as a means to bring about an experience, such as kensho or sotapatti, that will instantly transform the whole of one’s existence. Buddhism, like life, isn’t that simple. I think many American teachers and practitioners have begun to appreciate this, yet old habits die hard.”³⁷⁹

4.4.9 Being a Buddhist, *being* Buddhist

4.4.9.1 Early Buddhism has what it calls **the 3 jewels**: (the precious pillars that is) the Buddha (the historical teacher), the Dharma (the teaching of true reality), and the sangha (noble community of path disciples). After the Buddha’s time, as new Buddhist sects arose and became more distant from the historical Buddha and his teaching, each of these precious early Buddhist pillars was interpreted in various ways, even demolished and replaced by other grand but hollow edifices, mainly to outrival other sects and garner support for the sect.

What gets lost here? First, the historical **Buddha** is replaced by some God-like figure that came to be worshipped increasingly as some Other-power, for example, one that can grant succour and salvation merely by reciting his name, and the supplicants can even be reborn in His Paradise. The one historical Buddha eventually was crowded out by a huge crowd of cosmic Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The single rare diamond of evolutionary wisdom was flooded over with worthless sand of the Ganges river.

The influences of the God-religions in ancient Persia and Israel began to infiltrate and inform these sectarian **Dharmas**, Teacher-centred Buddhisms. Their unawakened preachers, far from practising what the Buddha teaches, worked to promote themselves, even fabricating their own Sutras

³⁷⁴ On Mahasi Sayadaw, see SD 60.1b (2.4.5).

³⁷⁵ On Goenka Vipassana, see SD 60.1b (2.4.10 f, 2.5); SD 60.1c (12).

³⁷⁶ Sharf 2007b:47 f.

³⁷⁷ On the Ledi-Thetgyi-U Ba Khin-Goenka lineage, see SD 60.1b (2.4-2.5).

³⁷⁸ On leaving Vipassana, see SD 60.1b (1.12.3 f).

³⁷⁹ Sharf 2007b:48.

(like the Lotus Sutra)³⁸⁰ to belittle and debunk the 3 jewels of early Buddhism. Sadly, by letting the waters of samsara flood their own sectarian boats, they inevitably sank with the floods. Some new sects had larger, stronger, more luxurious ships, with impressive engines and salaried crew, sailing in samsara's ocean, never finding any safe harbour, ghost ships dragged by the raging currents bound for nowhere.

The early Buddhist **sangha** comprised those who by self-effort and personal realization gained the path leading up to arhathood and nirvana. In later times, the arhat was derided by theologians ignorant of the suttas as being outmoded and "inferior" (*hīna, yāna*), and nirvana (which was beyond them) was vulgarized as the daily grind of life itself ("nirvana is samsara"). The ancient sangha was happily celibate and moneyless, living as true renunciants as exemplars of the Dharma. Today, it is the Lay Sangha (with the big S), a self-defined entitled group of those deeply engaged with the world, imagining themselves purified and powered by its exotic uniform and holy air: what they lack by way of mental *state*, they compensated with ostensible status (ritual, looks, titles, wealth, assets and affairs).

In promoting our self and our group as its extension, we lose our connection with the 3 jewels. We count ourselves as each *a Buddhist*, turning away from the interconnectedness of *being* Buddhist.³⁸¹ To **be Buddhist** is to walk towards the path or on it, *part* of a spiritual community; to be *a Buddhist* is to differentiate and define oneself above others, *apart* from them.

4.4.9.2 Early Buddhism, as handed down to us to this day, is a record of the Buddha's awakening, and how we can, by self-effort, by our **inner experience**, taste that same freedom. By its very nature, inner freedom frees us from corporate slavery. Accepting this sort of training helps us downplay the corporate dimension that has enslaved society and forced its traditions upon us.

We often hear the merchants of Mindfulness or their sales representatives describing themselves as being "**spiritual but not religious**." They probably mean that they care deeply about their inner spiritual and psychological lives, but are not particularly interested in any affiliation with a religious tradition or institution; hence, one declares, "I'm not a Buddhist." This, however, may often fall on the far side of a modernist strategy—indeed, Buddhist modernism itself—thus "provides a perspective that not only facilitates this sort of appropriation of Buddhism but makes it desirable." (Sharf 2007b:48)

This suspicion and rejection of religion (including Buddhism) is misguided. The traditional sangha, unified by the Vinaya, inspired by the Dharma, provides a framework that, at least ideally, helps to whittle down eccentricity and egocentrism. The sangha, as envisioned by the Buddha, embodies the training—moral, psychological and philosophical—leading away from crass worldliness to personal growth, that is, the evolution of the good society at its very cellular personal level.

4.4.9.3 In a remarkable early text, **the Gāraṇa Sutta** (S 6.2), the Buddha is recorded as declaring: "Let me, ... honour, respect, and dwell in dependence only on **this very Dharma** to which I have fully awakened." He explains that if there were anyone who gives the true teaching (of the 4 noble truths) for the sake of moral virtue, concentration, wisdom, freedom, and the knowledge and vision of freedom (the path leading to awakening), he would respect such a person, implying that **we should place the teaching (the truth) above the teacher**.³⁸²

This **power of truth**—putting what is true, real and good above even ourselves—empowers the sangha or monastic community as the protector and propagator of the Vinaya (monastic discipline) and the Dharma (liberating truth). When truth and goodness define such a community, then, it is truly "democratic," that is, it speaks and works with authority and compassion for the benefit of the many.

³⁸⁰ On the Lotus Sutra, see SD 16.1c (16).

³⁸¹ I must apologize for the uncharacteristically uncomfortable language of this section, the kind of bombast and rhetoric that I often deplore, but I cannot think of any better way of highlighting the danger and urgency of this worldliness sweeping over Buddhism today than to use its own idiom to give us a taste of what we are up against.

³⁸² S 6.2/1:138-140 (SD 12.3).

It is because of this truth-based democracy, not personal charisma, that has preserved the 3 jewels right down to our own times.

This means that we recall (we do not forget, Greek *aletheia*, for “truth”) the Buddha as our one historical teacher, his teaching (the Dharma) which is open to all who wish to train, and the noble sangha (the community of path saints). This is **the noble sangha** (*ariya,saṅgha*), the 3rd jewel as refuge (the ideal we aspire to), and which the “conventional sangha” (*sammuti,saṅgha*) or monastic community emulates; in doing so, that monk or nun is effectively training for the path of awakening.

4.4.9.4 Properly speaking, then, **the sangha** embodies the early Buddhist tradition for transcending worldliness and self-centredness, especially such concerns that arise from placing our self at the “centre” of the universe, that is, unified with some Supreme Self (Ātman) or God, which then “empowers” us to dominate others and exploit the world. As Sharf wisely puts it: “So we must ask whether Buddhism, when practiced without the ties of community and tradition, instead of mitigating our tendency toward narcissism, actually feeds it” (2007b:48).

Historically, the authority of Buddhist teachers was conferred and mediated by the sangha, specifically the ordained community, which, structurally, worked on a more or less strict system of seniority, and decisions were made by consultation and voting.³⁸³ Functionally, individual disciples, monastic and lay, were often known for their special qualities or abilities—wisdom, discipline, meditation, teaching Dharma, ascetic living and so on. The processes of teaching and learning were gradual,³⁸⁴ not strictly or academically structured.³⁸⁵

4.4.9.5 Personal progress—and often personal transformation too—was, as a rule, characterized by spiritual friendship (*kalyāṇa,mittatā*).³⁸⁶ One attentively listens to another teaching Dharma and attains streamwinning. Only the attaining of arhathood was, as a rule, described as one having received instructions and a proper meditation subject, went into solitary retreat and, in time, emerged self-awakened.

But the general idea was that before you could claim to represent the dharma, you had to thoroughly imbibe and participate in the life of the institution to which the dharma had been entrusted. But if institutions don’t matter, if basic knowledge and understanding of scripture don’t matter, and if Buddhism is reduced to an inner experience, however this might be construed, then authority becomes a matter of **personal charisma**.

Lacking the support and the checks and balances that are part of a strong community life, the authority and prominence of any particular teacher, whether by choice or necessity, is based largely on his or her skill as an entrepreneur. In short, teachers are forced to market, however tacitly, their own enlightenment. And this is precisely the situation with so many teachers in America. Living as we do in a market economy, I think this sort of entrepreneurial model demands scrutiny, at the very least. (Sharf 2007b:48)

Commodified and worldly Buddhism works to make each of us *a* Buddhist, a statistic amongst statistics of figures and funds. The Buddhist training is, on the other hand, basically one of knowing ourself, taming ourself, freeing ourself—that is, *being Buddhist*. To have or to be? We need to make the wise choice.

³⁸³ On the self-regulating and democratic character of the early sangha, see **Gopaka Moggallāna S** (M 108,6-14), SD 33.5. On the Dharma “as our refuge,” see **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16,6/2:154), SD 9.

³⁸⁴ On the gradual training (*anupubba,sikkhā*), see **Gaṇaka Moggallāna S** (M 107,3-11), SD 56.3; the gradual teaching (*anupubbi,kathā*), see **Mahā’padāna S** (D 14,3.15), SD 49.8a; pericope: SD 49.8b (7.3 esp 7.3.2).

³⁸⁵ On the foremost disciples (*agga sāvakā*), see SD 55.22 (3.4.2).

³⁸⁶ See **Meghiya S** (A 9.3 ≈ U 4.1) + SD 34.2 (2.1.1); **Spiritual friendship: Stories of kindness**, SD 8.1; **Spiritual friendship: A textual study**, SD 34.1.

4.5 MODERN BUDDHISM IN MALAYSIA

4.5.1 How other religions and cultures influence local Buddhism

4.5.1.1 As we go through this essay—or any writing on Buddhism—we should keep track of the purview of the term “Buddhism”: which Buddhism are we referring to? When we speak of “**Protestant Buddhism**” [4.4.4] we are actually referring to modernist Buddhism, one that is characterized by its strong anti-Christian rhetoric, yet appropriating ideas and values from Protestant Christianity. This characterizes Sinhalese Buddhism since the late 19th century. This quaint feature, however, was and is generally absent from the Theravāda of Myanmar and Thailand, and their missions overseas.

This Protestant Buddhism was brought by Sinhalese missionary monks to Malaysia and Singapore at the end of the 19th century, and became very popular with the local English-speaking Chinese.³⁸⁷ The main reason for this popularity is probably that the local English-speaking Chinese were the main target of evangelizing by Protestant missionaries, especially in their local mission schools (such as the Anglo-Chinese School network). At first, these missionaries blatantly attacked the “sinful” superstitions of local “heathen” religions, especially the traditional Chinese eclectic mix of Daoism, Confucianism and Chinese Buddhism.³⁸⁸

4.5.1.2 With the resurgence of Islam in Malaysia beginning in the early 1970s, Malay politicians often reminded non-Malays of the privileged positions of Islam and the Malays in the country to the effect that the latter were actually marginalized or felt alienated.³⁸⁹ Local Buddhist groups, being less united and more docile to authority, could do little except look up to an English-speaking Buddhist mission as a rallying point for them. Sadly, this actually became a *lose-lose* situation: the Buddhists not only had little freedom (and did not know what to do about it), and they went on to become followers of foreign Buddhist cultures, especially Sinhalese Buddhism (which tends to be perhaps the most racist form of Buddhism).

The Brickfields Buddhist Vihara (renamed as Buddhist Mahavihara),³⁹⁰ a temple specially built for the Sinhalese in Malaya during the British administration was founded in 1894. Its main buildings, however, were only completed in the first decade of the 20th century.³⁹¹ Even then, the control of the Temple was (and is) fully in Sinhalese hands: it was (and is) run by the Sasana Abhiwurdhi War-dhana Society (SAWS) whose management committee comprised only Sinhalese of the higher castes.³⁹²

Although the Temple management is solely controlled by the Sinhalese, a donor list published by the Temple management showed that local Chinese Buddhists donated a significantly huge sum of

³⁸⁷ On Sinhalese Buddhism in Malaysia and Singapore, see SD 60.1c (8.1.7).

³⁸⁸ For a 1st-person scholarly study, see TAN Lee Ooi, Thesis, “The Making of Modern Buddhism: Chinese Buddhist Revitalization in Malaysia,” 2008-13: <http://asc.mcu.ac.th/database/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Full-Thesis.pdf>; rev as *Buddhist Revitalization and Chinese Religions*, Amsterdam Univ Press, 2020.

³⁸⁹ See also Jomo K Sundaram & Ahmed S Cheek, “The politics of Malaysia’s Islamic resurgence,” *Third World Quarterly* 10,2 1988:843-868, online 15 Nov 2007: [Third World Quarterly: Vol 10, No 2 \(tandfonline.com\)](http://www.tandfonline.com). For a summary & refs: [Freedom of religion in Malaysia - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_of_religion_in_Malaysia). Also: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/malaysia/>.

³⁹⁰ Named after the Mahāvihāra (3rd-cent Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka), supported by King Devanampiya Tissa, the main centre for Sinhala Theravāda Buddhism. With the Coja invasions from S India, Anuradhapura and the Mahāvihāra were abandoned for Polonnaruwa. See *Ency of Monasticism* (ed Johnston et al), 2000: Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka.

³⁹¹ J Samuels, “Forget not your old country,” 2011:120 f; “A tale of two colonialisms,” in T Borchert (ed), *The-ravāda in Colonial Contexts*, Routledge, 2018:41.

³⁹² According to the inaugural meeting minutes of the Temple, the appointment of the its abbot should be from Ceylon and administration of the Temple should be Sinhalese. This principle of maintaining control of the Sinhalese became a constraint on the development of the Temple until it was rebuked in the later years. (Tan Lee Ooi, 2020:39).

money during the temple construction, the largest amount from Kapitan Cina (華人甲必丹 *huárén jiǎbìdān*)³⁹³ of Kuala Lumpur, Yap Kwan Sengg (Yeap Quang Seng) and other local Chinese leaders like Loke Yew, Loke Chow Kit, San Peng and son, and Lim Tua Taw, who were instrumental in the rise and prosperity of KL.³⁹⁴ Since 1920, Chinese devotees grew to be the Temple's largest group of supporters.³⁹⁵ In fact, the Vihara became renowned for favouring the wealthy and powerful that it came to be well-known as "the rich man's Temple."³⁹⁶

The financial and material success of the Temple might be attributed to the Machiavellian genius and foresight of its Abbot Dhammananda [4.5.2.1], who insisted that the Chinese be given their "proper" place in the Temple—they were, after all, its main source of wealth. To keep his hold on the local Chinese, he allowed them to form their own Buddhist Missionary Society as the local alternative to the SAWS, and which had nothing to do with any Temple administration. This was a win-win situation in the sense that the local Chinese got the kind of Buddhism they deserved, and all worldly gains (especially funds and buildings) belonged to the Sinhalese.

However, with Dhammananda's death, the BMS were clearly made unwelcome on the premises. Most of the local Chinese Buddhist leaders and workers left, and dispersed all over the state (Selangor) to form their own Buddhist Societies or joined existing Buddhist centres. The positive side to this was that there was a growth spurt in locally run Buddhist groups.³⁹⁷ While the demise of the Mahāvihāra in Anuradhapura was brought on by the Cojas of South India, the fate of the local Mahāvihara has been brought on by the Sinhalese themselves. The Chinese were regarded as outsiders to those who placed race and culture above even Buddhism.³⁹⁸

4.5.1.3 Unlike the Chinese-speaking Mahāyāna Buddhists—who also put race and culture above Buddhism itself—the English-speaking Chinese Buddhists, culturally uprooted by Christian mission schooling and faith, tend to be less racist or unified. The local English-speaking Chinese looked up to the Sinhalese Temple and the Sinhalese in a colour-blind way, simply and happily as "Buddhists." In fact, although the Sinhalese exploited the local Chinese Buddhists for their wealth and yet discriminated them for their race, the Chinese Buddhists neither reacted by demanding any rights nor asserted Buddhist teachings against caste and race.

Being a local Chinese Buddhist myself, my impression is that we were unconsciously burdened by the notion of being "migrants," even "peasants" (like our forefathers who fled from China generations ago in the wake of political and social turmoil). Hence, we have been conditioned never "to rock the boat," but to serve and support the influential and powerful. However, since I have been

³⁹³ "Kapitan Cina" or "Captain of the Chinese," an office supported by the colonial govt for the control of the local Chinese: [Kapitan Cina - Wikipedia](#).

³⁹⁴ [Buddhist Maha Vihara Malaysia - Welcome To Our Website: \(archive.org\)](#). This is from the Wayback Archives: the original Vihara website yielded a 404 error, meaning it was either made inaccessible or removed.

³⁹⁵ TAN Lee Ooi, *Buddhist Revitalization and Chinese Religions in Malaysia*, Amsterdam Univ Press, 2020:40. For refs: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhist_Maha_Vihara_Brickfields (contains a number of factual errors like the Sinhalese characters).

³⁹⁶ J Samuels: "Personal communication with Vijaya Samarawickrama on 9 July 2010. Several lay people I spoke to said that under its current administration, the Brickfields temple—with its current ambitious welfare agenda—favours wealthy patrons. Venerable Ananda Mangala [*Young Buddhist*] (1977, p. 119) also noted that one of the former head monks of the Sentul temple—Ven Dhammeswara—was known as 'the missionary of the middle-classes'." (2011:124).

³⁹⁷ These new groups tended to gravitate mostly to the Burmese tradition, or, to a lesser extent, the Thai tradition. There was, however, a small rise in local Buddhist monastic teachers of the meditation tradition.

³⁹⁸ I spent my late teens as a novice (*sāmaṇera*) under the Sinhalese priest, Dhammananda, and my 20s in touch with the Brickfields Vihara, during which time, I do not ever recall it having any Tamil members, except for one **Dr Lingam**, a very well-educated English-speaking Tamil, devout Buddhist and a friend. His 2 daughters once won the best marks for the Sunday class tests, but they were sidelined for the Sinhala students. This deeply upset and disappointed Lingam. In due course, I was told, he retired to a semi-ascetic life at his own retreat centre on the outskirts of KL.

able to write this, it shows we are willing and ready to confront and correct this negative conditioning. We need a **Dharma vision** that transcends race, culture, status and materialism, that prioritizes Buddha Dharma, to galvanize us into a mature and progressive Dharma-spirited community.

The point remains that the Sinhalese, as Buddhists, still looked down at non-Sinhalese Buddhists in racist terms as aliens. This dark karmic side of theirs must surely have been due to past conditioning which the Sinhalese themselves must investigate and deal with so that they would once again enjoy the blessed light of the Buddha Dharma, and Sri Lanka returns to be the Island of Dharma (*dharma dweepaya*).

4.5.1.4 Traditionally, Chinese Buddhists in Malaysia and Singapore, especially those of the upper class and the better educated, had always been very generous and strong supporters of the foreign missions. The foreign missions knew this and keenly exploited the situation by welcoming them into their Temples and activities. Significantly, this is often represented by the presence of the Guanyin statue in an otherwise Theravāda Temple. This strategy is, clearly to attract more Chinese money to these foreign missions.

In fact, even in Sri Lanka, local Chinese Buddhists were widely known as “**angpow Buddhists**” (those who readily gave cash-envelops to the monks).³⁹⁹ To encourage a freer flow of angpows and cash donation, Sinhalese monks in Malaysia and Singapore promoted the teaching of “**merit transfer**,” by which merits were effectively commodified and “transferred” to the departed for their benefit, or stored in reserve, as it were, for the donors’ future wealth!

Such a practice—based on the Chinese folk belief that death is a fixed “hell” state—is not found in early Buddhism, which instead encourages us to perform such rites ourselves, as a family or community of friends as an act of love, kindness and wisdom, and **to dedicate the merit to the departed** (who have been reborn anyway).⁴⁰⁰

4.5.1.5 At that time, most of **the English-speaking locals**—mostly better educated members of the middle class—were quickly attracted to Buddhist teachings of the Sinhalese monks that they could understand and relate to. Besides Chinese Buddhism (which was mostly ritualistic and Sinocentric),⁴⁰¹ there was a strong presence of Thai Buddhism in the northern and north-eastern parts of peninsular Malaya⁴⁰² (known as Malaysia since 1963),⁴⁰³ and only one Burmese (Myanmar) temple, which was in Penang (NW Malaya) and one other in Semenyih, Selangor (central Malaya). Both the Thai and Burmese temples catered mostly to their own community or Hokkien-speaking local Chinese.⁴⁰⁴

The most successful of the English-speaking foreign Buddhist mission was that of the Buddhist Vihara in the Brickfields area of Kuala Lumpur (KL). Its great success with the local English-speaking Buddhists in the late 20th century was due to what has just been mentioned: they used English, which attracted growing numbers of English-speaking locals. Secondly, they—the Brickfields Buddhist Vihara and the Sentul Temple—were well located in the capital, KL. The Buddhist Vihara was better located nearer to the city-centre, while the Sentul Temple was in a suburb.

³⁹⁹ On the red packet, see SD 60.1c (17.12).

⁴⁰⁰ See **Tiro,kuḍḍa S** (Khṇ 7 = Pv 1.5), SD 2.7 dedication of merit; SD 2.6a (6); 2.6b (3); 2.7 (4).

⁴⁰¹ “Sinocentric” ie, using Chinese language, focused on Chinese culture (Confucian-based), and tended to be superstitious (Taoist-based).

⁴⁰² By “Malaya” here, I refer generally to the peninsular Malaysia.

⁴⁰³ To date, there are at least 70 Thai temples in Malaysia: <https://www.malaysia-traveller.com/malaysian-thai-temples.html>.

⁴⁰⁴ While Hokkien (local Fujian dialect) predominates amongst the Chinese of Penang and north Malaysia; Cantonese predominates in Kuala Lumpur (the capital) and Ipoh. The predominant Chinese dialect in Singapore is Teochew (originating from the Chaoshan region of E Guangdong province in China). Due to official policy, Mandarin is now the predominant Chinese language in Singapore.

There was serious professional rivalry between the two Temples, but thankfully the devotees had little understanding of such religious complications, and they patronized whichever Temple they chose, or even supported both of them. Most locals (even today) actually fear monks, especially titled ones, and feel they should not even comment on such matters, since, after all, “They are monks, we should respect them!”⁴⁰⁵

4.5.2 Priestly politics

4.5.2.1 The Buddhist Vihara abbot, Sinhalese priest, **Kirinde Sri Dhammananda** (1919-2006),⁴⁰⁶ a member of the landed Goyigama caste, educated in the Benares Hindu University, India, used the title “Chief High Priest” (*mahā,nayaka*) since 1963. This title itself makes fascinating study at least from a social psychological perspective. Technically, this title is a Sinhalese clerical title for the head of one of 3 sects (*nikāya*): the Siyam Nikāya, the Amarapura Nikāya and the Rāmañña Nikāya.⁴⁰⁷

The first odd thing about this title is its translation. The title *mahā,nayaka* literally means “great leader,” and thus seems to mean “supreme patriarch.” However, traditionally, there can be only one such figurehead in a country, unless there is some kind of division or schism in the country’s sangha. To avoid this problem, but to evoke an air of supremacy, the modernist and magical title, “chief high priest,” is adopted. Ironically, this fits the clerics perfectly since, as a rule, most of them neither observe the fortnightly conclave nor keep the Vinaya, but act as “priests,” performing rituals and pretending to have religious powers.

Secondly, since Dhammananda did not head any Nikāya, either in Sri Lanka or in Malaysia, the title seemed to be merely honorary. It is also improper to claim that he was the “chief high priest of Malaysia” or “of Malaysia and Singapore,” since there were (and are) no local Sinhalese priests to form a sangha, much less a Nikāya, not to mention they, as a rule, did not keep to the Vinaya.⁴⁰⁸ Its effect is, of course, psychological and political: the *sound* of power was good enough for a society where status and power defined social relationships, as in Malaysia.⁴⁰⁹

4.5.2.2 Here, I divert from the drift of ideas thus far to briefly mention 2 common manipulative ploys used by religious leaders to maintain their power and assert control over others, which also explains why Dhammananda was viewed as a very successful Chief High Priest. One of his trademark habits was **the silent treatment**. He would remain practically silent and somewhat unmoved by comments or complaints from certain devotees (other than the rich and powerful). A “plebeian” Vihara devotee once ejaculated to the effect: “He is amazingly calm and mindful. He must have attained some high levels!”

⁴⁰⁵ This is an example of looking up to a person’s **status** rather than respecting the true state of Dharma in one. On the proclivity of Malaysians to respect or fear the powerful, and the “power distance index” (PDI), see SD 60.1d (1.1.2.5). See below [7.6.2.1].

⁴⁰⁶ In Sinhalese monks’ names, their first word (here, Kirinde) refers to his village, and from which the informed may also infer his caste affiliation. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caste_system_in_Sri_Lanka.

⁴⁰⁷ In 2019, the last two joined together as the Amarapura-Rāmañña Sāmagrī Mahā Saṅgha Sabhāva, becoming the larger of the 2 Sinhalese Buddhist sects today. The Siyam Nikāya only accepts members of the highest castes, ie, the landed Govigama and the royalist Radala castes. See K Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society, 1750-1900*, Berkeley, 1976:84-87, 91; A M Blackburn, *Buddhist Learning and Textual Practice in 18th-century Lankan Monastic Culture*, Princeton, 2001:34.

⁴⁰⁸ In 2011, the Brickfields Vihara, Chief High Priest, K Sri Dhammaratana, went to the KL Palace to receive his Datukship title, without priest’s robes but wore a business suit! <https://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=70,9839,0,0,1,0#.Y1aWUnZBz84>.

⁴⁰⁹ See n on “power distance” above [4.5.1.5]. For refs: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahanayaka>. For an interesting comment on the “Chief High Priest” title on Buddhist Channel, see [Letters | Who is the Chief Monk of Malaysia? \(buddhistchannel.tv\)](https://www.buddhistchannel.tv). On the growing number of Sanghanayakas (Chief High Priests), see Seneviratne, *The Work of Kings*, 1999:341.

The passive-aggressive attitude underlying the silent treatment makes it highly effective and very flexible, making it the perfect tool for abusers of all kinds. Indeed, the silent treatment may be used by just about anyone, including family members, significant others, friends, co-workers, or even by a person you might have regarded as a close friend.

Similarly, we may have ourselves been a victim of the silent treatment. The idea behind the silent treatment is to make us (the victim) find fault with ourselves and our conduct instead of with our abuser. Our abuser cunningly shifts the focus or blame away from themselves, without any effort, causing us great emotional distress, even to the point where we will not know responsibility for any wrong whatsoever, leaving us confused, even in a state of cognitive dissonance.

Often out of respect or fear for the aggressor, we too, fall silent. One way out is to simply acknowledge that the person is using the silent treatment. For example, we can say, “I notice that you are not responding to me.” This lays the foundation for two people to perhaps engage with each other more effectively and warmly.

Once, when Dhammananda reprimanded me for speaking on the Vinaya to the temporary novices of the Vihara Novitiate programme, that I would “frighten” them from wanting to become monks (!), I retorted something like, “What should a monk teach the novices then?” Later, I was told by a local elder that Dhammananda had calmly hinted to them, “Piyasilo scolded me!” This is another clever way of foreign colonial manipulation, getting locals to keep their own kind “in order,” instead of working together as monks *in the spirit of the Vinaya*!⁴¹⁰

Such racist inclinations and parochial biases in the name of Buddhism are clearly at tangent with the Buddha’s teachings. Local Buddhists are seen as mere fund-raisers, servants and slaves of the Temple. The vision projected back to Sri Lanka is that the Vihara is doing all the good work of converting locals to their religion and culture. Since the early 21st century however we are seeing the rise of more local Buddhist centres run by locals, but which are still dependent on foreign ethnic Buddhism from Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand. The signs of **local Dharma growth** are there, but more needs to be done.

4.5.3 Buddhism and Buddha Dharma

4.5.3.1 Do we deserve the Buddhism that we get, or do we deserve better? When we look for Buddhism in impressive buildings or charismatic personalities, we deserve what we get: we tend to find what we are looking for, like chickens scratching the ground. But if that’s all we are; that’s all we will get—knowledge, fame, status, respect, wealth perhaps—but keen-eyed scholars will watch and study us, like King Yama, recording our karmic deeds for posterity.⁴¹¹

Our beliefs and fears are often deeply rooted in our past; in the case of local Chinese Buddhists, in our peasant and migrant past. Even when our ancestors here had grown rich through dint of labour and frugality, our views and fears continue to domesticate us as underdogs: we may have all the creature comforts but never enjoy humanity and fellowship. We will be like the Minions.⁴¹²

4.5.3.2 One of the vital psychosocial teachings of early Buddhism is that we are conditioned by the past and present conditions tend to perpetuate our past, so that we are caught in a vicious loop of predictable instinctive and routine behaviour. Our task as Buddhists is to see and confront this

⁴¹⁰ For another example of such an incident where local elders were used by Dhammananda to try “to put Piyasilo in his place,” see SD 7.9 (4.4.3.2). (**Aṭṭhaka**) **Khaluṅka S** (A 8.14) is, in fact, a psychological study of Dhammananda and his Buddhist activities in Malaysia, during the years I knew him (SD 7.9).

⁴¹¹ On King Yama, see (**Yama**) **Deva,dūta S** (A 3.35), SD 48.10.

⁴¹² *Minions* was a 2015 US computer-aided (and highly successful) comedy film produced by Illumination Entertainment and distributed by Universal Pictures. The Minions are small pill-shaped creatures who have existed since the beginning of time, and exist only to serve the most evil masters, but often end up destroying their own masters.

uroboric lifestyle: that of a serpent devouring its own tail.⁴¹³ There is so much in great literature written about how people are caught in this rut of ignorance and craving; the lesson is that we should live without falling into such a rut.

Religion—for us, Buddhism—is a double-edged sword. It cuts both ways: it can enslave us; it can free us. Buddhism is the most effective tool with which others can mentally and culturally enslave us, to be their dancing bears, and like the huge but docile bears, we are leashed to this strange heartless Master, dancing to his tune.

Or, Buddhism can free us from the gilded cage of spoon-fed subhuman euphoria.

We need to learn and understand why this is so, and how we can be better. Our task then is to pull ourselves out of the mire of mental slavery to foreign cultures, and inspire others to rise to lives dignified by the Buddha Dharma of **true nobility**, leading to the path of awakening.⁴¹⁴ Heading for this path, even faltering yet persevering on with diligence and wisdom, we would in time realize that we would have written all this ourself, seeing our own inner good for the better of our own Buddhist community.⁴¹⁵

4.5.3.3 The Commentaries—summarizing the teaching styles of the suttas—lists the “2 kinds of teachings” (*desanā*), that is:

- (1) the person-based (*puggalādhiṭṭhāna desanā*) and
- (2) the Dharma-based (*dhammādhiṭṭhāna desanā*).

In terms of (1) a person (that is, addressed to a person, or based on a person), and (2) based on a concept or idea, one that is “truth-based” (*dhammādhiṭṭhāna desanā*).⁴¹⁶

On a deeper level, we should understand *dhammādhiṭṭhāna* as meaning “Dharma-based,” in the sense of the Buddha Dharma as the true teaching. This simply means that we should always hold the teaching above the teacher. Instead of idolizing the teacher, attributing him charisma, we should instead attend to the wholesome teachings he has taught, reflect on them and go on to search the suttas for a better self-understanding, personal growth and spiritual transformation. This is the Buddha’s teaching in **the Gāraṇa Sutta** (S 6.2).⁴¹⁷

This is how we free the serpent from devouring itself: we are that serpent. We free ourselves from the subhuman state to attain humanity, and upon reaching the path become truly noble (*ariya*), that is, one bound for awakening.

5 Approaches to Buddhism: the scholar and the practitioner

5.1 EARLY BUDDHISM AND CULTURAL BUDDHISMS

5.1.1 Early Buddhism⁴¹⁸

5.1.1.1 Buddhism, as we know it today, originated with the teachings of **the Buddha**, whose original name was Siddhattha Gotama (Skt *Siddhārtha Gautama*), born in Kapila, vatthu (Skt, *Kapila-vastu*) in the Nepalese border with northern India over 2,500 years ago. Scholars of Buddhism refer

⁴¹³ On the uroboros, see SD 23.3 (1); SD 49.2 (4.3.2.3).

⁴¹⁴ Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* (1989) is a modern classic about an English butler who has been conditioned to serve, and does so consummately, so that he could never learn to be happy for himself, or even reciprocate the love of others for him. See SD 60.1e (7.1.1); SD 7.9 (4.5.3.3); for similar works, see (4.5.3).

⁴¹⁵ I thank TAN Cheng Siong of Malaysia for his inspiring sentiment which I have expressed here.

⁴¹⁶ See esp SD 36.1 (1.11.2); also SD 47.20 (1.2.3).

⁴¹⁷ S 6.2/1:138-140 (SD 12.3).

⁴¹⁸ A recommended reading for this section is Catherine Newell, “Approaches to the Study of Buddhism,” in (ed) B S Turner, *The Sociology of Religion*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010:388-406.

to Gotama as “the historical Buddha” to distinguish him from other buddhas, mostly in the past, and the next buddha,⁴¹⁹ and also from the cosmic Buddhas of the Mahāyāna.

Since Buddhism is deeply and inextricably rooted in the historical Buddha, Gotama, his teaching is generally referred to by scholars as “**early Buddhism**.” This rather contested term is used in reference to Buddhist history and teachings of the Buddha himself and the early arhats, well before the 2nd century CE, when we saw the gradual emergence (over a period of many centuries) of Mahāyāna Sūtras, which were texts that explored new, even contradictory, doctrinal interpretations of Buddhism.⁴²⁰ [5.1.1.2]

5.1.1.2 Scholars who accept the idea of “**early Buddhism**” generally refer to the time of the historical Buddha [3.2.3.1 n] in one of 2 ways: either in terms of the “short period” or in terms of the “long period”:

- (1) Early Buddhism as **the short period** is from the Buddha’s time up to that of Asoka (268-239 BCE) or just before that.⁴²¹ The rationale here is that, with the acceptance of the Kathāvatthu (the 3rd book of the Abhidhamma), the Pali canon was closed, that is, just after the Council of Pāṭaliputra II (c 250 BCE), that is, the so called 3rd Council.⁴²²
- (2) Early Buddhism as the **long period** broadly refers to the Buddha’s time up to the period of the so called “18 early schools of Buddhism” [2.2.1.2(2)], that is, the first 400 years of Buddhism. This was when differences in some doctrines began to appear; otherwise, these schools generally followed the early Buddhist teachings, that is, before the emergence of Mahāyāna.⁴²³

5.1.1.3 What little we know about both these periods of early Buddhism has to be reconstructed from the Buddhist literature of these “**18 schools**,” and the limited epigraphic and archaeological evidence. We cannot be certain of this exact number, which comes from traditional accounts, for which we have no clear historical evidence. Fragments of the monastic rules and teachings of some of these 18 schools have survived to the present day, often in translations.

The most important of the 18 schools, for our study’s purposes, was **the Sthavira, vāda** (the teaching of the elders), which due to disagreements with another school, **the Mahā, saṅghika** (the great community), split up during the first major schism of early Buddhism, traditionally said to be held in Vesālī (Skt *Vaiśālī*) 100 years after the Buddha’s passing. This was probably during the reign of Mahāpadma Nanda (c 362-332 BCE).⁴²⁴

The Sanskrit term, *sthavira* means “elder,” that is, a senior monk (of 10 rains and above), and which, in Pali, is *thera*. Hence, the historical Sthaviravāda, which did not survive to the present day, came to be associated with the Theravāda. There is, however, no clear evidence for such a connection between the 2 schools, and their exact relationship, if any, remains debatable.

There is, of course no good reason to suggest that the 2 schools did not share similar, even identical, teachings and practices. It is even believed that “the only surviving strand of the Sthavira, nikāya (another name for the Sthavira, vāda) is the Theravāda.”⁴²⁵ Properly, historical “**Theravāda**” is neither

⁴¹⁹ See SD 60.1c (15.7.6.3).

⁴²⁰ R Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, Oxford, 1998:225.

⁴²¹ See H Bechert, *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft in den Ländern des Theravāda-Buddhismus* 1, 1966; “Sangha, state, society, ‘Nation’,” *Daedalus*, 1973; *Buddhism and Society*, Kandy, 1979; “Orthodoxy and Legitimation in the context of Early and Theravada Buddhism,” Tokyo, 1985; also S Collins, “On the very idea of the Pali Canon,” JPTS 15 1990: 89 f, 105 n4.

⁴²² **Council of Pāṭaliputra I** = the 3rd Council (c 350 BCE) is a scholarly hypothesis used to explain the “Great Schism” between the Elders (*sthavira*) and the Mahāsaṅghika, later followed by the rise of Mahāyāna. **Council of Pāṭaliputra II** was mentioned only in Pali sources, and regarded by Theravāda as the 3rd Council (c 250 BCE), during Asoka’s time. On both, see Oxford *Dictionary of Buddhism* [DB].

⁴²³ See SD 58.1 (5.4.5.6); Oxford DB: Eighteen Schools of Early Buddhism. See Newell 2010:404 n1.

⁴²⁴ Princeton DB: Council, 2nd. Routledge Ency Bsm 2007:251 f, 554-556.

⁴²⁵ Princeton DB: Sthaviranikāya.

the *ethnic* Theravāda of Sri Lanka (centred on Mahāvihāra) [4.5.1.2] *nor* that of Myanmar *nor* that of Thailand *nor* any ethnic Buddhism: it is rather the “Theravāda” related to the Pali canon, that is, the Sthaviravāda canon, the only complete early Buddhist canon extant.

5.1.1.4 Strictly speaking, we can thus speak of a 3rd way of viewing early Buddhism—the **canonical period**—that is, *while the Buddha lived and taught, and after that until the death of the great arhats of his time*. In other words, this is the time of teachings and events recorded in the suttas, and perhaps such teachings reflecting the sutta teachings, recorded in the Vinaya [5.1.1.4] and the Abhidhamma [5.1.1.5].

While the suttas of the Pali canon attributed to the Buddha himself may not be his “exact words” (*ipsissima verba*) they are the careful and systematic transcriptions of his direct teachings coded in the style of **the oral tradition** of early Buddhism. The depth, coherence and cogency of the sutta teachings evince their age and authenticity. Indeed, whatever discipline that modern scholars follow—whether of the text-historical (philological) or the ethnographical (anthropological/sociological)—they fundamentally fall back on the Pali canon, that is, early Buddhism (as we shall see in the rest of this section).

Since the suttas define the canonical period, we can also call it **the sutta period**. Since it was the time when these suttas were categorized into various “collections” (*nikāya*)—the Dīgha Nikāya (the long teachings), the Majjhima Nikāya (the medium teachings), the Saṃyutta Nikāya (the connected teachings), the Aṅguttara Nikāya (the numerical teachings) and Khuddaka Nikāya (the minor teachings)—we can also call it **the Nikaya period**.

Just as the Vedas are especially sacred to the brahmins, the Torah to the Jews, the Bible to the Christians, the Quran to the Muslims, even so, the suttas define early Buddhism, traditionally called Buddha Dharma. Of course, each religion looks up to their Scripture in their own way; so does early Buddhism.⁴²⁶ The point is that *without* the suttas, there is *no* Buddha Dharma. We can still speak of “Buddhism,” of course, but that is another kettle of fish, as we shall see.

5.1.1.5 The history or tradition of the Pali canon as we have it today goes back very close to the Buddha’s time, specifically to **the Council of Rājagaha** (Skt *Rājagṛha*), often called the “1st Council.” Its history is clearly recorded in chapter 11 of the Culla,vagga of the Vinaya (Cv 11 @ V 2:284-293). We are told that it was held 3 months after the Buddha’s passing (which would traditionally be August of that year). It was actually a “rehearsal” (*saṅgīti*)—in keeping with the oral tradition—when the Dharma and Vinaya (*dhmma,vinaya*) were recited.⁴²⁷ (Note that no Abhidhamma was recited at the 1st Council.)

The Council was presided over by the seniormost monk then, Mahā Kassapa, and was attended by 500 arhats. He called upon the elder Ānanda (who reportedly gained arhathood just as the Council was about to begin) to recite the Buddha’s discourses (the suttas), that is, the Dharma. The elder Upāli, the foremost expert in the Vinaya recited the 2 Pātimokkhas (of the monks and of the nuns).⁴²⁸ The recitals of these 2 monks were carefully repeated and remembered by the arhats present, who, in doing so, endorsed the texts (called *pāli*, a sense of which is “that which guards”), and thus constituted **the Pali canon**. The whole procedure lasted some 7 months.⁴²⁹

These elders each specialized in sections of the sutta (Dharma) recitals, and in turn recited them to their pupils, who repeated and memorized these texts in groups known as “**reciters**” (*bhāṇaka*).⁴³⁰ Hence, we have groups who specialized in memorizing and transmitting the long suttas (*dīgha,bhāṇa-*

⁴²⁶ See SD 60.1c (14.4.2).

⁴²⁷ On the oral tradition and the Pali canon, see SD 58.1 (6).

⁴²⁸ Vinaya states that Mahā Kassapa only questioned about the Pātimokkha (of the monks and of the nuns): *eten’eva upāyena ubhato,vinaye* [so Ee Se; Be Ce ubhato,vibhaṅge] *pucchi* (V 2:289,8 f). See Norman, *Pali Literature*, 1983b:18.

⁴²⁹ See Norman, *Pali Literature*, 1983b:8 f.

⁴³⁰ On the reciter tradition (*bhāṇaka*), see Ency Bsm 2:688-690.

ka), the medium sutta (*majjhima, bhāṇaka*), and so on. Besides such recitals, teachers, both monastic and lay (like Citta the householder) would teach these suttas especially during the observance days (*uposatha*).⁴³¹ [5.4.1]

5.1.1.6 Since we only have the Vinaya accounts and later Buddhist commentaries to go by regarding the 1st council, and with practically no historical evidence or research to support its historicity, we can at best say it was a traditional account or “sacred history.” From internal textual evidence, scholars can only conclude that the Pali canon received its final form many years after the Buddha’s passing. Very likely, this account of the 1st Council was a literary device to retrospectively legitimize teachings handed down as being canonical so that they were (are) better preserved.

Be that as it may—even without archaeological or ethnographical evidence—it is difficult to imagine how the Pali canon, with its *humanly germane, intellectually unified and spiritually profound teachings*, could have been compiled willy-nilly, or “constructed” by some later monks or committee. There is really no good reason to reject the canonicity of the Pali texts, especially the Sutta and the Vinaya Piṭakas, unless we have not carefully studied these texts, or do not care for them as rare and authentic sources of the Buddha’s teachings and practices. Instead, we would rather hold up some non-canonical or worldly texts that merely affirm or glorify our own views. [5.1.3.2]

5.1.1.7 Occasionally, we do get hints of the existence of suttas heard by other monks of the Buddha’s time⁴³² but which were not included in the canon as we know today. **Culla, vagga 11** of the Vinaya, for example, records an interesting incident of a visit by the elder Purāṇa and his following of some 500 monks from the Deccan, or the “Southern Hills” (*dakkhiṇa, giri*) to the Bamboo Grove in Rājagaha after the elders had rehearsed the Dharma-Vinaya. When they were invited to join them to practise reciting the texts, he declined, saying:

“Well recited by the elders, avuso [friends], are the Dharma and the Vinaya, but in that way that I heard it before the Lord, that I received before him, in that same way will I remember it.”⁴³³ (Cv 11.1.11)

Some scholars jump to the conclusion that this was a sign of “early dissent,” that differences in views about the Dharma-Vinaya arose even immediately after the 1st Council. We are, however, not told what happened after that: even the Vinaya Commentary is silent on this episode. Taking Purāṇa’s remark as it is, it simply means that there are an unspecified number of teachings (suttas) that are not recorded by the 1st council. After all, the Buddha travelled all over the central Gangetic plain teaching Dharma for 45 years.

However, such teachings would, in principle, still be accepted as canonical, so long as it is “heard directly” (*sammukhā sutarā*) from the Buddha himself. The Buddha, in his final instructions, explains **the 4 great references** (*mahā’padesa*) for claiming that “this is the Dharma, this is the Vinaya, this is the Teacher’s teaching,” that is, one claims that:

- (1) one has heard it directly from the Buddha himself;
- (2) one has heard it from a community with elders and distinguished teachers;
- (3) one has heard it from some elders who are learned experts, lineage masters, Dharma-experts, Vinaya-experts, experts in the Matrices;⁴³⁴

⁴³¹ On the *uposatha*, see, eg, **Tad-ah’uposatha S** (A 3.70), SD 4.18; **Dhammika S** (A 4:254 f = Sn 400 f), SD 27.3-(2.1).

⁴³² Meaning that it was unlikely that *all* the teachings given by the Buddha during his 45-year ministry are recorded in the Pali canon. This however does not refer to the bulk of the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna teachings.

⁴³³ *Susaṅgīt’āvuso therehi dhammo ca vinayo ca, api ca yath’eva mayā bhagavato sammukhā sutarā sammukhā paṭiggahitarā that’evāhaṃ dhāressāmī ti* (Cv 11.1.11 @ V 2:290,6-8).

⁴³⁴ *Sambahulā therā bhikkhū ... bahussutā āgat’āgamā dhamma, dharā vinaya, dharā mātikā, dharā*. At this early stage, the “matrices” (*mātikā*) referred not to the Abhidhamma, but to the “Pāṭimokkha of the monks and

- (4) one has heard it from an elder who is a learned expert, lineage master, Dharma-expert, Vinaya-expert, expert in the Matrices.

Then, we should neither approve nor disapprove of such a claim, but carefully study and check it against the Sutta [teaching], against the Vinaya [discipline], and examine it (for conformity).

(D 16,4.7-11/2:123 f), SD 9

Clearly then, even while the Buddha lived, there was (in the later years) already a sufficient authorized body of suttas and Vinaya texts to act as the basis for textual authentication. Hence, the elders of the 1st Council were doing nothing new but simply rehearsing, that is, recalling, this **canon** (*pāli*) of Dharma-Vinaya for safe-guarding it (the Dharma-Vinaya) so that it is handed down fully and truly right down to our time. It is against such a canon that we check our practice and experience to correct, regulate and authenticate it.

Imagine that we were to live in a country where there is neither a Constitution nor the law to regulate us, but only our own actions, each doing what we like, each in our own way. This is called **anarchy**. Hence, the constant referral and reliance on the canonical records: it is not our practice that authenticates the Buddha Dharma; rather, it is the Buddha Dharma that authenticates our practice when they are in mutual agreement.

Then, our ship not only has a good engine but is guided by a gyrocompass, a strong rudder and a good captain and crew. A strong watertight hull keeps out the waters. So long as the waters remain outside the ship, it is safe. The ship does not sink because of the water *around* it, but because of the water *inside* it.

5.1.1.8 The oral tradition developed various methods to ensure that the Buddha's teachings were properly preserved both in meaning and in word (*sāttam sa, vyañjanam*).⁴³⁵ We see at least the following transmission methods and features pervading every aspect of the early Buddhist texts.⁴³⁶

- (1) repetitions of words, phrases, passages and whole suttas;
- (2) standardization of words, phrases and passages (the longer ones are known as “pericopes”);
- (3) the use of strings of synonyms and near-synonyms;
- (4) the use of the waxing syllable principle;⁴³⁷
- (5) sound similarities (such as correlation and alliteration);
- (6) concatenation of suttas or other textual units;⁴³⁸
- (7) formal structures, especially ABA;⁴³⁹
- (8) “summary” (*uddesa*) and “exposition” (*pariyāya*), standard features of ancient Indian education;
- (9) framing narratives to define the limits and give the context for what is taught;
- (10) verse summaries of prose teachings (especially in the Aṅguttara);
- (11) similes and metaphors (usually in the ABA structure);
- (12) numbered lists; and
- (13) group recitals.⁴⁴⁰

the nuns, as confirmed by Comys: *māṭikā, dharā ti dve, māṭikā, dhārā* (AA 2:189,23 ad A 1:117,29); *māṭilā, dharā ti dve, pātimokkha, dharā* (AA 3:382,11 ad A 3:361,25). See Norman, *Pali Literature* 1983b:97, 100.

⁴³⁵ See (Dasaka) Upāli S (A 10.99,5.1), SD 30.9.

⁴³⁶ See Sujato & Brahmali, *The Authenticity of the Early Buddhist Texts*. 2015:41 f.

⁴³⁷ Mark Allon, *Style and Function – Function, A Study of the Dominant Stylistic Features of the Prose Portions of Pāli Canonical Sutta Texts and Their Mnemonic Function*, Tokyo, 1997a:191, 249 f, 252, 365; see index.

⁴³⁸ Oskar von Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pāli Literature*, Berlin, 1996: §21.

⁴³⁹ Eg, (A) a doctrinal passage, (B) followed by a simile, (A) then by a verbatim repetition of the doctrinal passage,

⁴⁴⁰ Mark Allon 1997a:366.

The phrase, “**in word**” (*sa, vyañjanam*), in reference to the oral tradition, does not mean that the suttas record the Buddha’s teachings, *ipsissima verba*, word for word, as they are spoken. It would be very odd if the Buddha or the sutta actors were to speak in the repetitive style of the oral tradition! Clearly, only the key words or phrases are reflected in the text, which is constructed in such a way that facilitates smooth recitation for committing them to memory. There is nothing innovative here, but it’s the nature of the oral tradition.

5.1.1.9 In the early years of the ministry, when there were only arhats in the sangha—that is, only the noble sangha (*ariya, sangha*)—there is no need for **the Vinaya** (“that which drives away (unwholesome states)”, that is, the disciplinary code that wards off unwholesome deeds on account of greed, hate or delusion, and their various forms. Once the Buddha allowed the monks to admit others who were not even streamwinners (those on the 1st step of the noble path), they have to be guarded against whatever that holds them back to the world. One of the Vinaya’s vital purposes is to ensure that the monks and nuns remain renunciants, so that they are able to train themselves in the Dharma to reach the path in this life itself to become **noble disciples**.

The Vinaya rules were introduced only after new offences were committed by monastics. The rules were defined and refined⁴⁴¹ to prevent future breaches, and to deal with various disciplinary aspects of the offences. As the rules grew, they were codified and standardized into 227 rules for the monks and 311 for the nuns.⁴⁴² Unlike the suttas, the Vinaya rules evolved over time: the core-rules were introduced by the Buddha himself, and related rules, amendments, interpretations and exceptions were added in due course by the sangha in conclave. The Pali Vinaya as we have it today was probably redacted after the 2nd Council (Vesāli)—recorded as Culla, vagga 12 (V 2:294-308), the last chapter—that is, around the 1st century CE.

Besides the Theravāda Vinaya, there are also the Vinayas of the Mahāsaṅghika, the Mahīśāsaka, the Dharmaguptaka, and the Sarvāstivāda (or Mūla, sarvāstivāda). Although all these Vinayas agree on the first 4 “defeat” (*pārājika*) rules for monastics—against sexual intercourse, stealing, murder and false claims of spiritual attainment—there are variations in the remaining rules. Thus, across the schools, the monks’ rules vary from 218 to 263, and for the nuns from 279 to 380.⁴⁴³ While the Theravāda (and some other schools) do not allow the reordination of a “defeated” monastic (who has broken any of the *pārājika* rules), the Mūla, sarvāstivāda retains a possibility of redemption from this state by that offender continuing to live in the monastery as a “*pārājika* penitent” (*śikṣā, dattaka*).⁴⁴⁴

5.1.1.10 The Pali Abhidhamma has been more fully discussed elsewhere [SD 26.1]. While the early schools shared the same canon of suttas [5.1.1.3]—with each school probably recording them in their own local dialect, most of which are now lost—their Abhidharma collections differed significantly. This shows that the Abhidharma was a late compilation and recorded mostly their own interpretations and opinions regarding Buddhist scholastic teachings: they were basically technical systematization and enumeration of Buddhist teachings.

Since each school had its own Abhidharma collection, and each differed significantly from the other, we may say that it consisted mostly of **Buddhist dogmatics** (unlike the early suttas). Abhidharma specialists and scholars tend to view the suttas as discursive or provisional (*sappariyāya*) and conventional (*sammuti*) teachings, presenting the Dharma using worldly language of stories, myths, metaphors and literary figures.

On the other hand, the Abhidharma was traditionally (each school) conceived as a precise (*nipariyāya*) and definitive (*param’attha*) presentation of the Dharma. Hence, it tends to provide an

⁴⁴¹ On how this was likely done by the early sangha, see K R Norman, *Pali Literature*, 1983b:19-22.

⁴⁴² See *The Pātimokkha*, (ed) William Pruitt, (tr) K R Norman, Pali Text Soc, 2001:xxxviii f.

⁴⁴³ On the Vinaya, see Ency Bsm: Vinaya; K R Norman, *Pali Literature*, Wiesbaden, 1983b:18-29. Routledge Ency Bsm: 804-810.

⁴⁴⁴ See Princeton DB: śikṣādattaka.

objective, impersonal, and highly technical description of the specific characteristics of reality and the causal conditionality of things.

Scholars try to explain the Abhidharma tradition as having arisen in either of 2 ways. In one theory, accepted by most Western scholars, the Abhidharma is thought to have evolved out of the “**matrices**” (*māṭikā*; Skt *māṭṛkā*) or numerical lists of **dharmas** (states or units of reality), that were used as mnemonic devices for organizing the Buddha’s teachings. While the sutta treatment of dharmas are shaped by its oral tradition, the Abhidharma employed scholastic (technical)—almost like that in modern science, but it is important to remember that it is a pre-scientific dogmatic system, and may, in time, be proven wrong or inaccurate by science.

Even when right, an Abhidharma teaching is only wholesome when it helps us better understand the suttas, and helps transform us into a better person. Even then, when we think that knowing Abhidharma makes *us* right, and gives us a sense of arrogance (*māna*) of being apart from, even above, others, then, we have fallen into an unwholesome mental state, quite contrary to the spirit of the Buddha Dharma.

5.1.1.11 A second theory, favoured by Japanese scholars, is that the Abhidharma⁴⁴⁵ evolved from **catechistic discussions** (*abhidharma, kathā*), employing the dialogue format to clarify problematic issues of doctrine. This technical approach is sometimes found in the suttas, where, for example, the Buddha gives a brief teaching (*uddesa*), which is then explained by way of exegesis (*niddesa*)—a style in which the elder Mahā Kaccāyana is declared to be the foremost. This method is also known as **veyyākaraṇa** which is one of the 9 limbs of the Teacher’s teaching⁴⁴⁶ or of the 12 genres⁴⁴⁷ of Mahāyāna literature.⁴⁴⁸

As already stated, Abhidharma teachings are useful and reliable when they help us with a clearer understanding of the suttas. Otherwise, they tend to be speculative dogmas which become “empowering knowledge” for people who think they have understood some deep or secret teachings. Where the Abhidharma gives **numerical teachings**, such as descriptions of the mental processes, the teachings would become outdated, or would be disproved by modern science in due course.

The Abhidharma can be helpful when, based on our good understanding of the suttas, and with proper personal practice, we master its teachings to explicate difficult aspects of sutta teachings. Otherwise, we should set the Abhidharma aside as later scholasticism that is likely to hinder our Dharma understanding and spiritual progress, or worse, give us a false notion of having attained some high state, when the reality is that we are stuck in a thick view of self-deception.

5.1.1.12 The first serious **schism** in Buddhism was said to have occurred as a result of the 2nd Council (at Vesālī)⁴⁴⁹ [5.1.1.7], when the Sthavira, nikāya (the traditional “elders”) broke away from the Mahā, saṅghika (the progressive great community). **Andrew Skilton**, in his *A Concise History of Buddhism* (2004),⁴⁵⁰ suggests that the problems of contradictory accounts of the Council are “solved”

⁴⁴⁵ While “Abhidhamma” (P) refers to the Pali tradition, “Abhidharma” (Skt) refers broadly to the Mahāyāna or broadly, incl all traditions.

⁴⁴⁶ *Nav’āṅga satthu, sāsana*, viz: (1) *sutta* (discourses); (2) *geyya* (prose with verses) (3) *veyyākaraṇa* (prophecies); (4) *gāthā* (verses); (5) *udāna* (verses of uplift); (6) *iti, vuttaka* (“thus said” teachings); (7) *jataka* (past-life story); (8) *abbhuta, dhamma* (miraculous accounts); (9) *vedalla* (catechisms): SD 51.16 (2) defs; SD 3.2 (1.4); SD 26.11 (3.2.1.3); SD 30.2 (2.1); SD 30.10 (4).

⁴⁴⁷ The 12 Mahāyāna genres—*dvādaśāṅga, (pra)vacana*—are: (1) *sutra* (scripture); (2) *geya* (mixed prose and verse); (3) *vyākaraṇa* (prophecies); (4) *gāthā* (verses); (5) *udāna* (inspired verses); (6) *nidāna* (frame stories); (7) *vaipulya* (catechisms); (8) *jataka* (past lives stories); (9) *adbhuta, dharma* (marvellous events); (10) *avadāna* (heroic tales); (11) *iti, vṛttaka* (“thus heard” teachings); (12) *upadeśa* (instructions).

⁴⁴⁸ For an overview of the Abhidharma: Routledge Ency Bsm 2007:553 f; Princeton DB 2014:4. On the Pali Abhidhamma, see Norman, *Pali Literature*, 1983b:96-107.

⁴⁴⁹ It was held about 100 years after the 1st Council.

⁴⁵⁰ Birmingham: Windhorse, 2004.

by the Mahāsaṅghika work *Śāriputra, paripṛcchā*,⁴⁵¹ purportedly “the earliest surviving account of the schism” (2004:48).⁴⁵²

According to this account (which, of course, sides with the Mahāsaṅghika), the Council was convened at Pāṭaliputra over Vinaya matters, and it says that “the schism resulted from the majority (*Mahāsaṅgha*) refusing to accept the addition of rules to the Vinaya by the minority (*sthaviras*).” The Mahāsaṅghikas therefore saw the Sthaviras [the Elders] as being a breakaway group which was attempting “to modify the original Vinaya.” (2004: 64)

Scholars generally agreed (according to Skilton) that the matter of dispute was indeed a matter of Vinaya, and had noted that the Mahāsaṅghika account was bolstered by the Vinaya texts themselves, as Vinayas associated with the Sthaviras do contain more rules than those of the Mahāsaṅghika Vinaya (2004:48). Modern scholarship, therefore, adds Skilton, generally agreed that the Mahāsaṅghika Vinaya was the oldest (id). Future historians, he claims, might determine that a study of the Mahāsaṅghika school would contribute to a better understanding of the early Dharma-Vinaya than the Theravāda (2004:64).⁴⁵³

Earlier on, in 1977, Jan Nattier and Charles Prebish published an article on “Mahāsaṅghika Origins, The Beginnings of Buddhist sectarianism” (*History of Religions* 16 1977:237-272). This paper expresses more or less the same opinions as held by Skilton, who must surely have read it anyway.

I’m keeping my mind open on this debate, especially when **Bhikkhu Sujato**, in his characteristically cogent defence of the Theravāda in response to Prebish (and also indirectly, to Skilton), has published a full response in his paper, “Mahāsaṅghika—the earliest Vinaya?” (2012a).⁴⁵⁴ Those keen in early Buddhist history, especially in connection with the early Vinaya, should read Sujato’s article.⁴⁵⁵ [4.4.9]

5.1.2 Cultural Buddhisms

5.1.2.1 “Cultural Buddhism,” also called ethnic Buddhism or “folk Buddhism”: their senses overlap, which means that they are not always synonymous. **Ethnic Buddhism**—such as Sinhalese Buddhism, Myanmar Buddhism and Thai Buddhism—are well established and well-known. They are officially sanctioned and organized religions, each with their own clergy. Their followers are, as a rule, defined by their ethnicity, and converts to ethnic Buddhism essentially undergo some level of cultural assimilation.

A special, high-level kind of ethnic Buddhism is “state Buddhism,” even an “imperial cult Buddhism,” such as when a Chinese emperor favoured Buddhism. This kind of Buddhism—or rather, its clergy—would wield political and social power and affluence that may rise well beyond ethnicity (they may be foreign clergy favoured by those in power).

⁴⁵¹ *Śāriputra, paripṛcchā, sutra* (the discourse on the questions of Śāriputra) extant only in Chin: 舍利弗問經 *Shè lì fó wèn jīng*, T24.1465.900b20-28: Willemsen, *Sarvastivada Buddhist Scholasticism*, Brill, 1993:xv f, 2 n6, 39-44 + n12, 48, 53-59, 106. Also A Bareau, *Les sectes bouddhiques du petit véhicule*, Paris: École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1955b:17-22.

⁴⁵² On the Sthavira, nikāya and the Mahāsaṅghika, see Routledge Ency Bsm 2007:554-556.

⁴⁵³ If Skilton’s excitement hinted of “Theravāda-bashing,” one wonders if it might have been linked to this popular trend in the early Western Buddhist Order of Sangharakshita, of which he was an Order Member named Sthiramati, ordained in 1979.

⁴⁵⁴ “Mahāsaṅghika—The earliest Vinaya?” Santipada, 2012. Rev ed 2017: <https://discourse.suttacentral.net/t/why-the-mahasa-ghika-is-not-the-earliest-vinaya/7458>.

⁴⁵⁵ Also see K R Norman, *Pali Literature*, 1983b:18-22. My only complaint about Sujato’s paper is that he should show us lay readers more compassion by using the proper academic referencing so that his otherwise convincing paper will effectively correct such scholarly sallies against Theravāda. Apparently, he assumes that we have read the papers he is addressing and are familiar with the intricacies of referencing.

5.1.2.2 A partly overlapping concept is that of **folk religion**, which refers to ethnic or regional Buddhism whose beliefs and practices come under the umbrella of a traditionalized religion. Adherents of folk Buddhism may constitute an ethnoreligious group, that is, it is a category invented by scholars, especially anthropologists or ethnographers for their purposes or theories. An interesting example of a folk religion is Shintoism, which displaced Buddhism in the Meiji era in Japan to become its state religion and ideology.⁴⁵⁶

In ancient Tibet, Bon was a folk religion which was very much absorbed into mainstream Tibetan Vajrayāna, which is Tibet's ethnic Buddhism. In Chinese popular religion, Daoism may be regarded as its folk religion, much of which was assimilated into its Chinese ethnic Buddhism, which also assimilated elements of Confucian ethics. Hence, essentially, a traditional Chinese Buddhist tends to be religious in a Buddhist way, superstitious in a Daoist way, and socially defined in a Confucian way.

In much of ethnic Theravāda Buddhism—in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and mainland SE Asia—there is a significant presence of Hindu elements, such as by way of the worshipping of **devas** in Sinhalese ethnic Buddhism, of **nats** in Burmese ethnic Buddhism, and of **phī** (demons) in Thai, Khmer and Lao ethnic Buddhisms.⁴⁵⁷ These entities are actually “phantoms of power,” worshipped and bribed by the disempowered, and by those who pretend to give these unseen powers a voice, even embody them, in society for their own selfish gains. Hence, these spirits continue to have power and to lurk in the undergrowth of Buddhism.

5.1.2.3 Filipino Buddhists show interesting developments in their religious consciousness. Most of the Buddhists are Chinese, and, understandably, they keep to the ritualist tradition that is Pure Land Buddhism, where it fits nicely into their worldly priorities of daily work and wealth. They are deeply insular by nature, fiercely loyal to their ethnicity, using affluence (such as Temples and Idols of various sizes) as the main means of social strength. Hence, they are capable of socially insulating themselves from any interventions or influence from the dominant Christian culture.

Native (non-Chinese) Filipino Buddhists, on the other hand, especially the Theravāda converts and supporters, feel especially vulnerable because they lack both number and social status, and thus fear any retaliation from the powerful Catholic Church and its followers who dominate their society. Hence, Filipino Theravāda converts often feel they need to periodically “prove” that they are neither “atheistic” nor “anti-Christian,” nor any threat to the mainstream. This is often done, for example, by interspersing their websites and publications with Catholic pictures and Bible quotes. Hence, for such Buddhists, it seems that “folk Catholicism” will always lurk in their consciousness well into the foreseeable future.

5.1.2.4 As Buddhism spread to the West and westerners convert to Buddhism, we still see many such converts or nominal Buddhists conditioned by “**folk Christianity**” by way of the influences of the ideas of an immortal soul, or Jesus Christ, even the God-idea lurking darkly in the unconscious of Western convert Buddhists. Such influences can be detected in their hesitance with, even rejection of Buddhist teachings, especially that of nonself, or in their attitudes towards the Buddha or Buddhahood.

Tibetan Buddhism is especially successful or popular with Western Buddhists, especially Hispanics, who have been conditioned by their Catholic childhood and ambience. Tibetan Buddhist ideas about the Buddha, Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and Buddha-nature can easily fit into a numinous sense of Godliness that these converts are so accustomed to. Hence, Catholicism continues to be the “folk religion” of such Buddhists. [5.1.2.3]

5.1.2.5 Amongst the world religions, Judaism and Hinduism can be regarded as ethnic religions, since, as a rule, those who follow Judaism are called “Jews,” and Hindus are predominantly Indians or would adopt the Indian mode of praying, dress, food and other features. Within Hinduism itself,

⁴⁵⁶ See SD 60.1c (1,10).

⁴⁵⁷ On Buddhist modernism and ethnicism, see SD 60.1c (1.9).

however, there are more local ethnic traits that we may call “folk Hinduism.” We often enough see such “folk” traits even in modern Buddhism today.

To be Buddhist, then, is to live in a colourful spectrum of the Buddha’s evolutionary path, refining our practice by overcoming **the 1st 3 fetters** of:

- (1) self-identity view (identifying with any culture or race),
- (2) doubt (not fully confident in Buddha Dharma as our way of life) and
- (3) superstition (relying on race-based beliefs and practices for solace).⁴⁵⁸

By overcoming the self-identity view, we evolve into true humans by seeing others as capable and desirable of being human too. It is a matter of broadening our consciousness with joyful goodness to encompass others. Overcoming doubt, we cut down being distracted by quick but false promises of success and succour. We see the Buddha Dharma as an effective and joyful path of personal development and awakening. Overcoming superstition, we break out of being emotionally dependent on others, especially what we see as embodiments of power, but instead empower ourselves to directly experience true reality, thus rising above suffering by self-effort, just as the Buddha and the arhats have done.

5.1.3 Textual Buddhisms

5.1.3.1 Some of the most vital contributors to the rise of an “intelligent” Buddhism—that helps free us from being ensnared with *a particular Buddhism or race, a particular teacher or scholar, a particular view or dogma*—are the scholars of Buddhism. Of course, not all scholars are the same: there are excellent scholars and there are mediocre ones; and there are very good students and poor students. The poor students merely collect great ideas and rehash them up for public display; the good students are inspired by insightful studies by which they discover their own insights, even discover themselves through Buddhism.

The bottom-line is that we are scholars and students of Buddhism because there are **the Buddhist texts**, to be exact: **the Pali canon**. Even without the Abhidhamma, or without knowing the Abhidhamma, we can still sustain up a proper practice of the Buddha’s teaching, and have a good idea, even a clear and joyful taste, of the Buddha’s awakening experience. However, when we have no Dharma-Vinaya, but only the Abhidhamma, we will never know what early Buddhism is really about, much less experience any vision of awakening for ourselves.

A good scholar soon realizes that there is a vital difference between true scholars and true students. Scholars study, defend their theses, work for a tenure, publish as much as possible, find time for family, finally retire, often forgetting themselves. **A good student** never stops learning, awakening in due course.

5.1.3.2 We have already noted how vital, and how vitally fortunate, it is for us to have **the Pali canon** [5.1.1.5]. Those who study the Buddhist texts—especially the Pali canon (as Dharma-Vinaya), and the Pali Tipiṭaka (including the Abhidhamma), and early Buddhism and its textual traditions—give us a rare ideal vision of an ancient past, when it all began, so to speak. Note that I have used “textual Buddhisms” (plural) as the title: any kind of Buddhism that bases itself squarely on a traditional set of scriptures can be said to be a textual Buddhism. However, we are only concerned with the Pali canon, since it is the only historically and traditionally complete scripture constituting “early Buddhism.”⁴⁵⁹

As for **the Pali canon**, by its very nature of being *humanly germane, intellectually unified and spiritually profound collection of teachings*, could not have been compiled willy-nilly, or “constructed” by some later monks or committee.] [5.1.1.5]. Even when we discover **archaeological remains**—bits

⁴⁵⁸ For a study of the 3 fetters (*ti, samyojana*), see **Emotional independence**, SD 40a.8.

⁴⁵⁹ See Sujato & Brahmali, *The Authenticity of the Early Buddhist Texts*, 2015 & SD 60.1d (14.2.2).

and pieces of ancient stupas, buildings, carvings, figures, and other artefacts—we will be able to make better sense of them through the textual traditions.

5.1.3.3 Beyond the Theravāda Buddhists of contemporary South and SE Asia, there are Buddhists in North and East Asia who follow traditions based on later Buddhist developments, often reflecting local ideas, called **Mahāyāna**. While Theravāda may be seen as “a school with its own closed canon and Vinaya, Mahāyāna is an overarching term used to denote the philosophical basis for an array of diverse and geographically dispersed forms of Buddhism (mostly historically with China and East Asia).”⁴⁶⁰

Another important influential textual tradition, **the Buddhist Tantras**, appeared from around the 2nd century CE in northern India and spread northwards, throughout the Himalayas (Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan, Sikkim, and so on), into north Asia (Mongolia, Siberia and China), and even East and SE Asia. Tantra was a pan-Indian shamanic movement which had a major influence upon Brahmanism and other Indian religions. It incorporated texts, beliefs, and practices that aimed to transform the elements and our physical body into the means for spiritual attainment and transformation as envisioned in Tantra.

Tantric Buddhism or Tantra, yāna is also known as **Vajra, yana**. Edward Conze, in his *A Short History of Buddhism* (London, 1980), conveniently discussed the historical development in periods of 500 years, thus:

500-0 BCE	a “psychological” Indian Buddhism leading to the arhat ideal
0-500 CE	an “ontological” or gnostic Mahāyāna leading to the Bodhisattva ideal
500-1000 CE	“cosmological” Tantra and Zen, with the ideal of the Siddha
1000 onwards	Buddhism stagnates or declines

Note that Conze’s speculation on the 4th period (“1000 CE onwards”) was wrong. Far from stagnating, modern Buddhism is engaging with various aspects of science and society, which we have been discussing now into our 3rd volume. Conze’s book was hurriedly written (filled with numerous typos) as a favour to Italian scholar of Tibetan culture, Giuseppe Tucci (1894-1984).⁴⁶¹ It was included in Tucci’s *La Civiltà dell’Oriente* (Oriental civilization) under the title “Buddismo” (1958 vol 3:745-848). The work is thus not only dated but scholars hardly mention it.

Just as the sun rises and sets, even the best scholars are levelled by time and trend; each, a mere rung in the academic ladder that posterity’s young scholars step on to rise higher, as their forebears have done. Only relentless wholesome learning and humanity keep us growing, moving closer to, then up the path of awakening.

5.1.3.4 Most scholars today reject the simplistic linear depiction of Buddhist history, or do not see it as merely a linear development, thus:⁴⁶²

Early Indian Buddhism → Mahāyāna → Vajrayāna.

While it is true that early Buddhism is the singular root of all Buddhism, in later times, even today, Theravādā, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna influence one another. Hence, we should broaden this basic but important flowchart thus:

⁴⁶⁰ C Newell, “Approaches to the Study of Buddhism,” in (ed) B S Turner, *The Sociology of Religion*, 2010:389.

⁴⁶¹ Tucci was a supporter of Italian fascism at its zenith, and who used idealized portrayals of Asian Buddhism to support the fascist ideology (just as Hitler used “Aryan purity” to idealize his view of the “true” German race).

⁴⁶² See, eg, K Crosby, “Changing the landscape of Theravāda Studies,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 9,1 2008: 1.

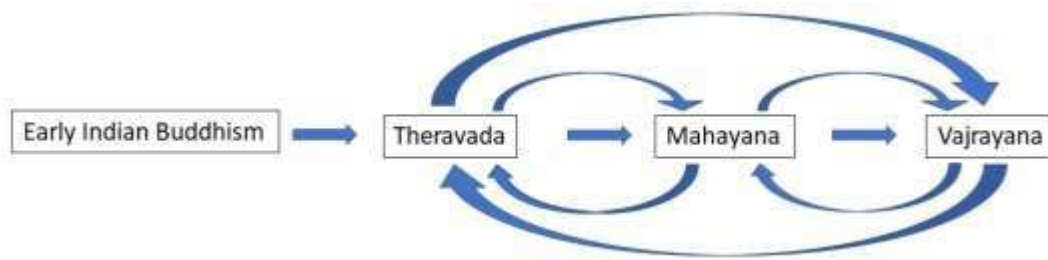


Figure 5.1.3.4 THE DEVELOPMENT OF LATER BUDDHISMS (by GOH Hian Kooi, Malaysia).

This relational flowchart shows how each of the schools *started* and how they mutually influenced one another. However, even as they are *today*, each of these schools have significant *later* developments.

Theravāda, for example, adopted the Mahāyāna teaching of the 10 perfections (*pāramitā*),⁴⁶³ and incorporated Tantric elements in its depiction of apotropaic mandala of the Buddha and the arhats, such as in the **Jina, pañjara**, the “Conqueror’s Cage” paritta (protective chant).⁴⁶⁴ Robert Buswell, Jr, tells us that most Korean monks training in meditation had extensive knowledge of Buddhist doctrine, ranging from basic “Hīnayāna” and Mahāyāna sūtras, to theoretical treatises on Sōn praxis and collections of Sōn lore. Most begin their meditation training only *after* they were steeped in the basic teachings of Buddhism.⁴⁶⁵

In this study, we mostly centre on the context of **Theravāda**. There are a few reasons for this. To begin with, there is a longer history of contact between Theravāda countries and European scholarship on account of European colonial engagements with Theravāda countries like Ceylon, Burma, Laos, and Indochina (Khmer). Although Thailand was never colonized, it had considerable interactions with its neighbours’ colonial rulers and had to negotiate concessions with them, even losing some of their own land, but keeping their freedom.

With the founding of **the Pali Text Society** in the UK in 1881 “to foster and promote the study of Pāli texts,” almost every text of the Pali canon and much of its commentaries and related literature have been edited and published, and the learning of Pali has progressed significantly well with a growing number of Pali specialists in various universities. The practice of translating the Pali suttas, their close and comparative studies, and various other guides for sutta studies, and to some extent Vinaya studies, are more common today than ever before.⁴⁶⁶ [5.2.2.2]

5.2 EVOLUTION OF MODERN BUDDHISM

5.2.1 Texts and contexts: Historians and ethnographers

5.2.1.1 Modern Buddhists who are interested in “facts” about Buddhism regularly benefit from specialist scholars of **Buddhist studies**, a broad term for a systematic and in-depth academic investigation and presentation of their understanding of Buddhism. However, these scholars study Buddhism in two broad but distinct ways which, simply put, are the “text-based” and the “context-based” approaches, between which there is often a “professional tension.”

Gustaaf Houtman, in his PhD thesis, summarizes this tension, thus:

Many anthropologists have oversimplified this relationship between text and context. Adopting the somewhat simplistic model of **context** (anthropologist’s concern) vs **text**

⁴⁶³ SD 15.7 (2.4) (1) n.

⁴⁶⁴ See “The Conqueror’s cage,” R463 160824, R623 190925. On Vajrayāna elements in Theravāda, see SD 60.1b (2.3.1.1 n). On a Theravāda monk converting to Vajrayāna: SD 60.1b (6.1.3.2 n).

⁴⁶⁵ R Buswell, Jr, *The Zen Monastic Experience*, Princeton, 1992:217; SD 8.4 (1.1.3.2 n).

⁴⁶⁶ <http://www.palitext.com/>.

(Indologist's concern), the text-context debate has been unnecessarily constrained to the level of what happens in the "field" (people's belief and practice) as against the "doctrinal" Buddhism (historical-doctrinal) as some unitary entity already understood in the west.
(Gustaaf Houtman 1991:235; highlighted)⁴⁶⁷

This tension may seem tragic (when scholars quarrel), like in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, where these key protagonists, two young lovers, each from a family feuding against the other, die in the end (through misreading each other's body language!). However, since we benefit from this scholarly tension—we can see modern Buddhism from the two broad perspectives—let's see the feuding tension as a comedy where both parties live, or rather, retire, happily ever after. Future generations of scholars (that's you) will read and quote their works, often to debunk their ideas for new ones. Yet we still need to read them while waiting for our turn in the scholars' samsara.

5.2.1.2 Buddhist studies, as we know it today, originated in the academic tradition and university system of the West. Traditional Buddhist studies in Asia had been going on even in the Buddha's time, and it took on a more familiar mode with the popularization of writing (around or soon after the 1st century BCE).⁴⁶⁸ These early centuries were period of the "**post-canonical**" writings, such as the *Peṭakopadesa*, the *Netti-p, pakaraṇa*, the *Milinda, pañha*, the *Vimutti, magga* and the *Visuddhi, magga*. Around the same period, we have the earliest Commentaries (supposed to be Sinhalese translations of the Pali urtexts). These were (for unknown reasons) lost, but not after they were translated back into Pali by Buddhaghosa.⁴⁶⁹ There were also Commentaries by other scholar monks like Dhammapāla (Badaratittha, S India),⁴⁷⁰ Upasena (or Upatissa, Sri Lanka), Mahānāma (Sri Lanka) and Buddhadatta (Uragapura, Kāñcī, Coḷa country, S India).⁴⁷¹

There were also **Pali grammars**, of which there are at least 3 well-known classics. The earliest Pali grammar was the *Kaccāyana Vyākaraṇa*,⁴⁷² by Kaccāyana (5th/6th century CE), who was evidently familiar with the Sanskrit grammar of Paṇini and the *Kātantra*.⁴⁷³ The best of the extant Pali grammars is the *Sadda, nīti* (1154),⁴⁷⁴ by Aggavaṃsa from Arimaddana, Burma. Another well-known grammar belonged to a new school known as *Moggallāyana Vyākaraṇa*, also known as the *Sadda, lakkaṇa* (12th century).

The world's oldest dictionary is probably the *Abhidhāna-p, padīpikā*,⁴⁷⁵ which is a list of synonyms, arranged, not in an alphabetical order, but like a modern thesaurus.⁴⁷⁶ There are numerous other Pali works, like the chronicles (*vaṃsa*); treatises on poetics and prosody, even on medicine; handbooks on the Vinaya, the *Abhidhamma* and cosmology; anthologies of suttas, wisdom texts and jatakas; and bibliographical works.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁶⁷ G Houtman, "Traditions of Buddhist Practice in Burma." PhD diss, SOAS, Univ of London, 1990. Published 1991.

⁴⁶⁸ On Buddhism and writing, see SD 26.11 (3.1.3).

⁴⁶⁹ A Northern Indian monk living in the Mahāvihāra, Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka.

⁴⁷⁰ SD 51.19 (1.2.4.1 n).

⁴⁷¹ On the early post-canonical period, see Norman, *Pāli Literature*, 1983b:108-118; on the early commentators 1983b: 118-137, 145-151.

⁴⁷² Ed E Senart, Paris: *Journal Asiatique*, 1871:193-544. Ed A Thitzana, *Kaccāyana Pāli Vyākaraṇam*. 2 vols. Onalaska, WA: Pariyatti Press, 2016.

⁴⁷³ See R O Franke, *Geschichte und Kritik der einheimischen Pāli-Grammatik und -Lexicographie*, Strassburg, 1902:14-20.

⁴⁷⁴ Ed H Smith, 5 vols, Lund, 1936-1966, Repr in 3 vols, Oxford: Pali Text Soc, 2001.

⁴⁷⁵ Ed W Subhuti, 2nd ed, Colombo, 1883; *Abhidhānappadīpikā, sūci*, Index compiled by W Subhuti, Colombo, 1893.

⁴⁷⁶ For details on the Pali grammarians, see R O Franke, 1902:1-64. For a bibliography, see D L Barua, Calcutta: *Indian Culture* 15 1948-49:194-202. See A K Warder, "Some problems of the later Pāli literature," JPTS 1981: 204 f.

⁴⁷⁷ For an overview, see K R Norman 1983b:108-183.

The purpose of this brief excursus into Pali literature should be sufficient to give us a good idea of the extent and depth of **the textual tradition** underlying Buddhism and its study. To only study Buddhists “on the ground” without a working familiarity of its textual tradition is like studying a family or tribe of people without any knowledge of their history and cultural background. We will only be watching human movement and sound without any way of understanding how and why they are so. Indeed, the truth is that even a “contextual” study of Buddhists, at some crucial point, demands a reliance on the texts: there is no context without the texts.

5.2.1.3 During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, almost all the scholars engaged in studying Buddhism were historians and buddhologists, and perhaps some comparative religionists. For such scholars, a text-based approach was not only necessary but also sufficient. Then, from the early 1970s, scholars from **the social sciences** —especially anthropologists and sociologists—began to study *the Buddhists* themselves, that is, Buddhist groups or societies, or the behaviour of *certain renowned Buddhists* and its impact on society. The focus of such studies was neither the texts nor the history of Buddhism, but how it was lived “on the ground,” that is, its context rather than its texts. The ethnographies of these researches focused not only on *what* Buddhists did but more so why they did it.⁴⁷⁸

These specialists worked mainly “**in the field**,” meaning that they observed the Buddhists, spoke with them, interviewed them, even lived with them, for a few years at least to have an in-depth understanding not just of their behaviour, but why they behaved in those ways. They become like guests living in our homes: they even go native, acting as docile devotees, serving as humble temple boys (they have to be young enough) and going through all the motions with an air of devotion—like King Yama in affable human guise observing and recording what we do and say in his karmic mirror.⁴⁷⁹

Understandably, for these researchers to be successful in their projects, they must be well familiar with Buddhism, that is, the Buddhist texts, which become the touchstone for what constitutes “Buddhist.” Indeed, without a good grasp of textual Buddhism, they are likely to misinterpret what they had observed (which happens to the best of them) [5.3.5], such as reading too much into their observations to construct a new Buddhism from their biases and quirks. In fact, those who can do this convincingly, high on hubris, deluding even themselves, would after a successful career or tenure, retire as iconic scholars who had not only uplifted Buddhist studies in their time (and for posterity) but created a new Buddhism in their own image! [5.3.5]

5.2.2 The vital role and need for textual Buddhism

5.2.2.1 Much of modern academic Buddhist studies and researches, whose venerable volumes grace the sacred spaces of our university libraries and our own studies are the Galataeas, beautiful sculptures crafted by skilful Pygmalions.⁴⁸⁰ Like the sculptor Pygmalion, they had to invoke Aphrodite (the goddess of love) to turn their cold stone statues into living images. That Aphrodite is the power of the early Buddhist texts, without which their fieldwork would be but enigmatic encounters with exotic natives living their esoteric Buddhist lives—fascinating traveller’s tales. The early Buddhist texts give their work that final seal of their creative genius in seeing and recording what others do not see.

Surely, the Buddha neither taught **the Dharma** with only the ethnologists in mind nor to leave remains and artefacts as later Buddhism fabricated by bad monks and nuns. The suttas were taught and preserved for the benefit of practitioners who wish to know the Buddha’s awakening experience and to practise his teachings. If the scholars see this as a unicorn, imagining or hoping that “early

⁴⁷⁸ For a helpful overview of this trend, see Houtmann 1991:242-254.

⁴⁷⁹ On Yama and the hells, see (**Yama**) **Deva,dūta S** (A 3.35,28-33), SD 48.10.

⁴⁸⁰ On the Greek myth of Pygmalion and Galataea, see SD 17.6 (3.1.3.6); SD 51.18 (2.3.1.5); SD 56.1 (4.3.1.3).

Buddhism” were non-existent or useless, then they have missed the beautiful stories and early lessons that had livened up our childhood.

The early Buddhist texts are precious because they record the lives of the Buddha and his immediate disciples, their experiences of awakening, and teachings on true reality. We have noted how, through the oral tradition, they successfully canonized and transmitted the Pali canon, so that we still have it today, even after over 2,500 years [5.1.1.5]. The contents of this Pali canon, however, were scattered in the ancient temples and forgotten libraries of Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand and Asia, discovered and salvaged by Western explorers, adventurers and those who knew the value of ancient artefacts.⁴⁸¹

5.2.2.2 A great deal can be written about textual Buddhism. Due to space constraint, keeping to the purpose of this survey, we will only examine the discovery of **the Pali canon** and its impact on the world, beginning with Victorian Britain. That we today have access to a wide range of the texts of the Pali canon from Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, and of course the Pali Text Society in the UK, is the result of historical developments going back to the last-named, founded by **Thomas William Rhys Davids** (1843-1922), the son of a Congregational minister, who gained his PhD in Sanskrit from the University of Breslau, Germany.

Rhys Davids founded the Pali Text Society (PTS) in 1881 and became in 1904 the first professor of Comparative Religion at Manchester University.⁴⁸² He discovered Buddhism while working in the Ceylon Civil Service, starting in 1864, when he succeeded R C Childers to serve for 3 years as the Private Secretary to the Governor. Sinhalese monk, Yātrāmulle Śrī Dhammārāma (1828-1872) taught Rhys Davids Sinhalese for his examinations which, as in the case of Childers, inspired Rhys Davids to learn more about Sinhalese culture.

From the colonial records, we learn that Rhys Davids came to know of **Pali** when he was confronted with Vinaya texts in the course of a trial he conducted as the District Judge of Galle. When none in the court could translate the relevant text, he decided to study Pali and, again with the help of Dhammārāma. During this learning period, he came to know the two best-known Sinhalese scholar-monks then, Hikkaḍuwe Śrī Sumaṅgala (1827-1911) and Waskaḍuwe Śrī Subhūti (1835-1917).⁴⁸³

5.2.2.3 Through **the Pali Text Society** (PTS), Rhys Davids initiated the process to put together the whole Pali canon, its Commentaries and related works, followed by their translations, and making them available to Buddhists and scholars alike. His book, *Buddhism* (Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1877), had a major impact on Victorian Britain. Although working largely from ancient Pali texts rather than contemporary ethnic Buddhism (that is, Sinhalese Buddhism), his emphasis on Buddhist moral striving made Pali Buddhism more attractive to a Victorian audience.⁴⁸⁴

This was a time when Britain was at the height of her imperial might, with Anglicanism as her state religion. Educated Victorians who read essays on Buddhism in popular journals found themselves at odds with a Christianity which Almond described as “increasingly effete in precept and in practice.”⁴⁸⁵

Another important Buddhist influence in Victorian Britain was Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia* (1879), a long blank-verse poem on the Buddha’s life. Its huge popularity only increased the British fascination with Buddhism’s romantic background and heroic founder, the Buddha. **Christopher Clau-**

⁴⁸¹ A famous discovery of ancient texts in Buddhist languages (eg Chin, Tib and Uighur) was made in the Mogao or Dunhuang Caves and salvaged by Paul Pelliot and Aurel Stein in the 1900s: SD 40b.5 (5.2.5.1). A more modern textual discovery is that of the Gandhāran Buddhist texts (1st cent BCE-3rd cent CE) in the late 20th century: for refs, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gandh%C4%81ran_Buddhist_texts.

⁴⁸² T Thomas (ed), “East comes west,” in *The British: Their religious beliefs and practices 1800-1986*, London, 1988:93 f.

⁴⁸³ Anandajoti 2016: <https://www.ancient-buddhist-texts.net/Reference/Living-Fountains/08-Rhys-Davids.htm>.

⁴⁸⁴ C Clausen, “Victorian Buddhism and the origins and Comparative Religion,” *Religion* 5,1 1975:12.

⁴⁸⁵ Philip Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism*, Cambridge, 1988:35.

sen argued that Buddhism might well have appealed to disaffected Christians, drawn by its perceived agnosticism (dogma-free regarding God-idea and first causes), belief in the rule of law (*dhamma* and *kamma*), emphasis on self-help (that is, self-salvation) and “an attractive personal founder who had led a life of great self-sacrifice” who could be accepted without the need for supernatural beliefs. (1975:4-7)

5.2.2.4 Although the Victorian British had great interest in Buddhism, hardly any of them converted to Buddhism. Academic scholars of religion eschewed any personal involvement with it, and there were then no Buddhist organizations in Britain. Almond remarked that “an overt commitment [to Buddhism] was socially difficult and, in the absence of an organized Buddhist group, practically impossible. The pressure of public opinion acted as a powerful deterrent to the expression of any opinions that might be conceived of as socially deviant or socially destructive.” (1988:36)

The British were then ruling an empire over which “the sun never set”⁴⁸⁶; many from the upper classes would be posted to govern or influence far-flung countries and regions, along with the lower-class members in the armed forces and services. In other words, family members and friends, would spend extended time away from one another. And the fact that religion was used to support and legitimize these classes, had the effect of making many feel alienated from what was meaningful and purposeful to them. It was a time of great power and prosperity, but also great uncertainty and social rigidity—much like the urban areas of the central Gangetic plain during the Buddha’s time.

Power and status meant a lot in Victorian society, and the Anglican Church was part of this power structure, which meant that no Victorian British would dare turn their back openly on the Church. Even by 1900, the few British converts were those “to the somewhat eccentric spiritualistic Esoteric Buddhism of Madame Blavatsky and her Theosophical movement” (Almond, 1988:36). Although Theosophy was radically different from genuine Buddhist teaching and practice, it served as “a romantic foil to the rationalism of the scholars,”⁴⁸⁷ hinting at the tension between practitioners and the scholars that would follow.

5.2.2.5 If we go by the growth of **the English language** in this era, it showed that, during the course of the century, many important Buddhist words had entered the Oxford English Dictionary (OED)⁴⁸⁸ with interesting references, thus:

“Buddha” (1681)	R Knox (“Buddou,” 1881); Max Müller (1858); G Turnour, <i>Mahāvamsa</i> (1937)
“Pali” (1693)	Rhys Davids <i>Buddhism</i> (1877); <i>Buddhist India</i> (1903)
“karma” (1827)	--
“Jataka” (1828)	V Fausböll (1861); M Wickramasinghe (1956)
“Tathagata” (1835)	R S Hardy (1853)
“nirvana” (1836)	Max Müller (1864); G B Shaw (1898); D H Lawrence (1921)
“eightfold path” (1845)	T W Rhys Davids (1877); Christmas Humphreys (1951); H Dumoulin (1976)
“bhikshu” (1846)	“bhikshuuku” (1811); “Hinayana bhikshus” (1962)
“(a)rahat” (1850)	R S Hardy (1850); Max Müller (1870); T W Rhys Davids (1877)
“dhyana” (1850)	R S Hardy; W James (1902)
“sangha” (1858)	“Thanga” (Burmese) (1858); E Conze (1951); C Humphreys (1978)
“Hinayana” (1868)	T W Rhys Davids (1877); D T Suzuki (1907)
“Mahayana” (1868)	Max Müller (1883); W W Rockhill (1891); D T Suzuki (1907)
“Mara” (1871)	Edwin Arnold (1879)
“Theravada” (1875)	R C Childers (1875); C Humphreys (1978)
“Vinaya” (1881)	Rhys Davids & Oldenberg (1881)

⁴⁸⁶ On this interesting saying applied to the “wheel-turner’s empire,” see SD 36.10 (2.3.1).

⁴⁸⁷ S Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West*, London, 1994:270

⁴⁸⁸ OED is the principal historical dictionary of the English language, begun in 1857, published by the Oxford Univ Press, 1895, 1928 (10 vols), 1933 (12 vols; 1988 electronic ed; 2nd ed 1989 (20 vols); 2000 online, 3rd ed.

“samsara” (1886) Ency Britannica 21:289/1; W Y Evans-Wentz (1935); L A Govinda (1977)
 “dhamma” (1912) C A F Rhys Davids

This word-search of the OED only highlights references to Buddhism by well-known writers in English. The OED defines these terms (not always accurately or correctly) and gives much more examples. Even this condensed list suggests a progressive and deepening recognition of the Buddha, his teachings and other aspects of Buddhism from both Pali and Sanskrit. Such an anglicized terminology shows that since the late 17th century, there was a growing acceptance of Buddhism in the psyche of the British and the English-speaking world.

This remarkable vocabulary not only attests to the Victorian British’s literary awareness of Buddhism, but a deepening acceptance of the Buddha and Buddhism. At this stage, however—without much practical commitment to Buddhism, admiring the Buddha from afar, as it were, he was often seen as a mythological figure until about 1830, and by the 1850s, his **historicity** was widely accepted.

The Buddha has been compared to Luther, with Buddhism pictured as a reform movement like the Protestant Reformation (Almond, 1988:55 f, 73). He was praised for his qualities that included truthfulness, humility, chastity, patience and self-sacrifice, and “superior mental endowments ... sanctity of character ... serene gentleness ... wisdom and eloquence ... [and above all] compassion and sympathy.” Not surprisingly, Almond concludes that, in British eyes, “the Buddha was an ideal Victorian gentleman” (Almond, 1988:7 f, 79).⁴⁸⁹

If this were a “**Protestantization**” of Buddhism, it was a gratifying term for a growth of the British awareness of the Buddha and Buddhism, and their growing readiness for accepting them on a deeper level: we can see the West’s tired faith in a weary old gentry Church displaced by the rich spirituality of early Buddhism. Those who have no love for early Buddhism (or Buddhism as a whole) merely stir up the still deep waters and complain: “Look at how murky it is!” and do not see how the bright and beautiful British country-path epitomizes a vision of early Buddhist beauty and truth.

5.2.3 Socio-karma (Group karma)

5.2.3.1 Kate Crosby, in her elegant and instructive editorial to *Contemporary Buddhism* 9,1 (May 2008) writes on “Changing the landscape of Theravāda studies.” Essentially, she reflects on the up-grading of Theravāda studies (I presume we may include early Buddhist studies), including what should be done by scholars. Let me highlight her key idea, which, I think, directly concerns every informed Buddhist (those who value and practise the Dharma). Let me quote one of the most elegant passages I have read in a Buddhist studies journal:

Here we see then, that in the case of so-called **socio-karma**—where the interests of Theravada textualists, sociologists and Buddhists would appear to coincide in seeking to analyse the core of Theravada Buddhists’ beliefs about how society functions—certain presuppositions are forcing scholarship to deny Theravada its proper representation. The presuppositions at play here are the notion that true Theravada is the same as early Buddhism, that this early Buddhism has been accurately characterised from the western defined canon of Theravada, and that true early Buddhism is essentially individualistic and asocial.

Our minds naturally turn to the possible influence of Max Weber, the nineteenth-century German scholar attributed with the invention of sociology, whose views on the individualistic and life-denying nature of Buddhism seem to be reflected here (Weber 1958).⁴⁹⁰ And Weber is also shaping the agenda from another perspective, through his influence on the way in which social anthropologists set the framework within which they

⁴⁸⁹ Further on Buddhism and the religious-intellectual climate of Victorian Britain: Bluck, *British Buddhism*, 2006:4-6.

⁴⁹⁰ Max Weber, *The religion of India: The sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*. [1923] Ed & tr H H Gerth & D Martindale. Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958.

study Theravada society, not only on the basis of Weber's understanding of Asian Buddhism (which in a perverse irony they tend at least partially to reject) but also on the basis of his understanding of European Calvinism.

Weberian influence in both textual and sociological studies silences the significance of the kammic social context, and deflects scholars from themes central to practitioners and communities towards the extremes of assumed individualism, on the one hand, and macro-politics, on the other.

... Once pointed out it seems questionable, to say the least, that we have been content to allow a nineteenth-century Prussian analysis of a late form of one branch of European Protestant Christianity—in the context of the pervasive relationship between Catholicism and the state in the recent, tumultuous European history of the time—to shape representations of Theravada society today. (Kate Crosby, 2008:3; paragraphed)

Earlier on in her essay, Crosby mentions that **Charles Hallisey** (1995),⁴⁹¹ recognizing “the problematic artificiality of textual studies (especially where ethnologists are concerned), wrote on how scholars have worked on representing the “social life of texts, the local functional canonicities in a context of regional and chronological diversity.” (Crosby id)

5.2.3.2 Crosby (2008) then mentions, as examples, the following projects to survey and catalogue textual cultures, “set to transform further the horizons of Theravāda textual scholarship”:

- the work of L'École française d'Extrême Orient (EFEO) on Khmer literature surviving the Democratic Kampuchea period,
- the Laos-German manuscript preservation project in Vientiane, and
- the Social Research Institute at Chiang Mai University.

“Yet still this common ancestry between the two main branches of Theravada studies can leave some astonishing gaps in the representation of Theravada, gaps so yawning that we may look straight into them without seeing that they are there.” (Crosby 2008:2).

Pointing out one such gap, **Jonathan Walters** notes the repeated discussion of **karma** (Pali, *kamma*) by Theravada Buddhists, particularly discussion of how karma affects and binds individuals within their society. Yet, Walters observed a stark contrast between this and western scholarly attitudes to karma. He demonstrates that even when textual scholars are confronted by repeated evidence of the importance of social karma in texts, they still dismiss it. Walters notes that anthropological studies of karma do the same:

By the same token, karma plays almost no role in such seminal collections on Theravāda Buddhist society as the edited volumes on *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Sri Lanka*, *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Burma, Thailand and Laos*, and *The Two Wheels of Dhamma*, nor in such narratives of Theravāda Buddhist social history as Gombrich's *Theravada Buddhism: A social history from ancient Benares to modern Colombo* or Chakravarti's *The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism*. Melford Spiro's *Buddhism in Society*, which makes its explicit project to determine the relationship between “kammatic Buddhism” and society, fails to recognize any but mundane socio-karma and therefore can portray karma as at best an obstacle to economic development and public charity. (Walters 2003:16)

Similarly, it was **Phibul Choompolpaisal's** experience of not recognising the representations of his own Thai religious background in Buddhist Studies in the West that led him to trace the pervasive influence of Weberian ideas throughout social anthropological studies of Theravada. There is a need to cut down the Weberian forest to see the tree of early Buddhism (Dh 283).⁴⁹² As Choompolpaisal

⁴⁹¹ C Hallisey, “Roads taken and not taken in the study of Theravāda Buddhism,” in (ed) Donald S Lopez, Jr, *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, Chicago: Univ of Chicago Press, 1995:31-61.

⁴⁹² On Dh 283: SD 15.10b (2) SD 32.10 (2.6), SD 40b.5 (5.1.2.8).

points out in his 2008 article,⁴⁹³ the result is that social anthropological depictions of different Theravāda cultures all seen the same. Yet, with their growing awareness of the distinctive varieties of Theravāda cultures, scholars will begin to clearly see what they had unwittingly missed before (or perhaps they would have blissfully retired by then to notice it).

5.2.3.3 Crosby summarizes the key challenge of modern ethnographers as “the struggle to shake off the shackles of these two authorities—a colonially preselected canon and a western-derived social theory that involves assessing religion in terms of macropolitics and macroeconomics—confronts not just academics seeking to represent Buddhist societies, but also Buddhists living in those societies as well. The ongoing relationship between hegemonic social theory and both governmental—be they colonial, occupying, or national—and non-governmental organisations is informed by these same preoccupations.” (2008:3)

This dual impact on the lives and representation of Buddhists can be seen in the other contributions to the present issue. All 4 articles examine the emotional, aspirational and aesthetic motives and responses in making offerings to monks in modern Sri Lanka, what Buddhist individuals and local communities seek from their karmic relationships with the temples that they patronize.

Jeffrey Samuels replaces outmoded scholarly approaches to merit-making, which sought to contrast a mechanistic attitude on the part of donors with the supposed early ideal apparently represented in the canon. By taking the experience of practitioners as his starting point, Samuels then shows that we can find corroborating support for such views in the very same canon. An ongoing model of Buddhism dating back to Weber and other scholars of his day had previously misdirected our textual selection.⁴⁹⁴

Kate Crosby's article also confronts preselected canonicity and assumptions of a mechanistic approach to karma. The role of temples at the forefront in enabling communities to recover from trauma is in direct contradiction of the continuing perception of Theravāda monasticism as an essentially individually oriented, other-worldly “selfish” concern, a model that pervades Weberian-based studies.⁴⁹⁵

5.2.3.4 Alexandra Kent and John Marston separately studied developments in Khmer Buddhism following the trauma of the Democratic Kampuchea period (1975-79), especially after the end of direct state control since the reforms of 1989 and the introduction of multiparty democracy in 1991. Although officially, religious institutions in Khmer do not have to support the ruling party, **Alexandra Kent** shows how the introduction of multiparty democracy only tied temples and individuals to macropolitical processes, as the ruling elite seek to control the newly established rights of individuals to vote those into power to run the country.

This political intrusion into the traditional relationship between a community and its temple has serious implications for the freedom of **Khmers** (Cambodians) in seeking security through Buddhism. This is especially significant since Khmers believe in the connection between a lack of Buddhist morality and a loss of power, bringing on calamity and insecurity exemplified not only by the Democratic Kampuchea period, but also by the current fragility of Khmer society.⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁹³ P Choempolpaisal, “Constrictive constructs: Unraveling the influence of Weber’s sociology on Theravāda studies since the 1960s,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 9,1 May 2008:7-51,

⁴⁹⁴ J Samuels, “Is there merit in the milk powder? Pursuing *puñña* in contemporary Sri Lanka,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 9,1 2008:123-147; *Attracting the Heart: Social Relations and the Aesthetics of Emotion in Sri Lankan Monastic Culture*. Honolulu: Univ of Hawaii Press, 2010.

⁴⁹⁵ K Crosby, “What does not get translated in Buddhism and the impact on teaching,” in (ed) Lynne Long, *Translation and Religion: Holy Untranslatable?*, Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2005:41-53.

⁴⁹⁶ A Kent, “Reconfiguring security: Buddhism and moral legitimacy in Cambodia,” *Security Dialogue* 37,3 Sep 2006: 343-361; “Peace, power and pagodas in present-day Cambodia,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 9,1 May 2008: 77-97.

5.2.3.5 The Khmer Republic, perhaps more than anywhere else, illustrates the multivalent problems of an imposition of social theory on both representation and practice of Buddhism, as shown in **John Marston's** assessment of the problems that Khmer society presents for classical theories of civil society. This is particularly pertinent given the successive marshalling of religion by a centralised state from the Thai and French colonial struggles for dominance of Khmer onwards.

Both the French (through the modernizing wing of the Mahānikāya) and the Thai (through the then newly established Dhammayuttika Nikāya) patronized a reform Buddhism based on a notion of a pristine and universally uniform Theravada tradition derived from the Pali canon itself read through a secularizing lens. In that context, the traditional forms of Khmer Buddhism, based around the teacher-pupil lineages of *kammaṭṭhāna* (meditation),⁴⁹⁷ empowering meditation practices, and the personal authority of monks thus empowered, were seen as “boran” (“ancient/traditional,” from Pali *purāṇa*) in contrast to the modern.⁴⁹⁸

Marston examines the ways in which, following the disruption of the Democratic Kampuchea and socialist periods, people understand *borān* more broadly, and not to the exclusion of modernity, in their search for a return to the authenticity of the past in their quest to re-establish community.⁴⁹⁹

5.2.3.6 Almost all the articles quoted examine the implications of the doctrine of karma—especially “socio-karma,” that is, **group karma**⁵⁰⁰—and that having merit is central to Buddhist social dynamics. Such insight has broad implications in both the study of Buddhism by the scholars, and the practice of Buddhism itself. Karma and how it ties an individual to their context is currently largely ignored not only by scholars of Theravada, but by non-governmental organizations and in therapeutic applications even where they seek otherwise to incorporate Theravāda doctrine. When scholars are willing to work with such new parameters—and turning away from Weberian Occidentalism—they will have new visions of Buddhism and deeper insights into the Buddhists, that is, as the study of textual Buddhism, the Buddhist individual (psychology) and the Buddhist community (ethnography).⁵⁰¹ [7.6.6.1]

5.3 SCHOLARS' BUDDHISMS

5.3.0 Reynolds' 4 modes of scholarship

5.3.0.1 Good social scientists understood that for their fieldwork and studies to be properly interpreted, they had to be harmonized with their textual understanding of Buddhism. On the other hand, text-based historians of Buddhism who also studied the Buddhists as living specimens, observed and recorded how they actually kept the precepts, meditated, understood Buddhism, and how they interacted with one another, and so on. From both kinds of scholars, we gain a wealth of intersecting trajectories between **the texts and the contexts of living Buddhism**.

Now, a remarkably perceptive study of these intersecting modes of Buddhist scholarship was done by Frank E Reynolds, helping us better understand what was going on. **Frank E Reynolds** (1930-2019), an ordained Baptist minister, was so drawn to Buddhism that, according to his former student, Charles S Hallisey (Senior Lecturer in Buddhist Literatures at Harvard Divinity School), “shaped how

⁴⁹⁷ On *borān kammaṭṭhāna*, see SD 60.1b (3).

⁴⁹⁸ Since Kate Crosby's 2000 summary of related academic studies, at least 2 important works on these *boran kammaṭṭhāna* practices have appeared. The most extensive study of these practices is Olivier de Bernon (2000) [5.4.2.2]. Catherine Newell (2008) examines the Thai temples that have preserved these practices since before their adaptation by the modern Dhammakāya temples [5.4.2.2].

⁴⁹⁹ John Marston, “Reconstructing ‘ancient’ Buddhism.” *Contemporary Buddhism* 9,1 May 2008:99-121.

⁵⁰⁰ On group karma, see **Aggañña S** (D 27,26), SD 2.19; **Group karma**, SD 39.1.

⁵⁰¹ For an interesting exploration on the meeting of textual Buddhism and Buddhism as psychosocial reality, see Kathleen Gregory, “How did the nineteenth-century notion of Buddhism arise? Two perspectives in parallel,” *Contemporary Buddhism: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 13,1 2012:113-124.

Theravāda Buddhism has come to be routinely studied in North America today by historians of religion and area specialists, by textualists as well as anthropologists.”⁵⁰²

5.3.0.2 Reynolds took a keen interest in the fieldwork of one of the leading social anthropologists of the time, **S J Tambiah** (1929-2014), who has done some fieldwork in Thailand [5.3.4]. Reynolds, in a short but instructive paper on “Trajectories in Theravāda studies with special reference to the work of Stanley Tambiah” (1987),⁵⁰³ briefs us on the inner workings of both social scientists and textual historians⁵⁰⁴ in terms of the “4 modes of scholarship,” that is, as follows:

Mode I [5.3.1]	the use of text/historical data and methods (including philology)
Mode II [5.3.2]	the ethnographic (fieldwork) approach
Mode III [5.3.3]	focus on text-historical methods with holistic support of ethnographic fieldwork
Mode IV [5.3.4]	focus on ethnographic fieldwork with holistic support of the texts (including Pali) and history

(Reynolds 1987:114)

Mode I is the buddhologist approach, focused on philology (especially Pali), doctrine, history and Buddhism in a socioreligious perspective. **Mode II** is the ethnographist approach of the anthropologist and sociologist, based on fieldwork of observing and interpreting the data collected. **Mode III** is primarily the text-historical approach that also uses some *ethnographic fieldwork*. **Mode IV** primarily takes an ethnographist approach but also uses *text-historical data* to support it.

Now, these are not ideal categories but merely descriptive distinctions, characterizing the works of the scholars mentioned. In other words, these Modes are based on the understanding there are these scholars with their distinctive methods, and the Modes help us to better understand how these methods work, along with the other Modes. Hence, these Modes are simply descriptions of the differing gradations of emphases and the heuristic variations of data analysis. “Given this way of mapping the field, it is fairly easy to place scholars and scholarly traditions within the various segments, or on the boundaries between them.” (Reynolds 1987:114)

Reynolds then gives a classic example for each Mode and explains how it works. If you are an academic student, you should read Reynolds’ paper for all its insightful details. Here, I will only summarize it essentially for a better understanding of how scholars study Buddhism, and how, as Buddhists, we can learn something useful from all this.⁵⁰⁵

5.3.1 Mode I scholarship: The Pali Text Society and Max Weber

5.3.1.1 Mode I is clearly represented by the mainstream tradition of the **Pali Text Society** (PTS) of the UK⁵⁰⁶ [5.3.1.3] as well as by the German pioneer sociologist **Max Weber** (1864-1920) and many

⁵⁰² <https://news.uchicago.edu/story/frank-e-reynolds-leading-scholar-buddhism-and-revered-teacher-1930-2019>.

⁵⁰³ *Contributions to Indian Sociology* ns 21,1 1987:113-121.

⁵⁰⁴ “Social scientists” refers to anthropologists, sociologists, ethnographers and other specialists in social science who study the Buddhists. “Textual historians” refers to buddhologists, historians, philologists and others who rely almost exclusively on the Buddhist texts to give us in-depth insights into Buddhism.

⁵⁰⁵ A memorial service was held for Reynolds in the Plainfield Congregational Church in Plainfield, MA. In lieu of flowers, donations were directed to support the efforts of Frank’s Thai student, Koson Srisang, to develop a new, updated mission for the Bangkok Student Christian Center, where Frank served as program director. Reynolds was a Christian evangelist.

⁵⁰⁶ On its founder T W Rhys Davids (1843-1922), see C Hallisey, “Road taken and not taken in the study of Theravāda,” in (ed) Lopez, 1995:34-38.

of his followers. Weber's work on early Buddhism relied mostly on the works of Hermann Oldenberg and T W Rhys Davids, and also Hendrich Kern and Heinrich Hackmann. He wrote about Buddhism in his *Hinduismus und Buddhismus* (1916),⁵⁰⁷ where he expressed his sociological ideas of Indian Buddhism as "a specifically unpolitical and anti-political status religion, more precisely, a religious 'technology' of wandering and of intellectually-schooled mendicant monks."⁵⁰⁸ His ideas about India and Buddhism did not catch on, especially amongst those who knew Buddhism better, sociologically and otherwise; so, there were critics.

Weber, using the information on Buddhism he found in the work of those scholars mentioned, wrote *about* Indian Buddhism, but, for a sociologist, he had not done any fieldwork in India, nor visited the country. **Aldous Huxley**, in an essay entitled "Wordsworth in the tropics" (1929), points out that Wordsworth's poetry reflected the English countryside for the very good reason that that was the countryside he knew, mild and moderate. But to quote Huxley, "Nature, under a vertical sun and nourished by equatorial rains, is not at all that chaste, mild deity who presides over the *Gemuthlichkeit* [sic], the prettiness, the cosy sublimities of the Lake District."⁵⁰⁹

Huxley quipped that Wordsworth's feelings for pantheistic Nature would be terribly disturbed and his poetry would have been very different had he visited the jungles of Borneo or Malaya (or even "in the forests of Germany"). Had Weber done a few years of fieldwork in India—as it is required of a modern sociologist—for his views of Indian religion, he might have written a very different account of the place of religion in the life of modern India.

5.3.1.2 The mood of Weber's writings had been assessed by Joseph Schumpeter rather interestingly: "The whole of Max Weber's facts and arguments [in his sociology of religion] fits perfectly into Marx's system."⁵¹⁰ Irving Zeitlin went further, remarking that Weber "generalized and revised Marx's method," and disagreed with Talcott Parsons that Weber (who was only 19 when Marx died, 1883), after an early encounter with the Marxian view of history, soon abandoned it.⁵¹¹ As for the rest, you may read them up for yourself.

It has been suggested that Weber's views of Buddhism as *The Religion of India* were "Marxian" in the sense that he imagined other-worldly religions led by a Guru, "the master of mystagogues and magicians" dominated the culture. T O Ling mused that if Weber had visited India, "such a period of field-work might have led Weber to modify some of his conclusions regarding the responsibility of Indian religious ideas and practices for what he sees as the failure of India to develop a bureaucratic capitalism of the kind which had developed in Europe."⁵¹²

Weber, in short, was not explaining the nature of Buddhism historically, but merely showing how even early Buddhism and Hinduism in India, and Daoism and Confucianism in China, can be seen as playing sociological roles in shaping their respective societies. Gombrich bluntly opens his essay on "Max Weber's work and the study of Buddhism today" (2018:20) by remarking: "Weber's work on early Buddhism relied on such poor information that it is almost worthless. But the concepts he used for his analysis of religion in its social aspects were so well devised that many of them are still valuable for guiding our research and understanding."⁵¹³

⁵⁰⁷ Tr H H Gerth & D Martindale, *The Religion of India: The sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958.

⁵⁰⁸ Weber, *The Religion of India*, Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958:206; on early Buddhism, see 204-230.

⁵⁰⁹ A Huxley, an essay from his *Do What You Will: Essays by Aldous Huxley*, London, 1936:90.

⁵¹⁰ Joseph A Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 5th ed, Routledge, 1976:11.

⁵¹¹ Irving M Zeitlin, *Ideology and the Development of Sociological Theory*, Prentice-Hall, 1968:111-158. Qu in Ling 1980:81.

⁵¹² Ling, *Karl Marx and Religion in Europe and India*, 1980:87 f

⁵¹³ H Bechert, "Max Weber and the sociology of Buddhism," *Internationales Asienforum* 22,3-4, 1991:181-195, <https://crossasia-journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/iaf/article/viewFile/1740/1689>, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/808605/pdf>. P Choompolpaisal, "Constrictive constructs: Unravelling the influence of Weber's sociology on Theravada studies since the 1960s," *Contemporary Buddhism* 9,1 2008:7-51. R F

5.3.1.3 The Pali Text Society (PTS), founded by T W Rhys Davids (1881), singlehandedly pioneered the study of Pali, and the translation and publication of Pali texts of a very high standard, as the foundation for the modern early Buddhist textual tradition. T W Rhys Davids and the PTS used classical Pali texts as their primary source, and have employed rationalistically oriented historical/critical methods to identify the “authentic” versions of those texts or their “ancient” strata, or choose the best readings for their difficult passages. Max Weber, for his part, during those pioneer years, relied on such texts and the works of Rhys Davids and other writers of Buddhism of his time.

In both cases, we have scholars who have, as a result, envisioned an image of Theravāda as a philosophical and/or ethical system oriented toward an other-worldly nirvana, giving priority of training to monastic renunciants, with the laity playing mostly a supportive role. Two points should be noted here. The first is that modern social scientists should remember that Max Weber [5.3.1.1], one of the key theorists of modern sociology, did no fieldwork but relied on classical texts and contemporary writings for his classic works.

Secondly, such pioneer scholars started by seeing Buddhism as a purely monastic system with almost no significant role for the laity, except as its supporters. However, Buddhist studies has matured and advanced far enough to accept that the Buddha has given a significant corpus of teachings for the laity, and there are many lay disciples who, like the best monastics, have reached the path for themselves. [3.3]

5.3.1.4 Donald Lopez, Jr, writes that “Buddhist studies ... began as a latecomer to Romantic Orientalism, an offshoot of Indology at a time when India was no longer in vogue.”⁵¹⁴ Although Indian Buddhism tickle the dull staid palate of the stuffy Victorian upper class, it was given a good start, in the right hands, to present Buddhism as an inspiringly viable alternative to Christianity. Despite being uprooted from India during the 12th and 13th centuries on account of the Turkish Muslim invasion of India,⁵¹⁵ Indian Buddhism went on to prosper throughout the colonized East, in British Ceylon and Burma, and in French Indochina (Khmer).

Victorian scholars, from the start, had no interest in the practice of Buddhism on the ground in those societies. A key reason for this was clearly because it was predominantly a **folk Buddhism** [5.1.2]—comprising mundane rituals, deva and spirit worship, and sundry superstitions—which were foreign to Westerners and had no appeal to the Victorian upper class.⁵¹⁶ However, as we shall see, this will change from the 1970s on when social scientists entered the Buddhist native world. [5.2.1.3]

5.3.1.5 From the start, the British who came into significant contact with Buddhism were mostly drawn to the classical Buddhist texts, that is, the Pali canon. As they became more familiar with Pali, and the texts became clearer to them, they see it as a means to understand and represent Buddhism, that is, early Buddhism, to be exact. When we understand the British to be intellectually inclined and religiously informed, it is not difficult to see how easily they were drawn to the Pali canon.

Some scholars would, of course, simply dismiss this as a passing, frivolous comment by a “non-professional.” For their part, they propose a host of factors to explain **the Buddhist textualism** of the Victorians. They often give good explanations for these factors, but, as we shall see, for the wrong reasons. From the available documentations on how Buddhism arose in Europe generally, and Britain specifically, we will see that they initially saw the Buddha as some kind of mythical, even god-like figure, in the Hindu pantheon. Their contacts with Mahāyāna further enriched this mythical image of

Gombrich, “Max Weber’s work and the study of Buddhism today,” London: Max Weber Studies 2018:20-40, https://maxweberstudies.org/source/files/MWSJournal/18.1pdfs/Max_Weber_Studies_18.1_LS_FINAL.pdf.

⁵¹⁴ D S Lopez, Jr (ed), *Curators of the Buddha: The study of Buddhism under colonialism*, Chicago, 1995:2.

⁵¹⁵ See SD 60.1c (8.1.4).

⁵¹⁶ C Hallisey, “Road taken and not taken in the study of Theravāda,” in (ed) Lopez, 1995:34-38; P Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism*, Cambridge, 1988:24-28.

the Buddha. This last-mentioned is already well documented, so we shall not dwell any further on it.⁵¹⁷

5.3.2 Mode II scholarship: Spiro in Burma

5.3.2.1 According to Reynolds, a classic example of **Mode II scholarship**—that of the ethnographer—is the work of US cultural anthropologist specializing in religion and psychological anthropology, **Melford Spiro** (1920-2014), as he has presented it in his *Buddhism and Society, a Great Tradition and its Burmese vicissitudes* (1970),⁵¹⁸ which combines functionalist, historical and psycho-analytical approaches in a study of the relationships between Buddhist text and practice, and of the Sangha to society and the state. This was one of the most important early anthropological studies of Buddhism ever done.

Spiro's study of Buddhism in the context of Burmese society was ground-breaking in a number of ways. His analysis was based on anthropological fieldwork in Burma, and his attempt to account for differences in lay and monastic religiosity, to understand Buddhism on the ground, was largely unprecedented in ethnographic studies.⁵¹⁹

5.3.2.2 As far as scholarship goes, it is clear that the anthropologist starts where the textual and historical scholar ends. The anthropologist is not concerned with religious texts in themselves, but rather with the interaction between the sutta-based doctrines and the prevalent views of the Buddhist devotees, and consequently, with the relation between these religious conceptions and the general ordering of social and cultural life. Spiro is aware that his project is somewhat innovative, and in the preface to his study, admits that, as an anthropologist, he hopes to build upon the philological and Indological basis, and advance upon it. (1971:3)

It is clear, then, that Spiro feels that the anthropologist can improve upon the Indological or philological scholars who have preceded him/her, using them as the basis on which to build, by informing the doctrinal and literary framework already established, and enriching it with proper, scientific analysis which needs to come from a scholar trained in the social sciences. It is clear, then, that Spiro was confident that "Buddhist doctrine" is located *in the texts*, in contrast with their expression *on the ground*, which are "conceptions in the heads of religious devotees."

With such latitude, it is clear that Spiro's work would fall under **Mode IV**, representing a holistic approach synthesizing textual and anthropological approaches to the study of Buddhism methodologies with particularly sympathy for the latter. Reynolds, however, explicitly states that Spiro's *Buddhism and Society* is "the least ambiguous and most influential expression of what I have called Mode II in Theravāda scholarship" (Reynolds 1987:114). This assessment, concludes Newell, "presumably based upon the scarcity of anthropological studies at the time of Reynolds' writing" (2010:397).

5.3.2.3 Spiro accepts the mainline PTS/Weberian interpretation concerning what the authentic form of Theravāda Buddhism is. With that as a given, he goes on to give an ethnographic description and interpretation of Burmese Buddhism which includes not only this authentic form of Theravāda *religion*—note the usage of "religion" [4.1]—but 3 other quite distinct *religions* that are, in his view, Buddhist in a qualified sense as these 3 broad categories:⁵²⁰

⁵¹⁷ See Almond 1988:7-32; also SD 59.6 (1.1.2.4).

⁵¹⁸ *Buddhism and Society: A great tradition and its Burmese vicissitudes*. Berkeley: Univ of California Press, 1970.

⁵¹⁹ Houtman (*The Tradition of Practice Amongst Burmese Buddhists*) notes that Winston L King had attempted a similar project in his *A Thousand Lives Away* (Harvard, 1964), to which Spiro owes some of his classifications (1991: 244).

⁵²⁰ Spiro also identified other, but less common, categories: millennial, eschatological, esoteric and normative; see Houtman (1991:247).

1 nibbanic Buddhism	the practice of the path with nirvana (<i>nibbāna</i>) as the goal
2 kammatic Buddhism	the strategy of accumulating good karma for blessings and better rebirth
3 apotropaic Buddhism	strategies for the immediate avoidance of misfortunes and evil.

The first two, “nibbanic” and “kammatic” Buddhisms, operate within a soteriological system. However, the salvific goal differs in each case. **Nibbanic Buddhism** is a religion with “the most radical form of salvation striving conceivable,”⁵²¹ and technically applies only to monks (Burmese Buddhism lacks fully ordained nuns). **Kammatic Buddhism** centres on the consequentialist notion of accumulating “good karma,” the merits (*puñña*) of which is supposed to bring blessings in this life and a better future life.

Note that these 3 categories are common but ideal forms that overlap in some ways. For example, while it is true that diligent monastics become arhats and attain nirvana, it is also possible for the laity, with proper training, to gain the path, and so reach nirvana too. However, the worldly nature of the laity, as a rule, rarely prepares us (the laity) to attain beyond once-returning [3.3.4]. The next stage—that of non-returning—demands that we have transcended the desire for sensual pleasures, that is, we are free from the gravity of the physical senses, and have almost fully mastered the mind. The arhat, on the other hand, is fully awakened and liberated, like the Buddha.⁵²²

5.3.2.4 Spiro in fact understands that the division between monastic and lay Buddhists is traditionally a reflection of “primitive,” that is, early Buddhism, comprising basically two classes of practitioners: the lay followers (*upāsaka*), who remained in the world, and the monks (*bhikkhu*), especially wandering mendicants, who dwell alone in the remote forests. The former, however, are mostly still far from the path; their basic practice is that of supporting renunciants with the basic supports of life: almsfood, robes, shelter and health care. (Spiro 1971:64 f)

Spiro’s third category, **apotropaic Buddhism**, features the use of magical formulae, amulets and rituals to appease spirits, ward off dangers and maintain good health and personal prosperity. This practice applies mostly to the laity, and is, by its very nature, non-soteriological (Spiro 1971:468). Hence, the apotropaic sometimes overlaps with the kammatic, both of which are the Buddhism of the laity. Then again, despite their differences, these 3 categories do not exist in themselves, but as 3 strands of the same ethnic Burmese Buddhism.

5.3.2.5 Clearly, Spiro observed Burmese Buddhists through an Indological lens, applying its colourful tints into the ethnographic details of his informants. In his account of the differences between lay and monastic Buddhists, we further see of the tropes of early Buddhist scholarship, which discounted lay religiosity, reducing it to the accumulation of merit gained by supporting the “true” Buddhists, the world-renouncing monks (1971: 64). Spiro’s approach thus favours the monastic ideal of the virtuoso monk over the practice of the untutored lay person.

Spiro’s model of the world-renouncing monk mirrors exactly **the Weberian ideal type** [5.3.1.1]. However, while he highlighted the monastic ideal, he frankly admitted that it was rarely found in the contemporary Burmese sangha. He concluded that contemporary Burmese monks were not focused on the nibbanic path, and, as such, did not live up to this ideal (Spiro 1971:358). In summaries of Spiro’s interviews with monks in which he explored monastic motivations and dispositions, he classified his subjects under such subheadings as “need for dependence,” “narcissism” and “emotional timidity” (1971:338, 343, 348), and are notably unsympathetic.⁵²³ Nevertheless, Spiro’s analysis and categories remain influential amongst scholars.

5.3.2.6 Geoffrey Samuel’s 1971-72 study of Tibetans living in India and Nepal, took 2 decades to be published, as his ideas about ethnography matured, and finally organized them as *Civilized*

⁵²¹ Weber 1958:206, from whom Spiro borrowed the term.

⁵²² On the sameness of awakening of the Buddha and the arhats, see **Sambuddha S** (S 22.58), SD 49.10.

⁵²³ Newell 2010:398.

Shamans.⁵²⁴ Samuel proposes a similar threefold typology of motivations amongst the Tibetan Buddhists. He labelled these as bodhi orientation (*bodhi* is a tatsama, Sanskrit/Pali, word for “awakening”), karma orientation and pragmatic orientation. These categories correspond with Spiro’s taxonomy of *nibbanic*, *kammatic*, and *apotropaic*.⁵²⁵

In *Civilized Shamans*, they formed the basis for Samuel’s careful analysis of Tibetan society. He identified his study as anthropological, that is, **Mode II** (1991:5) and the technical vocabulary and analytical categories of the social sciences pervaded his investigation to a far greater extent than in Spiro’s book.

A large part of Spiro’s study consisted of explaining Buddhist doctrine, but this came neither from his Burmese informants nor from Burmese textual sources, but from translations of Pali texts and European scholarship. It was clear that, in spite of Spiro’s pioneering use of anthropological methodology as his analytical framework, in many respects, *Buddhism and Society* “perpetuated many elements of early Buddhist Studies rather than holding them up to examination.” (Newell 2010: 398)

Although Reynolds categorizes Spiro’s approach to be Mode II [5.3.2.1], for its reliance upon Pali canonical texts and translations, even to a limited (but significant) extent, it could be argued that it, in fact, fits better into **Mode IV**, “a more holistic approach ... [which] takes ethnography as its primary focus.” (Reynolds 1987:114). Samuel’s approach, as attested in his *Civilized Shamans*, is classic **Mode II**.

5.3.3 Mode III scholarship: Gombrich in Sri Lanka

5.3.3.1 Mode III of Theravāda scholarship—the text-historical focus with holistic support of ethnographic fieldwork—is rooted in the French rather than the Anglo/German tradition of Theravāda scholarship. It was Paul Mus who gave its classic formulations (1935, 1939),⁵²⁶ and more recently they have been adopted and developed by scholars in the Germanic and Anglo/American contexts as well, such as by Sarkisyanz (1965)⁵²⁷ and Reynolds (1969).⁵²⁸

Scholars in this tradition rely heavily not only on doctrinal expressions from the Pali texts, but also on their cosmological, mythic, iconographic, and ritual expressions as well. These scholars highlighted the relationship of the Theravāda monastic order to the religious and political ordering of society; they emphasized the crucial role of royal symbolism and royal persons in Buddhist thought and ritual; and recognized that the lay segment of the community participates, in an authentic way, in the religious life of the Theravāda community. In so doing, these scholars have each utilised a distinctive buddhological or historical (in the history of religions sense) style to present Theravāda as a total religio-social reality.

5.3.3.2 Gombrich’s work—as his PhD thesis title, “Contemporary Sinhalese Buddhism in relation to the Pali canon,” suggests—focuses on Buddhism in Sri Lanka. His training and expertise lay in classical Indology, but his work was often based upon and informed by fieldwork (1966-67) in a small village outside Kandy. His holistic approach was what Reynolds would identify as **Mode III**. Gombrich described himself as “an Indologist sympathetic to anthropology.”⁵²⁹ His first book, *Precept and Practice*

⁵²⁴ G Samuel, *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan societies* [1991], Washington: Smithsonian, 1993.

⁵²⁵ Summarized in Samuel 1991:5-7, details 199-243, 258-269.

⁵²⁶ P Mus, *Barabudur, Esquisse d’une histoire du bouddhisme fondée sur la critique archéologique des textes*. Hanoi: Imprimerie d’Extrême-Orient, 1935; *La lumière sur les six voies: Tableau de la transmigration bouddhique*. Paris: Travaux et mémoires de l’Institut d’ethnologie, 1939.

⁵²⁷ Emanuel Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds to the Burmese Revolution*. Preface by Paul Mus. The Hague: M Nijhoff, 1965.

⁵²⁸ Frank E Reynolds, “Ritual and social hierarchy: An aspect of traditional religion in Buddhist Laos.” *History of Religions* 9 1969:78-89.

⁵²⁹ Gombrich & Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed*, Princeton, 1988:ix.

(1971),⁵³⁰ appeared almost at the same time with Spiro's *Buddhism and Society* [5.3.2.1], and like Spiro's, examines the practice of Buddhism in a rural, village setting. In contrasting the "precept" and the "practice" of his title, Gombrich examines Sri Lankan Buddhist practice in terms of the degree to which it reflects the textual norms of the Pali canon.

Hence, Gombrich perceives a distinction between what Sinhalese Buddhists "say they believe and say they do" and "what they really believe and really do" (1971:5). Gombrich labels these 2 categories respectively as "cognitive" and "affective," and employs them to explore particular issues. In doing so, he adopts a psychological approach.

Using this psychological dichotomy, Gombrich, for example, examines the villagers' attitude towards the Buddha image. His informants all claimed that they knew the Buddha to be dead, and thus beyond reach or influence, yet nevertheless they persisted in treating a Buddha image as if it "contained or embodied the living presence of the Buddha" (1971:166). Gombrich argues that this inconsistency can be understood in terms of what the villagers knew to be doctrinal fact (they "cognitively" knew that the Buddha was dead), but "affectively, the Buddha is felt still to be potent, even when an image is not present" (1971:167).

5.3.3.3 Tambiah disapproved of Gombrich's use of the **psychological dichotomy** of *cognitive* and *affective*, charging it to be "simple-minded"!⁵³¹ He claimed that "this dichotomy is arbitrarily imposed and theoretically untenable, as Gregory Bateson has demonstrated [J Ruesch & G Bateson, *Communication*,⁵³² NY: Norton, 1968], and is of little help in understanding the orientations of Buddhists toward relics and images." (1984: 375 n11). This work was co-authored by Jurgen Ruesch (1909-95), a US psychiatrist, and Gregory Bateson (1904-80), a British cultural anthropologist, writing in a controversial yet seminal interdisciplinary collaboration, "a presentation of the broader aspects of communication, to conceptualize interpersonal and psychotherapeutic events by considering the individual within the framework of a social situation."

Psychology, in Tambiah's time, was not as developed and diverse as it is today. Bringing in an alien discipline (psychology, the study of individual behaviour) into anthropology (the study of social behaviour) would clearly rock the boat. It would simply jeopardize even an expert's attempt to confidently explain the field when it is laced with a foreign element that he has to re-learn. This was no problem for Gombrich who loved sociology. He must have been quite surprised and disappointed with Tambiah.

5.3.3.4 More recent scholarship concerning Buddha-images in Theravāda societies, notably Bizot (1994), Crosby (2005a) and Swearer (2004)⁵³³ suggest other, more sophisticated readings of the complex and multi-layered relationships between Buddhist texts, Buddha images and Buddhist practice. Gombrich's approach—contrasting ethnographic data with ancient canonical norms—is similar to Spiro's, and indeed he makes similar distinctions between the types of Buddhist activity observed. However, while Spiro regards contemporary Burmese Buddhism as a kind of corruption of early Bud-

⁵³⁰ Gombrich, *Precept and Practice: Traditional Buddhism in the rural highlands of Ceylon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971a. 2nd ed, London: Kegan Paul International, 1995. Routledge 2009.

⁵³¹ Tambiah, in his *Buddhist Saints of the Forest ...*, said that Gombrich borrowed the idea from Obeyesekere, "The Buddhist Pantheon in Ceylon and Its Extensions" (ed Manning Nash, *Anthropological Studies in Theravada Buddhism*, Yale, 1966:1-26). Tambiah charged that "this dichotomy is arbitrarily imposed and theoretically untenable, as Gregory Bateson has demonstrated [J Ruesch & G Bateson, *Communication: The social matrix of psychiatry* [1951], NY: Norton, 1968], and is of little help in understanding the orientations of Buddhists toward relics and images." (1984:375 n11). Ruesch (1909-95) was a US psychiatrist and G Bateson (1904-80) a British cultural anthropologist, writing in a ground-breaking and seminal interdisciplinary collaboration.

⁵³² Full title: *Communication: The social matrix of psychiatry*, it was first published in 1951; reissued in 1987.

⁵³³ François Bizot, "La consécration des statues et le culte des morts," in (ed) F Bizot, *Recherches nouvelles sur le Cambodge*, Paris: EFEO, 1994:101-139. Kate Crosby, "Devotion to the Buddha in Theravada and its role in meditation," in (edd) A S King & J Brockington, *The Intimate Other: Love divine in Indic religions*, Orient Longman, 2005a: 244-277. Donald Swearer, *Becoming the Buddha*, Princeton, 2004.

dhism, Gombrich's interpretation allows room for doctrinal orthodoxy, in that his portrayal of Sri Lankan villagers and monks as being aware of what they "should" believe even when they do not act in accordance with this. Thus, his cognitive/affective distinction allows for a more nuanced understanding of the practice of rural Buddhists.

5.3.3.5 While *Precept and Practice* focuses on rural Sri Lankan Buddhism, much of Gombrich's subsequent work, *Buddhism Transformed* (1988), co-authored with Gananath Obeyesekere, is associated with analysis of the disputed label of "**Protestant Buddhism**." This term was coined by Obeyesekere in 1970,⁵³⁴ and is used by some scholars to refer to the "new" Buddhism of the urbanized middle-class Sinhalese who emerged during British rule from the end of the 19th century. In *Buddhism Transformed*, co-authors Gombrich and Obeyesekere outlined its key features, thus:

the hallmark of Protestant Buddhism ... is its view that the layman should permeate his life with his religion; that he should strive to make Buddhism permeate his whole society; and that he can and should try to reach nirvana. (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988:216)⁵³⁵

Obeyesekere conceived "Protestant Buddhism" as a convenient label for a complicated drama starting with foreign actors (Olcott, Blavatsky and others) [4.4.4] as role models and coaches to counter the dominance of a foreign religion and foreign power, by a chameleon-like imitation of those they hope to overcome—by becoming "them." Contra the Catholics, the Protestants proclaim the "priesthood of all believers." Contra their oppressors, the Sinhalese Buddhists declares for themselves the "priesthood of all Buddhists."

Protestant Buddhism's key dogma is that the path to nirvana is open to all, both lay and monastic. The notion that one need not fully renounce the world to reach the path led to the emergence of a "this-worldly asceticism." Gombrich, following Weber, would consider such a "this-worldly" asceticism to be seriously against the ideals of early Buddhism. Including that laity in nibbanic Buddhism would also challenge Spiro's model of Burmese Buddhism, in which even monks did not aspire to nirvana.

5.3.3.6 As if in parallel developments, while the Victorian British revelled in the Pali texts and their translations in their rejection of Biblical Christianity, the Sinhalese Buddhists turn to the very same English translations by the PTS and others as a powerful weapon against the Bible and the Church. The educated middle- and upper-class Sinhalese Buddhists, see their imbibing of European Protestant values and activities as rejecting their dominance, as if declaring: "We are not as good as you are!"⁵³⁶

Understandably, the Protestant Buddhists would also reject, or at least, not accept, vernacular Sinhala Buddhism, seeing it as representing their old colonial past dominated by the Europeans and their religion. This was a grand form of defence mechanism of **identification** with the Christians on an unconscious or preconscious level.

5.3.3.7 In this way, contemporary Sinhalese Buddhists and scholars of Buddhism came to agree upon where "true" Buddhism was located (in the Pali canon) and the format by which to access it (via Pali Text Society editions and translations). The reasons for labelling this Buddhism "Protestant," then, are twofold. First, its historical emergence coincided with Sri Lankan dialogue with Christian Protestant missionaries and disputes against British rulers, but secondly this interpretation of Buddhism came to incorporate a number of features of Protestantism itself, particularly the emphasis on the personal, individual focus of religion (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988:7). Gombrich however regarded

⁵³⁴ Obeyesekere, "Religious symbolism and political change in Ceylon," *Modern Ceylon Studies* 1,1 1970:46.

⁵³⁵ *Buddhism Transformed: Religious change in Sri Lanka*. Princeton: Princeton Univ Press, 1988. Repr Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1990.

⁵³⁶ See Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988:223.

Protestant Buddhism as being radically different from early Buddhism, and described its emergence as “one of the great transformations in the history of Buddhism” (op cit 241).

Protestant Buddhism was initially associated with Sri Lanka and its unique experience under colonialism, but as a category it is broadly synonymous with “Buddhist Modernism.” This was a label used first by Heinz Bechert (German, *Buddhistischer Modernismus*) (1966).⁵³⁷ Bechert emphasizes the complex nature of the forces which shaped Buddhist Modernism, noting that:

there was a close interrelation between Buddhist resurgence in the East and the early phases of the spread of Buddhism in the West. This interrelation was not only organizational; essentially it concerned trends towards reinterpretation of Buddhism as a system of thought.
(Bechert 1984:275, highlighted)⁵³⁸

This “Buddhist Modernism” extends to incorporate the many growing groups and forms of Western Buddhism as evidenced by Lopez’s *Modern Buddhism* (2002)⁵³⁹ which sees contemporary Buddhism as a global religion. The term “Protestant Buddhism,” however, remains highly problematic and contested by scholars, many of whom reject it as being neither valid nor helpful.

5.3.4 Mode IV scholarship: Tambiah in Thailand

5.3.4.1 As an example of **Mode IV** scholarship—that of a classic (hard-core) ethnographer, comprising fieldwork and anthropological data—Reynolds points to **Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah** (1929–2014), an Anglican Tamil from Jaffna, Sri Lanka, a social anthropologist who specialized in studies on Thailand, Sri Lanka and the Tamils, but best remembered for his ground-breaking anthropological work on traditional Buddhism in modern Thailand.⁵⁴⁰

As an English-speaking Sri Lankan, Tambiah felt forced out of teaching in Sri Lanka by the 1956 passage of language laws mandating Sinhalese as the medium of instruction. He turned to the study of Buddhism in Thailand, analyzing the growth of the dominant sect of Thai Buddhism as a tool of state governance and reform, and considering the dialectic of forest monks living apart from society, yet attracting charisma and followers.⁵⁴¹

BUDDHISM AND THE SPIRIT CULTS IN NORTH-EAST THAILAND (1970)

5.3.4.2 Tambiah carried out a series of ambitious studies that had Thai Buddhism as their touchstone. The first in his trilogy, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand* (1970), focused on Buddhist cosmology and the function and meaning of ritual in the Thai village⁵⁴² context (1961–62, when he was UNESCO staff-member, followed by shorter visits in 1965–66, when he was already at Cambridge). Reynolds observes that here “the holistic focus *vis-a-vis* Theravāda is a bit out of focus because the primary object of his study is the total field of village-ritual rather than Theravada Buddhism as such.” (1987:115).⁵⁴³ Critics have noted that Tambiah’s “use of canonical texts is exemplary

⁵³⁷ H Bechert, *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft in den Ländern des Theravāda Buddhismus*, vol 1, Frankfurt & Berlin, 1966.

⁵³⁸ H Bechert, “Buddhist revival in east and west,” in (edd) Heinz Bechert & Richard Gombrich, *The World of Buddhism*, London, 1984.

⁵³⁹ D S Lopez, Jr, *Modern Buddhism: Readings for the Unenlightened*, London: Penguin, 2002.

⁵⁴⁰ Reynolds 1987:115–150.

⁵⁴¹ Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand*, 1970 [5.3.4.2]; *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*, 1976 [5.3.4.6]; *Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets*, 1984b [5.3.4.9].

⁵⁴² The village was Baan Phraan Muean (village of Muean the hunter), between Udorn town and the Laos border in Udorn Thani, NE Thailand (opp Vientiane across the Mekong River). In 1961, it had a population of 932 persons, comprising 182 families, 149 households, and some 80 compounds (Tambiah 1970:6–31 + map Fig 2).

⁵⁴³ See also Reynolds 1972b:1015.

in a discipline often known for its refusal to deal with hieratic tradition.”⁵⁴⁴ However, “the text/historical dimension, though present, is clearly secondary.”⁵⁴⁵

Furthermore, as Reynolds points out, it is disappointing that Tambiah “was not aware of the work of a number of important scholars whose interpretations significantly overlap with his own, and whose insights could have been helpfully supplementary and in some cases corrective.”⁵⁴⁶ For example, Tambiah does not mention Charles Archaimbault’s studies of Laotian festivals, in which the French ethnologist displays a sensitivity to the complexity of the relationship between Buddhism and the spirit cults which was very similar to Tambiah’s.⁵⁴⁷

Similarly, Reynolds adds, Tambiah obviously was not acquainted with Paul Mus’s important Buddhist and Southeast Asian studies, which could have greatly enhanced Tambiah’s perception of the relationship between classical Buddhism and village religion, as well as the interaction between the dogmatic, cosmological, and ritual aspects of the tradition.⁵⁴⁸ And, again, in his discussion of the rite-myth problem, he did not make any reference to the brilliant studies of W E H Stanner, whose interpretation of the relationship between the two forms of expression among the Australian Mumbutuh as remarkable similarities with his own interpretation in Phraan Muan.⁵⁴⁹

5.3.4.3 Tambiah was neither a Buddhist [5.3.4.1] nor a specialist in Buddhism, but an anthropologist: sometimes said to be one who does precision guesswork on uncertain data provided by those of questionable knowledge. One of Tambiah’s strong critics was **F K Lehman**,⁵⁵⁰ especially in his review of *Spirit Cults*,⁵⁵¹ where he commented on a number of Tambiah’s errors and weaknesses in it. Lehman commented that a review of *Spirit Cults*:

is made difficult by the fact that Tambiah’s exposition is framed in the dialectic rhetoric of structuralism,⁵⁵² ie, interpretations in terms of categorical oppositions and equations. He weakens his analysis of symbols by making it speculative, rather than deriving it by argument from premises about what religion or culture or social structure are. (1972b:725c)

Lehman praised chapter 3 of *Spirit Cults* as “the best anthropological compilation of Buddhist cosmology I have seen. It falls short however in saying nothing much about Buddhist sociology, which postulates the ideal Buddhist society as a monarchy reflecting macrocosmos. This is serious, because village level social relations are part of a clearly perceived scheme of social relations encompassed by the monarchical ideal, and the connection between village social relations and cosmic ideas cannot be illuminated simply by direct symbolic analogizing without reference to the royal style. Tambiah maintains a healthy respect for facts on the ground, and his ground was a village. But this can become a positivist methodological obsession.” (1972b:725cd)

⁵⁴⁴ F K Lehman, review of Tambiah’s *Spirit Cults*, *Journal of Asian Studies* 31,3 1972:728.

⁵⁴⁵ F E Reynolds 1987:115.

⁵⁴⁶ Reynolds 1972:1016.

⁵⁴⁷ See, eg, “La Fête du T’at à S’ieng Kwang,” *Artibus Asiae* 24,3/4 1961:187-199, and “La Fête du T’at à Luang Prabang,” *Essays Offered to H G Luce*, (ed) Ba Shin et al, Ascona, 1966 1:5-47.

⁵⁴⁸ See, eg, *Barabadur: esquisse d’une histoire du Bouddhisme*, Hanoi, 1935, & “Cultes indiens et indigènes au Champa,” *Bulletin de l’Ecole française d’Extrême Orient* 33 1933:367-410.

⁵⁴⁹ See *On Aboriginal Religion*, Oceania Monograph 11, Sydney: Univ of Sydney, nd.

⁵⁵⁰ Frederic Kris Lehman (1924-2016), also known by his Burmese name U Chit Hlaing, or F K L Chit Hlaing, a US anthropologist (U of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1952-2009), was one of the founding fathers of Burma studies in the US.

⁵⁵¹ F K Lehman, *Journal of Asian Studies* 31,3 1972b:724-28.

⁵⁵² Rachelle Briggs & Janelle Meyer, “Structuralism,” Univ of Alabama, 2022: <https://anthropology.ua.edu/theory/structuralism/#:~:text=The%20structuralist%20paradigm%20in%20anthropology,nature%2C%20and%20raw%2Dcooked>.

5.3.4.4 Tambiah states that “*Bun Phraawes [puñña vessantara]* is the greatest merit-making ceremony in the village” (1970:160), and informs us that it “relates the story of the Buddha in his last birth before ... Buddhahood,” that is, as Vessantara (he did not give any Jātaka reference), and that it was often referred to as the *Mahachad* (great *Jātaka*) “written for the purpose of being read in merit-making rites in the form of 1,000 verses (*Gatha Pun*) divided into thirteen chapters,” and so on, all in a total of only 8 pages (160-167) out of 388 pages.⁵⁵³

Tambiah—probably on account of his unfamiliarity with SE Asian Theravada culture—failed to satisfactorily explain at least 2 important things. The first was the practice of an ordination during the guardian spirit’s festival, “and comes to the conclusion that it has something to do with the equivalence between serpents and novices ... [ch 10]. He reverts here to the worst circularities of structuralism. In fact, the doctrine requires us to make merit by sharing it with all sentient beings. There is great merit in ordination ceremonies” (Lehman 1972b:727d)

5.3.4.5 Then, there was the case of “Uppakrut,” a central figure in NE Thai mythology, and an arhat widely revered in Burma as Upagouk (**Upagutta**).⁵⁵⁴ Lehman disagreed with Tambiah for suggesting offhand that the monk’s *nāga*-shaped lustral bowl (for blessing water) represented “sexuality and power transformed into asceticism” and castigated Tambiah for surmising that the *krut* in Uppakrut was probably a garuda⁵⁵⁵ (Thai/Lao *kʰrut*; the tiny floating vowel is a schwa), who were “opposed to the naga” (1970:175).

Such a cavalier etymology is simply unknown amongst the Burmese, Thai or other SE Asian Buddhists or Theravāda literature. Tambiah had constructed his own Buddhist myth. Lehman unreservedly castigated him:

He notes that in Indian symbolism *nāga* representing water is opposed to *gāruḍa*, a mythical bird, representing sky, and suggests (p 175) that perhaps, since *gāruḍa* is *krut* in Thai, the last syllable of the Thai transformation of Upagutta’s name symbolizes the synthesis of categorical oppositions, so that water and sky are combined in a single figure. This is free-associative thinking at best, worse, a case of *lucus a non lucendum*.⁵⁵⁶ (F K Lehman 1972b:727b)

Lehman closes his review politely with a praise, a qualified one. “However, the book is marred by a bad philological apparatus. Sanskrit and Pali words are used without diacritics, something harmless except that they are so ill-glossed that one is required to look them up elsewhere and cannot readily do so. The roman transcription of Thai is a shambles. It confuses written form with pronunciation, lacks tones and is idiosyncratic besides. The Burmese words on page 177 are unrecognizable: Neh-

⁵⁵³ On Vessantara (the actual central figure of the festival, representing the Buddha), he gave a footnote quoting an obscure dated work: Henry Alabaster, *The Wheel of the Law: Buddhism, illustrated from Siamese sources*, London: Trübner, 1871:174 f (1970:161 n1).

⁵⁵⁴ On Tambiah’s Burmese “Upagotha from Burmese sources” (App to ch 10): 1970:176-178. He vacillated between spelling Uppakrut, Upagotha and Upagok for Upagutta (who he thought was a “swamp spirit”) (177). See Lehman 1972b: 726-728. Also John Strong, *The Legend and Cult of Upagupta, Sanskrit Buddhism in North India and Southeast Asia*, Princeton, 1992.

⁵⁵⁵ A **garuda** (*garuḍa*; Skt *garuḍa*) is a mythical bird, harpy (MA 2:196 = Nc 235, 3 f; Vism 206; VvA 9 = *supaṇṇa*; DhA 1:144, 279; see SD 27.5a (6.2.0) n. Also called *suparna* (*supaṇṇa*, eg J 1:203.12’: SD 52.1 (11.2.1.1) n. The garudas sometimes kill and devour the nagas; hence they are mortal enemies (serpent-beings): see eg **Uraga J** (J 31/2:12-14).

⁵⁵⁶ *Lucus a non lucendum*, usu *lucus a non lucendo*, lit, “a grove from not shining,” in reference to Roman rhetorician Quintilian’s assertion, in his *Institutio Oratio*, that Latin *lūcus* (“grove”) derived from *lūceō* (“I shine”), because groves were dark places and did not shine! An illogical argument or false etymology asserting that two things are related simply because they have opposite significations: see <https://www.latin-is-simple.com/en/vocabulary/phrase/1019/>; https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/lucus_a_non_lucendo.

bau for neikpan, Khenga for thin-ga. The great Pali invocation of Theravāda, *namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa*, is incorrectly rendered at page 171.”⁵⁵⁷ (1972:728)

WORLD CONQUERORS AND WORLD RENOUNCER (1976)

5.3.4.6 Tambiah’s 2nd book, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A study of Buddhism and polity in Thailand against a historical background* (1976) affirmed him as a major figure in his field. It explored the tension between Weberian perceptions of Buddhism as aloof from social engagement and politics, and repudiating Weber’s famous notion of famous Buddhism being “apolitical,” at least in the case of Thai Buddhism in which kingship was central. He showed Buddhism’s historical associations with and legitimating functions of the pre-nation-state “polity” in Thai history (and in South and SE Asia).

Frank E Reynolds was an admirer of Tambiah’s work and had written reviews on the trilogy. The best review of Tambiah’s *World Conqueror* surely was Reynolds’ “Totalities, dialectics, and transformations” (*History of Religions* 18,3 Feb 1979:258-268). He titled his review, suggesting that it discusses some interesting and important technicalities. It should be read in full, and here I will only briefly mention a couple of salient points that I think relate to the theme of this SD volume.

5.3.4.7 The book opens with an exposition of the classic concepts of Buddhist kingship and cosmology, comparing them with brahminical ideas. Thai Buddhism and polity are treated in terms of this classic model. The reform movements of the 19th century—especially the works of King Mongkut⁵⁵⁸ and King Chulalongkorn⁵⁵⁹—and the Sangha Acts of the 20th century⁵⁶⁰ were discussed. The second part of the book, an account of contemporary relations between the state and the Sangha, was based on research in Thailand.

Reynolds, in his review (1979), lists the following 5 important aspects—“the great strengths of Tambiah’s approach” as well as his weaknesses—that those interested in the social realities of Buddhism should read, as follows:

(1) Early Buddhism and polity (society as a politically organized state) are based on myth and history, such as accounts given in **the Aggañña Sutta** (D 27, SD 2.19) and **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16, SD 9). While the former affirmed the relationship between the Sangha and a monarch-centred society, the latter presented the idea of kingship as associated with the Buddha himself and actualized only in cultic and symbolic form. Tambiah, however, failed to discuss or notice the tension between the Sangha/laity connection and the King/Sangha connection. Simply put, only in controlling the Sangha or keeping Buddhism “pure” (ideally both), the King really controls the Buddhist population, or win their respect and love (increases his charisma).⁵⁶¹ (264 f)

(2) In showing how the religious, political and social dimensions complement each other, and yet oppose each other, Tambiah’s work had similarities with, for example, the classical studies of Max Weber and Louis Dumont (1911-98) in developing a “sociology of India.” Yet, in highlighting the tension between the Buddhist ideal of this-worldly order and centralized political power, he failed to consider the contrast in perspectives and situations in the cosmic ideal framing the hierarchy of an actual Buddhist state. In other words, he did not see this same cosmic symbolism in the well-known ancient dichotomy of the “2 wheels,” that of worldly power (*āṇā,cakka*) (or the King) and the Dharma

⁵⁵⁷ Tambiah badly misspelt the last word as *sam buddh thassa* (that is, closer to the Thai pronunciation), showing that he was unfamiliar with very basic Buddhist liturgy (1970:171).

⁵⁵⁸ On King Mongkut (1804-68), see SD 60.1b (4.4.1.1.).

⁵⁵⁹ On King Chulalongkorn (1853-1910), see SD 60.1b (4.5.2.2).

⁵⁶⁰ On the Sangha Acts of Thailand, see SD 60.1c (9.4.2).

⁵⁶¹ Katewadee Kulabkaew, “Managing moral authority: Thai king’s revived devotion to Buddhism,” 23 July 2021: <https://fulcrum.sg/managing-moral-authority-thai-kings-revived-devotion-to-buddhism/>.

(*dhamma, cakka*).⁵⁶² Thus, he practically neglected to discuss alternative and competing Dharmic orders in specifically religious contexts, such as pilgrimage complexes and the ritual life of other socioreligious units such as the village.⁵⁶³ (265 f)

(3) Tambiah made an effort to combine structural and historical modes of analysis by highlighting the presence of a pendulum swing between social centralization and decentralization; and, through his use of the Weberian concept of “elective affinity,”⁵⁶⁴ showing how society struggled with the impact of new situations. Even though he was somewhat successful in integrating the structural and historical perspectives of Theravāda and Thai polity well beyond even, say, Heinz Bechert’s *Buddhismus Staat und Gesellschaft in den Ländern des Theravāda-Buddhismus*,⁵⁶⁵ his argument was often unconvincing. We needed to understand the relationship between the dynamic Ayutthaya polity and Sangha organization in order to appreciate similar developments in the modern Thai Sangha, such as in its hierarchy and its more egalitarian organization. Tambiah treated the Ayutthaya Sangha in a very cursory and impressionistic way, drawing his examples of Sangha reform almost exclusively from the history of Sri Lanka. Reynolds thought that the correlation between the phases of the Ayutthaya polity and the phases of Sangha organization was fundamental to Tambiah’s analysis and should have been historically demonstrated. (266 f)

(4) Here we see how Tambiah expertly, yet self-consciously, applied structural/historical approach of his “totality” thesis to his own understanding of Buddhism, especially how the classical chronicles construct Buddhist “history.”⁵⁶⁶ In doing so, he obscured other perspectives of the real Theravāda “totality.” Thus, he failed to notice the competing forces from Mahāyāna, messianic movements, and indigenous cadastral⁵⁶⁷ practices in Sri Lanka and SE Asia. This brought on greater difficulties: he failed to notice how competing ideologies were actually undermining and replacing the ideal of world renunciation and the related conceptions of cosmic and social hierarchy that had traditionally supported “Buddhism and polity as a total social fact.” He also failed to see the extent and importance of the new patterns of education, economy, and social organization emerging outside of Buddhism, which would, in time, pose serious challenges to its influence in Thai society. (266 f)

⁵⁶² On the 2 wheels: SD 36.10 (5.4.1.2); SD 59.15 (2.2.3).

⁵⁶³ For an excellent account of such a pilgrimage complex, see Charles Keyes, “Buddhist pilgrimage centers and the twelve-year cycle: Northern Thai moral orders in space and time,” *History of Religions* 15,1 Aug 1975: 71-89. For a follow-up article Reynolds’s own study of “2 wheels” (in *The Two Wheels of Dhamma*, ed G Obeyesekere, F E Reynolds & Bardwell Smith, AAR Monograph 3, Chambersburg, PA: American Academy of Religion, 1972), that focuses on the tension between the royal center and the village as competing “dhamma realms,” see Regina Clifford & F Reynolds, “Buddhism and society in Burma and Thailand” in (ed) Carlo Caldarola (1928-81), *Society and Politics in Alberta: Research papers* (Toronto: Methuen, 1979).

⁵⁶⁴ “Elective affinity” (in Weber’s sociology) refers to when two systems overlap or resonate with one another, esp between the “ethic” of religion and the “spirit” of capitalism, such as by way of asceticism, diligence and individualism. See Boudon & Bourricaud, *A Critical Dictionary of Sociology*, 2nd ed, 1986:132, 294; Penguin Dict of Sociology, 5th ed 2006:126.

⁵⁶⁵ H Bechert, *Buddhismus Staat und Gesellschaft in den Ländern des Theravāda-Buddhismus*, Schriften des Instituts für Asienkunde in Hamburg 17,1+2+3 (Frankfurt and Berlin: Alfred Metzner, 1966, 1967, 1973); for the section on Thailand, see 2:181-220.

⁵⁶⁶ Reynolds noted that Tambiah explicitly called attention to the affinity between the Theravāda perspective and his own concept of “totalization” [516 f]; see also the more oblique reference to the relationship between the concepts of Dhamma and “totalization” [425]. Moreover, Tambiah provides a more specific indication of what he meant when he applied the term structural/historical, which he used to characterize his own method to the accounts of the traditional Theravāda historiographers [76 f].

⁵⁶⁷ Adj of “cadastre,” a public register showing the details of ownership and value of land, made for the purpose of taxation.

(5) This last aspect of Tambiah's approach would interest historians of religion: his various colourful cross-cultural comparisons between the Sangha and polity in Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand (but he said virtually nothing about parallel situations in Khmer and Laos). Elsewhere, he strayed far out in comparing the "totalizing" Dharmic orientation of the Buddhists (and Hindus) with Christian ideas. He even compared what he saw as Buddhist flexibility to Muslim legal rigidity (Shariah); and between Theravāda monasticism and that of the Mediaeval Christians, on why "feudalization" arose in the West. He did mention though how through the Theravāda Sangha and the mediaeval Church, men of humble origins rose to positions of responsibility and prestige. To be sure, noted Reynolds, some of Tambiah's comparisons were made rather offhandedly and open to serious challenge. Even his most substantive discussions appear only as appendages or as means of highlighting his own interpretation of the Thai situation. (267 f)⁵⁶⁸

5.3.4.8 A number of reviewers criticized Tambiah for quoting only a few academic sources which were from his student years (the 1930s and 1940s),⁵⁶⁹ hence outdated. For a study of Thailand, it glaringly lacked Thai-language references on Thai history and Buddhist practice (understandable since he did not know Thai). He made only 2 bibliographical entries on Thai-language works. Of the traditional Thai classics, he only mentioned Jinakālamālī (by Ratanapaññā of Chiangmai, 16th century), a Thai hagiographical life of the Buddha.⁵⁷⁰

Tambiah's ambitious "totalistic" scope, warned Reynolds, in the end produced an uneven work, likely to invite complaints from various disciplines; for example,

scholars of early Buddhism will raise questions concerning his rather carefree use of canonical and even commentarial texts to develop his characterization of pre-Asokan Buddhism [1976:48-53]; Thai historians will react negatively to his failure to take advantage of relevant Thai sources, as well as some of the more recent studies of various Thai kingdoms [79-101]; and social scientists will be skeptical of the adequacy of the data in which he grounds his generalization concerning certain aspects of the contemporary situation [397-400].

(Reynolds 1979:263; references detailed)

Constance M Wilson, in her review of *World Conqueror*, criticized Tambiah for not using some of the closely related contemporary works:

Tambiah is strangely reluctant to consult the work [sic] of many younger scholars, among them, Janice Stargardt's study of Pagan, I Mabbett's interpretation of the *Devaraja* cult of Angkor, Charnvit Kasetsiri's thesis on Ayutthaya, and E T Flood's these on Japanese-Thai relations in the 1930s. Recent research, such as Michael Aung Thwin's study on Pagan, which presents an alternative theory regarding monarchical [sic] attempt to purify the Sangha, and Nidhi Aeusrivongse's article on ancestor worship at Angkor, is moving in quite different directions from Tambiah's work by stressing indigenous/local aspects of kingship and polity. Both approaches, the study of classic texts and the study of local traditions, need to be taken into consideration in the study of Southeast Asia.

(Wilson, *American Historical Review* 82,2 April 1977:426)

Furthermore, like in *Spirit Cults* (1970) [5.3.4.4], *World Conqueror* too, "contains numerous incorrect and inconsistent transliterations of Thai words."⁵⁷¹

⁵⁶⁸ See also Frank E Reynolds, "Totalities, dialectics and transformations: A review of Tambiah, *World Conqueror* and *World Renouncer*," *History of Religions* 18,3 Feb 1979:268.

⁵⁶⁹ Roger E Harmon, review of *World Conqueror*, *American Journal of Sociology* 84,4 Jan 1979:1043.

⁵⁷⁰ Constance M Wilson, *American Historical Review* 82,2 Apr 1977:426. Reynolds 1979:263.

⁵⁷¹ R E Harmon, *AJS* 84,4 1979:1044. C M Wilson, id.

THE BUDDHIST SAINTS OF THE FOREST AND THE CULT OF AMULETS (1984)

5.3.4.9 The final volume in Tambiah's trilogy is *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets: A study in charisma, hagiography, sectarianism, and millennial Buddhism* (1984). Like the first 2 titles, this work embraced a number of themes, exploring contemporary Thai forest monks—reclusive, ascetic and charismatic virtuosi—Buddhist amulets usage, Buddhist hagiography, and their religious and political significance. Tambiah identifies himself as a social anthropologist (1984:3) and his methodology has been classed by Reynolds as **Mode IV**, the holistic approach which combines ethnographic and text-historical methods. Even then, noted Reynolds, Tambiah's text-historical study could never give a fully holistic picture of Theravāda Buddhism in a particular time and place but that his ethnographic approach was able to provide a more complete synchronic description. (1987: 115)

Understandably, he is well-known for his ethnographic snootiness, lampooning of what he labelled "Pali Text Society mentality," in reference to the idea of a "pristine" early Buddhism, which, in *Buddhist Saints*, Tambiah targeted:

not only portrayed by some Western scholars of a puritanical bent but also by some Sri Lankan scholars who have not emancipated themselves from the presuppositions of that "reformist Buddhism" inspired and propagandized by Theosophists with such vintage names as Olcott and Blavatsky and imbibed by the rising middle classes of the southwestern littoral of Sri Lanka. (1984b:7)

Yet, Tambiah, like most scholars, clearly depended on the PTS texts for his knowledge of Buddhism, and which he in fact often quoted in the theoretical parts of his works and to support his arguments. For this reason, he has been pointedly criticized by Houtmann:

even Tambiah, who is among the fiercest critics of the text-historical Indological approach ... has blatantly reintroduced the Indological texts through the backdoor when he uses them as key points of departure ... How methodologically sound is it to claim at the outset that ethnography is contextual, yet to anchor such ethnography in the ancient text [as edited and translated] by Western buddhologists? (Houtmann 1991:250)

5.3.4.10 In *Buddhist Saints*, Tambiah only dwelled on the polarity that existed between the forest monk (*ārañña, vāsī*) and town monk (*gāma vāsī*) in modern Thailand, and how the former's charisma drew the military and business elite to become their fervent devotees. These men (they were always men) were fascinated with power and safety, which they perceived as fetishized in the amulets and votive tablets associated with "spiritually attained" forest saints who "have access to supranormal powers with which they can fecundate the world like showers of rain" (1984:18).

Part 1 of *Buddhist Saints* dealt with the historical role of the forest monks in Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand, and showed how Theravada polity often relied on these monks to be the vanguard of Buddhist culture and to lend legitimacy to worldly agenda.

Part 2, the most controversial part of Tambiah's book, highlighted a piously imaginative life-story of one such forest saint, Ajahn Mun Bhuridatto, who died in 1949. Mun's story palely shadowed the Buddha's biography, much less to celebrate the humble saint than to aggrandize the story-teller, the monk Maha Bua himself.⁵⁷² The point was to exploit the Buddha's status as the paradigm of the saintly life, and to broadly hint that there were still such living saints (arahants) in Thai society, to "yield us an imperishable tithe from their austerities." In this part of his book, Tambiah thus showed how local ideologues wove the Buddha-biography into regional history in their ethnic chronicles (*vaṃsa*).

⁵⁷² On Maha Bua, see SD 60.1b (5,11).

It was probably academic convenience for Tambiah, or his ignorance of the Thai language that compelled him to resort to wildly religious fiction, available in nicely printed English translation,⁵⁷³ which was shown to be atypical of the genre by Thai scholar **Kamala Tiyavanich**.⁵⁷⁴ She reminded us that Tambiah, in his *Buddhist Saints*, explained that he was in part drawn to his subject by his observation of the proliferation of “popular Thai literature of magazines, books, and newspapers” in the early and late 1970s concerning amulets and forest monks (1984:3). Despite this claim, he used none of the wealth of Thai-language sources in his study (1984: 3).⁵⁷⁵

Part 3 dealt with the cult of amulets and images, and how they, in turn, were associated with the charismatic forest monks. Although certain images of the Buddha have long been regarded as having a “field of merit” (such as the Emerald Buddha in Bangkok’s Chapel of the Grand Palace), it is only at the start of the 1970s that amulets and other icons had become widely popular.

Tambiah reviewed some of the sociological and psychological reasons for this. The crucial point here was that the forest monks in particular were thought to be able to attract or generate power (*saksit*) and transfer into amulets, which thus become “charged” to become “something worshipful” (*phra*). In psychosocial terms, we may say that this is a case of thingifying or commodifying “power” into a what better fetish than Buddha-like images. The vehicle for this pious materialization is the monk’s perceived virtue, his “embodied essence.”

Part 4 considered the possible reasons why *only* the forest monks were sought after for such charismatic gifts. Firstly, Tambiah explained, it was because these monks were perceived to be apolitical, unlike the town-monks with their links to the ecclesiastical hierarchy and sectarian competition.

Secondly, Thailand was facing a “crisis of legitimacy,” as a Bangkok-oriented development model was imposed on an increasingly disaffected rural population which resented years of “benign neglect.” This, combined with other issues—such as the sidelining of the court and Sangha in Laos and Cambodia, student uprisings in the 1970s, the “fateful involvement” of the Thai monarchy with rightist military elements determined not to liberalize it—may lead to a declining legitimacy of the established Sangha and rulers.⁵⁷⁶

The “classical forms” of Buddhism, explained Tambiah, represented in the charismatic power⁵⁷⁷ of the ascetics and the magical protection of the amulets, were not so imperilled. Indeed, the more the political centre loses its self-confidence, the more it “searches for and latches onto the merit of the holy men” (344 f).⁵⁷⁸ The “fecund” link between the forest ascetics or saints and the amulets is not merely with their association with these saints, but more so with the popular idea of *merit* (*puñña*) as “currency.” If money is what money buys, then, one’s merits increases, as it were, by wearing such amulets, charged with the saints’ charisma. We see this as the commodification of religion: there are those who, rightly or wrongly, value such a commodity.⁵⁷⁹

⁵⁷³ Bua Ñāṇasampanno, *Venerable Ācariya Mun Bhūridatta Thera: A spiritual biography*. [Thai] Tr Bhikkhu Dick Silaratano. Baan Taad, Udon Thani: Forest Dhamma of Wat Pa Baan Taad, 2003. 2nd rev ed 2004, various reprs. See SD 60.1b (5.11).

⁵⁷⁴ K Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollection: Wandering monks in twentieth-century Thailand*, Honolulu, 1997:11.

⁵⁷⁵ Tiyavanich lists “a large corpus of published memoirs and biographical material that Tambiah left unexamined (304 f n30).

⁵⁷⁶ B Matthews, 1986:537 f.

⁵⁷⁷ On how Tambiah broadened his view of *charisma*, see Reynolds 1989:794.

⁵⁷⁸ On reviews of Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of the Amulets* (1984), see: Bruce Matthews, *Pacific Affairs* 59,3 1986:536-538; Frank E Reynolds, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31,4 Oct 1989: 792-794.

⁵⁷⁹ See also Ninian Smart’s review of *Buddhist Saints* (1984), *History of Religions* 25 1986:281 f.

5.3.5 Professional courtesy and academic honesty

5.3.5.1 As a rule, there is **professional courtesy** amongst the scholars, especially those in the same discipline. The rule of thumb amongst such scholars, when criticizing other scholars, is that they would always say something positive about them (even when they don't really meant it), either before criticizing or after doing so. Scholars sometimes debate passionately over controversial issues when their views differ: these often are precious moments for us to candidly hear about both sides, and to learn from them, especially as students of the same discipline or related to Buddhism.

Bruce Matthews' comments here are typical of a professionally courteous review of *Buddhist Saints*:

S J Tambiah takes up an enormous range of issues to assist his investigation, and in one sense the book can be seen as a series of essays strung together with, at times, only the barest of threads. But it is the genius of Tambiah that in the final analysis he is successful in his aim. It is not a work without flaws (a subject that provoked a bitter exchange in The Times Literary Supplement between Tambiah and Richard Gombrich in 1985), but in the opinion of this reader, it is nonetheless a splendid and worthy piece of scholarship.
(1986:536 f)

5.3.5.2 Richard Gombrich opens his Times review of Tambiah's *Buddhist Saints*, entitled "Knowledge of the unknowable," with a salvo:

Tambiah is an eminent social anthropologist who must by now have published nearly a million words on Thai Buddhism What comes with the authority of his Harvard chair and the Cambridge University Press cannot just be politely ignored, for it will be widely read and its facts taken on trust. Yet this book has so many howlers that a full demonstration of them would tediously cover many pages of this journal. ... What I am criticizing is simply inaccuracy, shoddiness and pretentiousness. My typed list of the mistakes in the first chapter of Part I alone takes two sides of an A4 sheet ...
(*Time Literary Supplement*, 29 Mar 1985:359 f)

Gombrich lists, to begin with, Tambiah's misreading of the Ratana Sutta; then, an odd comment on the laity keeping the 10 precepts (sic); wrong dates for the rains retreat; the claim that a Sanskrit Buddhist text was translated into Chinese in 303 BC (sic); (wrong) facts pertaining to Sri Lanka Buddhism and culture; and, the notoriously familiar howler, "Buddhist technical terms and historical figures are consistently misspelt." For the full flavour of the rest, and a lesson in responsible scholarship, one should read the TLS review itself, which is only about a newspaper page long.⁵⁸⁰

5.3.5.3 If book reviewing is a fine art, then, its finest, indeed, subtlest, form is that of the sublime irony of writing something really good about something really bad. Amongst scholarly publications, it is rare to find a rival to **Roger Corless'** *The Vision of Buddhism* (Paragon House, 1989), and **Jan Nattier's** 13-page review of it is a rare work of review art that embraces both wit and beauty of the highest degree amongst scholars.⁵⁸¹

⁵⁸⁰ S Tambiah, *The Buddhist saints of the forest and the cult of amulets: A study in charisma, hagiography, sectarianism, and millennial Buddhism*; and M Southwold, *Buddhism in life: The anthropological study of religion and the Sinhalese practice of Buddhism*. Review title: **Knowledge of the unknowable**. Times Literary Supplement (TLS) 4278 (see 7278), 29 March 1985: 359 f.
https://ia601904.us.archive.org/5/items/TheTimesLiterarySupplement1985UKEnglish/Mar_2029_201985_2C/The_Times_Literary_SupplementC_237278_UK_20_28en_29.pdf.

Other reviews: "The fissiparous monks," on E Mendelson, *Sangha and state in Burma: a study of monastic sectarianism and leadership*, TLS 4 Sep 1978:896; "On pain of retribution" on W O'Flaherty ed, *Karma and rebirth in classical Indian traditions*, TLS 4092:4 Sep 1978:995 f.

⁵⁸¹ This review is the product of a discussion of Corless' 1989 book in a seminar taught by Nattier at Stanford Univ during the fall term of 1991-92, and incorporates the observations of a number of participants, incl Gil

Nattier opens her review with subtle irony and a frank reservation: “Roger Corless has written a sometimes delightful, often thought-provoking, and ultimately exasperating book. Much of the information contained here has not been included in any previous introductory textbook on Buddhism, and the refreshing style, ample use of charts and diagrams, and abundant concrete examples of abstruse philosophical points combine to produce a product that seems, at first glance, both novel and useful. Yet a careful reading reveals countless errors of fact and interpretation, and the conclusion of the authors of this review is that the book is likely to leave the reader (in particular, the undergraduate reader for whom it is intended) with a substantial number of serious misconceptions.” (1992:525)

Despite Corless’ claim that his book will be “pan-Buddhist” (xx), we see a clear indication of the author’s own preferences: he tells us that the Pali texts “are themselves already heir to a denominational bias” (3). This might not be objectionable in itself, since the written Pali canon, like all written Buddhist Scriptures, does postdate the separation of the Buddhist community into distinct sectarian groups or schools. But Corless fails to point out that the same is true of all written Buddhist texts. Thus, the reader is left with the impression, however subliminal, that the Pali texts are “biased” in a way that other Buddhist texts are not.

Most revealing, Nattier notes, is Corless’ discussion of meditation practices (144-152). Without warning, his discourse suddenly shifts into the imperative: “Put a small, firm cushion under your buttocks and cross your legs ...” (145). Then, he goes on to dictate how to do so in the Theravāda, Zen and Tibetan styles, “precisely those schools that have gained a substantial number of adherents among fairly well-to-do Caucasian Americans.”⁵⁸²

5.3.5.4 “Besides methodological flaws, Corless’ book contains numerous errors of fact.” For example, when explaining the 2nd noble truth, he states that “the root of suffering is not *taṇhā* but *upādāna*, ‘grasping’ (208, 210). Craving and grasping are clearly related, and occur one after the other in the twelve-fold chain of causation, but they are not identical, and to substitute ‘grasping’ for ‘craving’ in one of the primordial formulas of the Buddhist tradition is simply not acceptable.” (Nattier, 1992:532)

Then, Corless, discussing Buddhist texts, cavalierly declares “canon” is non-Buddhist (213), which would surely surprise traditional Buddhists, from Theravāda to the Chinese schools. Then, strangely, he says that in the Tibetan canon, the Vinaya occurs not in the Kanjur (the Commentaries), but “in the Tenjur” (216)—which is almost like saying “the Vinaya does not occur in Aṭṭhakathā (Commentaries) but in the Tipiṭaka.

5.3.5.5 Nattier recounts that “another strong point is the author’s unrelenting sense of humor,” thus: “Trying to be happy by accumulating possessions is like trying to satisfy hunger by taping sandwiches all over my body.” (20). When Descartes says: “I think, therefore I am,” the Buddhist replies, “Think again.” (125). He describes Tibetan Buddhist practice as resembling Insight Meditation at the beginning, Zen at the end, and “Mexican Catholicism gone mad” in the middle (151). This may evoke

Fronsdal, Hank Glassman, Christian Meyers, Max Moerman, Mark Unno, Alan Wallace, and Vesna Wallace. Jan Nattier, “History, subjectivity, and the study of Buddhism.” Review of Roger Corless, *The Vision of Buddhism* (1989). *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 60,3 1992:525-536. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1465289>.

⁵⁸² Nattier: “As one member of our seminar pointed out, it is probably not fair to describe all Western Buddhists as ‘well-to-do,’ since many of them have suffered financial decline precisely because of their tremendous investment of time and energy in Buddhist practice at the expense of money-making activities. Such examples of downwardly-mobile Western Buddhists do not, however, contradict the basic distinction to be made here: there is usually precious little contact between ‘ethnic’ Buddhist groups in America, made up of recent immigrants to this country, and ‘elite’ groups composed of relatively privileged, non-immigrant American converts. From a sociological standpoint it is hardly surprising that these two types of groups should have little in common, and that they should draw on quite distinct aspects of the Buddhist tradition.” (1992: 531 n5)

a smile from the reader, but the members of the seminar most familiar with Tibetan Buddhism expressed considerable reservations about its accuracy (Nattier 1992:535).

Some jokes or humour may backfire, or others may have the last say. Corless, for example, renders the famous frog-in-pond haiku as “Old Pond + Frog = Splash.” This led to one member of the seminar to ask whether “Splash minus old pond equals frog.” The question thus remains too, whether these jokes are well-timed skillful tags to stress high points, or are themselves the high points.

Nattier concludes her instructive review by saying:

“In sum, it is the consensus of this group of readers that Corless has gone much too far in presenting his own vision of Buddhism at the expense of a more varied (and genuinely intra-Buddhist) introduction to the tradition. His first-person involvement in Buddhist practice enlivens the account, yet the extent to which his personal preferences are given free rein contributes to short-sightedness on numerous issues. The result was, in retrospect, intimated at the outset: ‘I have, in effect, reinvented the teaching of Buddhism, with a western audience in mind’ [1989:xx]. But though Corless may have meant to say that he was reinventing the teaching of Buddhism, what he has succeeded in doing is to reinvent Buddhism itself. Such a book is intriguing as a window into one Western Buddhist’s experience, but it cannot be recommended as a textbook.” (Nattier 1992:535 f)

5.3.5.6 I have echoed some high points from Nattier’s openly instructive review as a lesson in responsible teaching for Buddhist teachers and speakers. Firstly, we must be well-versed in the subject, or at least prepare well for what we will write on or talk about. Secondly, we should have some notes on the key ideas of the topic at hand, preferably with some useful references. If we are talking about suttas, we should have quoted the sutta titles, both in Pali and in translation, or know where they are accessible. The Pali is to help us with some difficult terms, phrases, sentences or passages. This last point will, of course, only apply when we know Pali well enough; otherwise, we must rely on one or more good annotated translations.

As any good scholar knows, we must always quote and credit our sources (at least in our notes). Otherwise, we will give others the impression that it is our own understanding, or worse, be accused of plagiarism. An advantage in quoting sources is that when any of these quoted sources is wrong or challenged, we only need to learn from it with humility and gratitude. At some point, it is wise, even noble, to plead ignorance—which means we will need to search the suttas to free the mind with wisdom.

5.3.6 Schopen’s Buddhism

5.3.6.1 From the ethnographic writings and views of certain scholars—perhaps it is only Gregory Schopen⁵⁸³ and his students—we are given the impression that early Buddhism, the historical Buddha and his renunciant monastics did not exist, or that we all have had very wrong ideas about the lives or motives of the Buddha and his arhats; that, indeed, there is no such thing as “early Buddhism”!⁵⁸⁴ Assuming scholars are what they think, it would be interesting to see what posterity will *now* think.

Schopen’s scholarship focused chiefly on Indian Buddhist monastic life in the first few centuries CE, that is, the time of the rise of early Mahāyāna. In fact, Schopen worked mostly on only a single text, the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya (a very huge corpus of post-Buddha rules composed and compiled by that sect). Unlike the suttas [5.1.1.4] (records of teachings by the Buddha and the early disciples),

⁵⁸³ Schopen was emeritus professor of Sanskrit and Buddhist Studies at Univ of California, Los Angeles, where he retired in 2019. https://encyclopediaofbuddhism.org/wiki/Gregory_Schopen.

⁵⁸⁴ Schopen was academically successful but the odd assumptions seemed to be his own, and few scholars actually kept up with them: see Sujato “The ironic assumptions of Gregory Schopen: Why the study of early Buddhism is not a non-subject,” Santipada, 2012, <https://santifm.org/santipada/wp-content/uploads/2012/-10/TheIronicAssumptionsOfGregorySchopen.pdf>.

the Vinaya was mostly composed by the monks themselves. Moreover, the Pali Vinaya is not so extensive, since it focuses mainly on the Pātimokkha itself. The later schools and sects have much larger Vinaya collections, depending on their interaction with the world. Their Vinaya, it seemed, was much less about rules of renunciation, but more about the rules for engagement with the world. This was Schopen's Buddhism.

5.3.6.2 Dan Boucher of Cornell University, during Schopen's retirement gathering (2019), explained, in ironic terms, how Schopen's views and works had helped scholars "by bringing the Buddha down back to earth, Gregory has made things very messy for us. But it is precisely in this messiness that we find the texture of lived religious traditions. And for this, students of Buddhism for generations to come have much to thank Gregory Schopen for."⁵⁸⁵

Shayne Clarke, Associate Professor at McMaster University, California, at the same gathering, praised him, thus: "On countless occasions, both in print and at public lectures, Professor Schopen has taken previous generations' romanticized notions of what it meant to be a Buddhist monk or nun in India and convincingly demonstrated that these ideas were certainly not shared by the authors or redactors of Buddhist legal codes, the authors of Buddhism as we know it, if you like—the monks who quite literally wrote the rules."

Robert Brown, professor of Indian and SE Asian art at UCLA, paid tribute to Schopen by noting that, using archaeological evidence, such as inscriptions, reports of site excavations and architectural descriptions, Schopen reached a number of new conclusions, such as the ritual of transference of merit appeared early in Buddhism and was not a Mahayana development; the call to worship the Buddha-image (that the Buddha was envisioned to be present) was largely a monastic, not lay, concern; the stupa cult started with monastic practitioners, not the laity; and monks were involved in the funeral ritual for fellow monastics.

5.3.6.3 Schopen was scathing in his assessment of the "assumptions" made by various Buddhist scholars. He characterized the work of early (Victorian) scholars such as T W Rhys Davids and H Oldenberg as "Protestant"—suggesting the influence of Victorian Christianity and status consciousness—and that they had read their own biases into the Buddhist texts, depicting the Buddha and his sangha much like rational, cultured English gentlemen. This might well be true, but it was hardly a valid criticism. Anyone familiar with Buddhist thought should accept that our understanding is always coloured by our beliefs and values.

Bhikkhu Sujato,⁵⁸⁶ a highly resourceful modern forest monk, is a sharp critic, perhaps an "anti-critic," considering that he is countering Schopen's criticisms of early Buddhism: one of the rare Buddhist Davids standing up against a hand-biting Goliath. "But," concedes Sujato, "Let's not assume that we are an exception. I am a forest monk, and I believe that the Buddha and his early generations of ordained disciples were also forest monks and nuns. So, when I look at the heritage of Buddhism, I naturally focus on this aspect. Gregory Schopen was a highly paid academic from an overwhelmingly materialistic society, and so when he looked at the heritage of Buddhism he saw money, rocks, and material remains." (Sujato 2012:5)

When he did look at the texts—as any scholar, whatever their beliefs, must eventually do, for the information contained in the inscriptions is scanty—he focuses on **the Vinayas** of the various schools, since they dealt most directly with the material aspects of monastic life—buildings, etc. But the Vinayas themselves represent a movement from the spiritual to the material—they were about what monks and nuns did when they misbehaved, and so, taken by themselves, they were misleading. We would not expect to have an accurate vision of how an ordinary person led their daily life today by reading law books!

⁵⁸⁵ <https://www.international.ucla.edu/buddhist/article/205235>.

⁵⁸⁶ This section contains excerpts from Sujato's *The Ironic Assumptions of Gregory Schopen* (2012), an instructive response to his exploitations of early Buddhism.

5.3.6.4 Sujato pointed out that Schopen contrasted the wealthy, developed monasteries with the poor, simple villages nearby, his agenda was, in the broadest sense, **Marxian**. This was without any pejorative slur: it's sweet that he dedicated his books to "the taxpayers and working men and women ... whose labor paid for my scholarly leisure."⁵⁸⁷ But he had little or no interest in the spiritual aspect of Buddhism, which put him in a minority of those, at any time, who wished to learn the Dhamma. Hence, in pleb (commoner) language: Schopen seemed to be "politically" against Buddhism, ironically, an easy and profitable target at that.

It should be obvious that Schopen's assumptions influenced his conclusions, just as the assumptions of earlier scholars influenced their own conclusions. "Wholesome states of mind leave no scar on the rocks. Meditation attainments are airily ephemeral. Insights into reality happen in the wispy world of the mind. If we were to accept Schopen's methods unconditionally, we would have to abandon the very reason that most of us became interested in Buddhism. There would be no more reason to study ancient India than any other ancient culture. This may not be a problem for Schopen, but it is a big one for most students of Buddhism." (Sujato 2012:5)

Schopen's fundamental error (or is it strategy?) was to highlight, in his numerous tomes, how the monastics of the early centuries of Indian Mahāyāna were living well-organized lives as accomplished "businessmen" and a wealthy, leisurely class. He pointed to what he saw as evidence of this in the archaeological sites, ethnographic inscriptions and, of course, the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya⁵⁸⁸ [5.3.6.1]. Then, he wanted us to understand that all this went right back to the Buddha and early Buddhism! To him, amongst other things:

- the Buddha was a home-owner and property-owner;⁵⁸⁹
- Buddhist monastics were wealthy money-lenders;⁵⁹⁰
- monks regularly used money, owned servants and slaves, used the Vinaya to regulate their wealth;⁵⁹¹
- the Buddha was an astute businessman, economist, lawyer.⁵⁹²

5.3.6.5 How a scholar sees Buddhism as his field of study often reflects how he thinks of Buddhists. For various reasons, some scholars and some foreign Buddhists (monastic and lay), may think that Asian Buddhists are often pleb and puerile, even obsequious. They may even presume, even exploit, Oriental hospitality—the "4th training" of early Buddhism.⁵⁹³ But these local Buddhists are our own family, relatives, friends and countrymen. History (colonialism) and tradition (foreign missions) have conditioned us to look up to authority, skin colour, and "to know our place" in society, even in a Buddhist one. This negative attitude is conditioned by a "false consciousness."⁵⁹⁴

⁵⁸⁷ Dedication page of *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters*, Hawaii, 2004.

⁵⁸⁸ Schopen: "its Tibetan translation, which appears to be complete, runs to thirteen volumes and the rough equivalent of eight thousand pages. It has been called 'one of the masterpieces of Sanskrit literature'," in "Separate but equal: Property rights and the legal independence of Buddhist nuns and monks in early north India." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 128,4, 2008:625.

⁵⁸⁹ G Schopen, "The Buddha as an owner of property and permanent resident in mediaeval Indian monasteries," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 18,3 Sep 1990:181-217.

⁵⁹⁰ G Schopen, "Doing business for the Lord: Lending on interest and written loan contracts in the Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 114,4 Oct-Dec 1994:527-554.

⁵⁹¹ G Schopen, *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters: Still more papers on monastic Buddhism in India*. Honolulu: Univ of Hawai'i Press, 2004.

⁵⁹² G Schopen, "The Buddha as astute businessman, economist, lawyer," 106th Faculty Research Lecture, UCLA Pacific Center, Los Angeles: <https://international.ucla.edu/asia/article/106061>.

⁵⁹³ SD 38.4 (5); SD 46.14 (1.2.1.1).

⁵⁹⁴ In Marxist theory, **false consciousness** is a term describing the ways in which material, ideological, and institutional processes are said to mislead members of the proletariat and other class actors within capitalist societies, concealing the inherent exploitation by the upper classes of the lower classes.

With a growing understanding of the historical Buddha's teachings, however, we rise with dawn's joyful face,⁵⁹⁵ and live blessed in the bright and beautiful day. We grow into a wholesome Buddhist community, thinking, feeling, working rightly and wisely as followers of the Buddha. It begins with some understanding what is happening in Buddhism, and what good we can be as Buddhists.

5.3.7 The 2 duties of a practitioner

5.3.7.1 Before we examine the modern scholar-practitioner, let us get to know the textual roots of the "**twin practice**" of the "task of the texts" (*gantha, dhura*) and the "task of insight" (*vipassana, dhura*), that is, in modern terms, textual learning and meditation. I have also translated *gantha* as "texts" rather than "books" for a strategic reason: it refers specifically to sutta study, and not the acquisition of some academic degree or book learning. This kind of measured learning, as a whole-some discipline, has its proper place, but it is clearly not a part of the training for the path [5.3.7.2].

Hence, I have purposely used the phrase, "twin practice" right at the start to stress the fact that the 2 practices are not exclusive terms. We do not select one to the exclusion of the other: they both work together to help us in a proper practice of the Buddha Dharma. We learn mindfulness and meditation as early in life as we can; then, we study **the suttas** for a better understanding of our mental cultivation (a common term for mindfulness and meditation). As our mind becomes more developed, we better understand the sutta teachings. Hence, text-study and mental cultivation help one another *pari passu* in our Dharma-spirited growth.

5.3.7.2 This interpretation is based on **the 3 trainings**, where we have the interconnected progression of *moral training, concentration (or mental training) and wisdom*. Note that "textual learning" is not mentioned in this formula. We may be tempted to include it under "wisdom," but then, this arises from the full benefit of a moral and mindful living, of seeing into the true nature of reality.

For practical purposes, in keeping with the spirit of Dharma training, we should place text-study (including book-learning) under **moral training**. This makes good sense, since what we study or read should not be about "knowing more and more," which will only make us arrogant, filled with *māna*, and measure ourself against others, or worse, we will be intoxicated, *mada*, with learning that we delude ourself into thinking we know better than what we have learned, and so change or invent Buddhism [5.3.5.5]; instead, we should be changing ourself into a better person.

Hence, wholesome learning—whether of the texts or through books or listening to teachers—is about *knowing more about ourself*. In our solitary self-reflection, we should discern our negative habits, try to understand why we have them; work to cultivate their wholesome opposite, and remind ourself to nurture that goodness in it. These are the 4 right efforts.

5.3.7.3 The suttas do not make any distinction between "the task of the texts" and "the task of insight" [5.3.7.1], but they both form a holistic part of our personal practice for reaching the path of awakening. They *implicitly* form an integral part of the well-known 12-step **gradual training** (*anupubba, sikkhā*), found, for example, in **the Caṅkī Sutta** (M 95) and **the Kīṭāgiri Sutta** (M 70), thus:

- | | |
|--|---|
| (1) He who has faith (in a teacher) | approaches him. |
| (2) Having <u>approached</u> him, | he draws near [attends] to him. |
| (3) Having <u>drawn near</u> to him, | he lends his ear to him. ⁵⁹⁶ |
| (4) He who <u>lends his ear</u> , | listens to the Dharma. |
| (5) Having <u>listened</u> to the Dharma, | he remembers [memorizes] it. ⁵⁹⁷ |

⁵⁹⁵ "Dawn's joyful face," *aruṇaṃ nandī, mukhī rattī* (Cv 9.1.1 (3.1)/2:236), SD 59.2c.

⁵⁹⁶ Alt tr: "Respectfully sitting close, he listens attentively."

⁵⁹⁷ This and next line: *Sutvā dhammaṃ dhāreti | dhātānaṃ dhammānaṃ atthaṃ upaparikkhati*: here *dhammaṃ* (sg) in the 1st line becomes *dhammānaṃ* (pl) in the 2nd line. In the 1st line, *dhammaṃ* refers to the teaching as a whole; in the 2nd line, individual aspects or topics are meant.

- | | |
|---|--|
| (6) Having <u>remembered the teachings</u> , | he examines their meaning. |
| (7) Having <u>examined their meaning</u> , | he reflectively accepts ⁵⁹⁸ the teachings. ⁵⁹⁹ |
| (8) Having <u>reflectively accepted</u> the teachings, | (wholesome) desire for mindfulness arises in him. |
| (9) Having (wholesome) <u>desire for mindfulness</u> , ⁶⁰⁰ | he exerts himself. |
| (10) Having <u>exerted</u> himself, | he weighs [harmonizes] it. ⁶⁰¹ |
| (11) Having <u>weighed</u> it, | he strives. ⁶⁰² |
| (12) With <u>a resolute [striving] mind</u> , | he realizes the ultimate truth. |
- M 70,24 (SD 11.1); M 94,20-33 (SD 21.15)

The task of the texts (*gantha,dhura*) is implicit in steps (4-7); **the task of mental cultivation** (*vipassanā dhura*) in steps (8-12), leading to realization of the ultimate truth. Step 9, “having (wholesome) desire for mindfulness” —means that “he exerts himself” in the practice of mindfulness (of impermanence, etc) and meditation (such as the breath meditation), to the best of his abilities. The task of study and meditation are never alienated, but always integrated in our Buddhist life.

5.3.7.4 We only begin to see **the 2 tasks** (*dhura*) appearing as if they are *optional choices* mentioned in the Dhammapada Commentary (5th century CE), that is, in 2 of its stories.⁶⁰³ The first story—from **the Cakkhu,pāla Thera Vatthu** (DhA 1.1), the story of the elder Cakkhupāla—is about how Mahā Pāla who renounced in his old age.⁶⁰⁴ Oddly, the story tells us that only after completing the 5-year tutelage (*nissaya*), he asks the Buddha what a monk’s tasks or duties (*dhura*) are.⁶⁰⁵

The Buddha is said to reply that there are the 2 “tasks” of a monk: that of the texts (*gantha,dhura*) and of meditation (*vipassana,dhura*)—this duad is not found in the suttas. The Commentary records the Buddha as defining **the duty of the texts** as the gaining of knowledge of the Buddha Word in accordance with one’s understanding, the mastery of one or two Nikāyas, or even the whole Tipiṭaka, bearing it in mind, reciting it, teaching it. **The duty of meditation**, which leads to arhathood, involves frugal living, being contented with a remote lodging, fixing firmly one’s mind on the idea of decay and death, and the development of spiritual insight by persistent effort. (DhA 1:7,18-8,7)

⁵⁹⁸ **Nijjhānaṃ khamanti**, lit, “insights are endured,” ie, “capable of bearing insights”; idiomatic meaning “he is pleased with, approves of, finds pleasure in” (M 1:133 f; 479 f, 2:173, 175; S 3:225, 228, 5:377, 379; Vv 84.17). **Khanti** usually means “patience” but here it means “choice, receptivity, preference, acceptance.” The BHSD defines *kṣānti* as “intellectual receptivity; the being ready in advance to accept knowledge.” *Khanti* is often used in the Canon in this latter sense (see SD 12.13(2a) for refs). The phrase can also be freely rendered as “a receptivity in harmony with true reality.” On **dhmma,nijjhāna,khanti**, see **Kesa,puttiya S** (A 3.65), SD 35.4 Comy 3a(8). On *khanti* as “mental receptivity,” see **Aniccā S** (A 6.98), SD 12.13(3).

⁵⁹⁹ This and the next line: *Atthaṃ upaparikkhatto dhammā nijjhānaṃ khamanti; dhamma,nijjhāna,khantiyā sati chando jāyato*. M:ÑB: “when he examines their meaning, he gains a reflective acceptance of those teachings.”

⁶⁰⁰ From here to end of para: *Chanda,jāto ussahati; ussahitvā tuletī; tulayitvā padahati; pahit’atto samāno kāyena c’eva paramaṃ saccaṃ sacchikaroti paññāya ca naṃ ativijja passati*. Alt tr: “With his desire, he applies his will.” On *ussahati*, see CPD: I have conflated both the normal (“he is able”) and conative (“he strives”) senses in the tr.

⁶⁰¹ Alt tr: “Having applied effort, he harmonizes his practice.”

⁶⁰² Alt tr: “Harmonizing his practice, he strives on.”

⁶⁰³ Vinaya Comy also mentions *te kira sāsane vipassana,dhuraṃ ca gantha.dhuraṃ cā ti dve pi yeva dhurāni* (VA 561,16). Ee reading *vāsa,dhuraṃ ca* should be corrected to *vipassana,dhuraṃ ca*.

⁶⁰⁴ In the story’s opening, Mahā Pāla’s younger brother begs him not to renounce until he is much older. In the later part of the story, it is clear that he is quite old.

⁶⁰⁵ On the other hand, it is possible that Mahā Pāla thinks that he would only spend those preliminary years as a monk, but at the end of the 5 years, he decides to remain a monk. Hence, he asks about the task or training of a monk.

We have to allow this Commentarial story some latitude and licence of anachronism. While the Buddha lived and taught, his teachings have yet to be compiled into “collections” (*nikāya*). Even during the 1st Council, only the “Dharma-Vinaya” was rehearsed: there was no Abhidhamma then; hence, no Tipiṭaka [1.2.4.2]. We must admit then that this is the genre of “**religious fiction**,” an important literary genre, which like fairy tales and space epics, have their great value and vitality into moderating our emotions and educating our mind—depending on how open we are to learning and literature.

5.3.7.5 The 2nd Dhammapada Commentary story—from **the Kapila,maccha Vatthu** (DhA 24.1), the story of Red-fish—recounts how, in the time of Kassapa Buddha (the Buddha before ours), two brothers, Sodhana and Kapila renounced before Kassapa. The elder brother, Sodhana, takes up the task of meditation for the duration of his 5-year tutelage. At the end of that tutelage, having obtained a meditation subject, he left for a remote forest dwelling to practise, and in due course, becomes an arhat.

The younger brother, Kapila, takes up the task of the texts, and having mastered them, becomes arrogant and abusive of other monks. He even takes upon himself to recite the Pātimokkha, but, understandably, the other monks refuse to participate in it. Even after his own elder brother, the arhat Sodhana, admonishes him, he stubbornly remains in his evil ways.

The story-teller then relates that he is reborn in the lowest hell called Avīci, going through great suffering. After that, he is reborn in our Buddha’s time in the Aciravatī river (in northern India) as a red-fish (*kapila*), with golden skin but stinking breath. When some fishermen catch it, on account of its rare golden hue, they present it to the king.

Sensing some significance in the fish’s golden hue, yet having stinking breath, the king brings the fish before our Buddha. We are told that the fish is able to speak: he identifies himself and relates the past events of his life resulting in his current predicament. At the end of his account the fish, Kapila, strikes his head against a boat and dies, and rises again in hell. (DhA 4:38-43)

The verses uttered by the Buddha in this connection have been preserved as the Kapila Sutta, also called **the Dhamma,cariya Sutta** (Sn 274-283/2.6). Since the verses are ancient, clearly the Commentator had related his story to highlight their significance. If we have difficulty believing in Kapila’s rebirth in hell, then as a remarkable fish, and back to hell, we should tease out the message here as that the misunderstanding and misuse of text-learning or book-study creates bad karma for us, making us lose our humanity, which is as bad as relegating oneself to a subhuman state even in this life itself.

5.3.7.6 With the training seen as “split” into the “duty of study” and the “duty of meditation,” it was perceived as corresponding with the monastic life-style split between urban or community life (the coenobites) (*gāma,vāsī*) and the forest or solitary itinerant (the eremites) (*ārañña,vāsī*). The urban community was seen as leaning on the vocation of text-study (*gantha,dhura*) or “theory” (*pariyatti*), while the forest monks focusing on meditation (*vipassana,dhura*), that is, “practice” (*patipatti*). This seemed to be the case in Sri Lanka during the 1st century BCE.⁶⁰⁶

From 13th-century Siamese inscriptions of King Raamkamkhaeng in Siam during the same period, we are told that the forest elders (*thera*) “walked alone” whilst the “remaining monks ... called village-dwellers ... walked with many.”⁶⁰⁷ These twin traditions, it seemed, were transmitted to SE Asia from the Mahāvihāra of Anuruddha during the Polonnaruva period (11th century), when it had both kinds of monks.⁶⁰⁸

⁶⁰⁶ For refs, see Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets*, 1984:53, 58 f; J L Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation-state: An anthropological and historical study*, Singapore, 1993b:12. See SD 26.11 (3.1.3).

⁶⁰⁷ Paññāsāmi, *History of the Buddha’s Religion*, [Sāsana,vaṃsa, 1861] London, 1952:92. Pali ed Mabel Bode, Pali Text Soc, 1897:84.

⁶⁰⁸ J L Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation-State*, Singapore, 1993b:12.

However, this opposition is not fixed, especially in modern times. The urban monasteries often promoted meditation, such as Wat Phleng Vipassana, Bangkok; while the forest communities have also produced excellent scholars, such as Nyanatiloka (1878-1957) of the Island Hermitage (Sri Lanka) and Nyanaponika (1901-94, Sri Lanka); well-known urban monk scholars include Prayudh Payutto (b 1937, Thailand), Analayo (b 1962, Germany).⁶⁰⁹ Interestingly, Nyanatiloka, Nyanaponika and Analayo are all German monks of the Theravāda order.

They came from a European culture that had, for centuries, a monastic tradition steeped in scholastic learning. German mathematician, astronomer, natural philosopher and music writer, Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) and German-Swiss poet, novelist, painter and 1946 Nobel Prize laureate, Hermann Hesse (1877-1962), were educated at the Maulbronn monastic school.⁶¹⁰ Hesse wrote a self-reflective novel on a search for meaning in life, entitled *Siddhartha* (1922), based on the historical Buddha's life.

5.3.8 Practitioners and professors of Buddhism

5.3.8.1 When we speak of Buddhism, concerned teachers often remind us that we should not only study the Dharma, but also **practise it**. In a broader perspective, these are the 2 kinds of professions of the faith, so to speak. The old sense of “**profess**” basically means “to confess, own, acknowledge” (OED), that is, to openly state that we have faith in some belief, teaching or religion, as in “professing Buddhism,” that is, to openly accept and practise Buddhism. In this sense, all practising Buddhists are, properly speaking, “professors” of Buddhism, that is, we study and practise the Buddha's teachings. This religious sense of “profess” goes back to before 1500 in the English language (OED).

The modern word, “**profession**,” in the sense of “a job that needs special training or skill, especially one that that needs a high level of education,” became current only from the late 16th century. Interestingly, the verb “profess” is rarely used in this connection, but retains its sense, “to make an open declaration of some belief or status,” *even when this may not be true!*⁶¹¹ In modern terms, the adjective, “professional,” and its adverb, “professionally,” refers to something done by a person in accordance with his qualification and skill, and highly paid accordingly.

Hence, we may have professed Buddhism for over half a century, making a full-time profession of Buddhism for the duration, but in the eyes of the academic profession, we are still not “professionals”! My point is that it is practical to differentiate between being a practising Buddhist who knows the sutta well enough, and a qualified scholar of Buddhism who may not even be a Buddhist. A similar scenario applies to the Buddhist meditation teacher: he is not a “professional” in the face of the (now) lucrative and competitive world of McMindfulness. [4.2]

5.3.8.2 The next distinction between the practising Buddhist and the academic professional of Buddhism is even more interesting in an outlandish way. As practising Buddhists, our task is to discipline our actions and speech, to train our mind to be calm and clear and to cultivate wisdom to see and correct the errors of our ways and views; that is, to keep to **the 3 trainings** [2.1.2]. We practise the Buddha's teachings as a part of our daily living experience to the best of our ability. We see Buddhism as a path by which we work to transform ourselves into better individuals.

Although there are today, a growing number of scholars who are practising Buddhists, there are still a significant number of them who remain purely “professional,” that is, they do not profess Buddhism as their faith, but merely as a field of study, a means of living. Interestingly, we tend to see two broad categories of scholars of Buddhism: those who profess Buddhism and those who are

⁶⁰⁹ See SD 60.1b (1.1.2).

⁶¹⁰ [The monastic school \(kloster-maulbronn.de\)](http://www.kloster-maulbronn.de).

⁶¹¹ See “profess” in *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, 6th ed, 2000; 10th ed 2020.

Buddhism professionals. Both earn their living by studying, teaching and writing on Buddhism, but the former also practise some form of Buddhism; the latter, as a rule, do not.⁶¹²

5.4 OVERVIEW AND RECAP

5.4.1 Early Buddhist Texts

5.4.1.1 To introduce the section on “Scholar’s Buddhism” [5.3], I wrote about “the vital role and need for textual Buddhism” [5.2.2]: this characterizes the first generation of modern Buddhist Studies. Every world religion has its **canonical scripture**, which records the life of its founder(s) and its early history. It is said that **the Dhamma-Vinaya**—comprising the suttas and the Vinaya texts—were first compiled by way of an oral tradition (*mukha, pāṭha*) with 500 arhats gathered in conclave reciting them during the 1st Council [5.1.1.5]. **The Pali canon**—or simply, Pāli⁶¹³—refers to the “canonical texts,” that is, the primary scripture, commented on by secondary texts known as “Commentaries” (*aṭṭhakathā*).

For 200 years after the 1st Council, the canon was handed down by the oral tradition of reciters (*bhāṇaka*) [5.1.1.5], until it was written down by monks in Sri Lanka during the reign of Vaṭṭagāmnī Abhaya (29-17 BCE).⁶¹⁴ Since then, we have versions of the Tipiṭaka written down respectively in Sinhalese, Burmese, Khmer, Lao and Thai scripts. Through the efforts of the Pali Text Society [5.1.3.4], we today have the romanized texts of the Tipiṭaka.⁶¹⁵

5.4.1.2 When Westerners—the British, to be exact—became interested in early Buddhism (which they discovered in Sri Lanka and Burma), Protestant Christianity was the dominant religion of Britain (and its empire). The Bible had, by then, a number of authorized translations, and biblical scholarship encouraged continuing interpretation of these translations.

Understandably, the pioneers of Buddhist studies in Britain used this proven apparatus of scriptural authenticity and exegesis to understand the best that Buddhism has to offer. The discovery of **early Buddhism** gives us the North Star to chart and guide our studies of later and ethnic forms of Buddhisms, which would otherwise seem to be like disconnected local folk-religions. The very idea of early Buddhism gives us an interconnected and holistic understanding of singular local Buddhisms.

We should be profoundly grateful for this solid foundation—this early Buddhism—which has thus opened up to us the various approaches to Buddhist studies today, not to mention the jobs and status that it has given to modern scholars in various disciplines. Hence, we should see “**Protestant**” as a vital historical term in this rise of Buddhism and Buddhist studies in the West, and into the learning centres of the world.

5.4.1.3 Early Buddhist Studies was largely a **philological discipline**: it involved a careful study of Pali and languages related to its understanding. The early Western philologists were also accomplished scholars of the classics, of Greek and Latin, which come from the same Indo-European family of languages. The Buddhism that emerged from such scholarship is a vital version of “early Buddhism” authenticated by very ancient texts. Later discoveries of other ancient Buddhist texts—like those of

⁶¹² For a modern scholar’s personal account of scholar-practitioners, see “The new panditas.” *Lion’s Roar* 1 March 2006. <https://www.lionsroar.com/the-new-panditas/>.

⁶¹³ The etymology of *pāli* or *pāḷi* is unclear, but it is taken as a synonym of *tanti*, “line, continuation; text, a passage (in the canon)” (DA 2,16): DP 2:289c (*tanti*). It is related to Skt *pāṭhya*, “(text) to be recited, needing instruction.” It is possible to take *pāli* as neut or fem (*pālī*), meaning “that which protects” (but it is unattested). See Norman, *Pāli Literature*, 1983b:1-7.

⁶¹⁴ Norman 1983b:10 f.

⁶¹⁵ For a brief history of the Pali canon, see *Routledge Ency of Bsm*, 2007:583-586.

the Gāndhārī Manuscripts⁶¹⁶—further helped to affirm the early Buddhist texts (EBT), and the EBTs, in turn, authenticate these rare and precious finds.

It is difficult to imagine how the European pioneers “constructed” the early Buddhist texts of inimitable truth and beauty—it’s like saying the modern believers of the Vedas (Vedic Sanskrit), the Tanakh (Hebrew), the Bible (Hebrew, Koine Greek and Aramaic) or the Quran (Arabic) were written by their modern believers! It would be unprofessional (at least) for scholars to air their petty hubris against the early Buddhist texts, and yet use them in their own works. Moreover, just imagine if there were no Pali canon at all—it would be impossible to authenticate the other Buddhist texts!

5.4.1.4 Most of the EBTs—especially the suttas—state explicitly that the Buddha is their author. When we do read some writing, for it to be useful, “our initial working hypothesis has to be that the text is telling the truth, and in each case where we do not believe it, or doubt it, we must produce our reasons for doing so.”⁶¹⁷ Where there are exceptions, they are obvious: the speaker is specifically said to be someone else, or where there are indications that texts or passages have been added. Such exceptions do not discount the truth of the main texts but should be taken for any useful truth they contain.

The EBTs are stylistically different from the other, especially later, Buddhist texts, and are also internally consistent in both teaching and phrasing. This shows that they reflect the teachings of a single teacher (the Buddha) or one of his contemporary disciples. Stylistically, the EBTs are a separate genre of literature.⁶¹⁸ This is because they are rooted in a common source in the earliest period, and coming mostly from a single author, the historical Buddha. Hence, the EBTs clearly differ from the later texts, whether the authors are mentioned or not.

5.4.2 Modern Buddhist studies

5.4.2.1 The early 1970s witnessed the emergence of a new approach to studying Buddhist societies, an approach which synthesized traditional philological research and anthropological analysis, building upon a text-historical basis with fieldwork in Buddhist societies. Scholars who pioneered this new approach, as we have seen, included Melford Spiro [5.3.2], Richard Gombrich [5.3.3] and Stanley Tambiah [5.3.4].

Spiro and Tambiah in particular prided themselves with what they saw as anthropological advances in traditional Buddhist scholarship. Yet, as shown by Newell (2010),⁶¹⁹ their understanding of basic Buddhist doctrine and Buddhist history were still fundamentally rooted in the text-historical scholarship. The “holistic” approaches favoured by Spiro and Tambiah were, however, severely handicapped by their failure to use the wealth of vernacular works and researches: they only resorted to interviews often via translators. Thus, despite their “new” approaches, they unwittingly perpetuated many of the assumptions of earlier scholarship.

5.4.2.2 The academic study of Buddhism and Buddhist societies evolved with the innovative holistic approaches of the 1970s and 1980s. Many of the new-generation scholars worked from the perspective of the Buddhist traditions themselves, built upon previous scholarship, only to challenge, even debunk, them. In Thailand and Laos, for example, **Justin McDaniel** blended their vernacular and

⁶¹⁶ J Braarvig & F Liland, *Traces of Gandhāran Buddhism: An exhibition of Ancient Buddhist MSS in the Schøyen Collection*, Oslo, 2010: https://epub.ub.uni-muenchen.de/21230/1/Hartmann_21230.pdf. Richard Salomon, “Gāndhārī Manuscripts in the British Library, Schøyen and other collections. Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2014: <https://www.austriaca.at/0xc1aa5576%200x00314c97.pdf>.

⁶¹⁷ R Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought*, Oxford, 2009a:96 f.

⁶¹⁸ A Wynne, “The oral transmission of early Buddhist literature,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 27,1 2004:113. For different senses of *pāli/pāḷi*, see DP 3:450 f.

⁶¹⁹ This section is mostly based on the Conclusion of Catherine Newell, “Approaches to the Study of Buddhism,” in (ed) Bryan Turner, *Sociology of Religion*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010:402 f.

classical language skills to study Thai Buddhism, particularly Buddhist texts and monastic education.⁶²⁰

Thai scholar **Kamala Tiyavanich** tapped a wide range of Thai- and Lao-language sources, and conducted interviews for broader and new perspectives on Thai Buddhism.⁶²¹ **Catherine S Newell** (2008) examined the Thai temples that have preserved *borān kammaṭṭhāna* practices since before their adaptation by the modernist Dhammakāya temples.⁶²²

Scholars associated with the École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFO) such as **François Bizot**, **Olivier de Bernon**, **Louis Gabaude**, **Peter Skilling**, and **Jean Filliozat** contributed to our knowledge of the Buddhist traditions of Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam by studying Buddhism through its texts, rituals and ordination lineages.⁶²³ **Geoffrey Samuels**⁶²⁴ [4.5.1.2] (Sri Lanka and Malaysia) and **Anne Blackburn**⁶²⁵ (Sri Lanka) combined text-historical analysis with fieldwork. **Juliane Schober** worked on contemporary Theravāda societies, particularly in Burma and Sri Lanka, and wrote on such themes as sacred biography (1997), manuscript culture (2009), and relics in Burmese Buddhism (2001).⁶²⁶

5.4.2.3 Many scholars whose focus remained textual produced enlightening works on Buddhist traditions and history, in part, by moving to examine such diverse and previously neglected materials as regional chronicles, meditation handbooks and *kamma, vācā* (formal texts of a sangha act) relating to local ordination lineages, as seen in the works of **Kate Crosby**⁶²⁷ and of **Andrew Skilton**.⁶²⁸

Tibetan Buddhism was generally seen as corrupt Buddhism and unfavoured by scholarship, but with their unrelenting diaspora and disarming charisma, came to acquire a new appeal, shaped by the very Orientalist discourse which had earlier dismissed it. Tibetan Buddhism, from its isolated homeland was perceived as somehow untarnished by the cultural and social decline characterizing the 20th

⁶²⁰ J T McDaniel, "Buddhism in Thailand," in (ed) S C Berkwitz, *Buddhism in World Culture: Comparative perspectives*. ABC-CLIO, 2006:101-128; *Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words: Histories of Buddhist monastic education in Laos and Thailand*, Washington, 2008.

⁶²¹ K Tiyavanich, *Forest recollections: Wandering monks in twentieth-century Thailand*, Honolulu, 1997; *The Buddha in the Jungle*, Washington, 2003.

⁶²² C S Newell, *Monks, meditation and missing links: Continuity and authority in the Thai Sangha*. PhD diss, SOAS, 2008.

⁶²³ See eg F Bizot, *Le Chemin de Lankā. Textes bouddhiques du Cambodge* vol 1, Paris: EFO, 1992; "La consécration des statues et le culte des morts," in (ed) F Bizot, *Recherches nouvelles sur le Cambodge*, EFO, 1994: 101-139. O de Bernon, *Le Manuel des Maîtres de kammaṭṭhāna, Études et présentation de rituels de méditation dans la tradition du Bouddhisme khmer*, PhD diss, Paris: Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales, 2000; "The status of Pāli in Cambodia: From canonical to esoteric Language," in *Buddhist Legacies in Mainland Southeast Asia: Mentalities, interpenetrations and practices*. Paris & Bangkok, 2006. L Gabaude, "Thai society and Buddhadasa: Structural difficulties," in S Sivaraksa (ed), *Radical Conservatism, Buddhism in Contemporary World: Articles in honour of Bhikkhu Buddhadasa's 84th birthday anniversary*, Bangkok: TICD-INEB, 1990:211-229. P Skilling, "Kings, sangha, and brahmins: ideology, ritual, and power in pre-modern Siam," in (ed) Ian Harris, *Buddhism, Power and Political Order*, Routledge, 2007:182-215. J Filliozat, "Sur le domaine sémantique de puṇya," in *Indianisme et Bouddhisme, Mélanges offerts à Mgr Etienne Lamotte*, Louvain-la-Neuve: Institut Orientaliste, 1980:101-116.

⁶²⁴ J Samuels, *Attracting the Heart: Social Relations and the Aesthetics of Emotion in Sri Lankan Monastic Culture*. Honolulu, 2010.

⁶²⁵ A Blackburn, *Buddhist Learning and Textual Practice in Eighteenth-century Lankan Monastic Culture*, Princeton, 2001.

⁶²⁶ J Schober, *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia*, Honolulu, 1997; "Venerating the Buddha's remains in Burma: From solitary practice to the cultural hegemony of communities," *Journal of Burma Studies* 6, 2001:111-140.

⁶²⁷ K Crosby, "Tantric Theravāda: A bibliographic essay on the writings of Francois Bizot and others on the Yogāvacara tradition." *Contemporary Buddhism* 1,2 2000:141-198; "Devotion to the Buddha in Theravada and its role in meditation," in (edd) A S King & J Brockington, *The Intimate Other: Love divine in Indic religions*, Hyderabad, 2005a:244-277.

⁶²⁸ A Skilton, *A Concise History of Buddhism*. Birmingham, 1994.

century elsewhere. It provides scholars with a repository of a largely unexplored rich textual tradition. Tibetan Buddhist traditions are now regarded as amongst the most popular and visible forms of Buddhism, particularly in the West, at least for the foreseeable future.

The current and emerging generations of scholars can be seen to have moved away, in many respects, from the rigid view of Buddhism and Buddhist studies that framed the discipline in its infancy. Indeed, Buddhist studies is now accepted to be practically interdisciplinary, embracing a rich range of linguistic and analytical skills for a more sophisticated and profound understanding of Buddhist traditions. Buddhist scholars will continue to embrace a growing range of approaches, not only to be informed by Buddhists themselves, but to gain first-hand empirical study and experience of Buddhism as scholar-practitioners. [5.3.7]

5.4.2.4 Early Buddhist studies, unlike the study of any other form of Buddhism or religion, is like looking at ourselves more closely over time. As we become more familiar with early Buddhism, we mature in our academic lives, and, in due course, retiring from academia. We then see ourselves as being well trained in the Buddha's teaching both academically and spiritually, in the letter and the spirit.

As scholars, we were like entomologists catching butterflies, squeezing their thorax, and keeping them in a bottle of chloroform. Then, when the hunt is over, we carefully push a pin through each butterfly's thorax, injecting it with formalin, and setting it on a setting-board, labelling it with its scientific name. When they are all done, we then show them off to others.

Now that we are life-loving Buddhists, we no more collect or kill these lovely beings. We know them better by their proper names. We simply enjoy watching them flying about their favourite plants and haunts. We see them no more as dead things in our collector's items, but as living beings in our own midst, just like us.

6 Teacher-constructed Buddhisms

6.1 PRIVATIZATION AND CERTIFICATION

6.1.1 Measuring meditation

6.1.1.1 In this section [6.1], we will examine how the personal **charisma** of teachers allowed them to promote their own modified meditation methods (each effective in its own way). These teacher-based meditations and teachings make interesting academic study since they attest to the fact that Buddhism is a living religion, which means that it will undergo changes and renewal. By that very fact, such methods, as a rule, would last only as long as their founders, and maybe a couple of generations thereafter, to be replaced by other competing new methods.⁶²⁹

This is the Dharma of the times (*kālika*), limited editions and collectors' items of Buddhist practice, passing echoes of the Buddha's timeless Dharma (*akālika*). Hence, the lesson is clear: we need to be guided by the steady North Star of early Buddhism. The goals of early Buddhism (streamwinning, etc) may seem distant to us—like the stars—even if we are unable to reach them, we could chart our life's course by them.

6.1.1.2 We have already noted that Mingun Jetawana Sayadaw (U Narada, 1869-1954) was probably the first Burmese monk to introduce group meditation training (traditional teachers tend to

⁶²⁹ The key paper related to this subsection (6.1.1) is Robert Sharf, "Buddhist modernism and the rhetoric of meditative experience." *Numen* 42,3 Oct 1995:228-283.

teach individual students or just a few at a time).⁶³⁰ His most famous disciple was **Mahāsi Sayādaw** (U Sobhana) (1904-1982) whom we have described in SD 60.1b.⁶³¹

As part of the pro-Buddhist policies of the newly independent Burmese government, Mahasi was invited to Rangoon in 1949 by the Prime Minister U Nu to take charge of Thathana Yeiktha, a new government-sponsored meditation center open to the laity (Mahasi Sayādaw 1971). The technique promoted by Mahasi at Thathana Yeiktha proved to be a tremendous success; as of 1973 some 15,000 students are said to have trained there.⁶³²

Mahasi's disciples have since disseminated his method throughout South and Southeast Asia, Europe, and America, and when Westerners speak of *vipassanā* today they are often referring to the specific style of practice popularized by Mahasi. His method has been very well documented by a number of 1st-person accounts in English.⁶³³ We will here only examine 2 features of Mahasi's teachings:

- (1) direct attainment of insight without any need of calm or dhyana;
- (2) with proper practice, attainment of the path within a short time.

6.1.1.3 Firstly, Mahasi claimed that his meditation method would bring **direct attainment of insight (*vipassana*)** without need for either calm (*samatha*) or dhyana (*jhāna*), that is, suprasensual concentration. This is a remarkable statement, since the foundation of Buddhist meditation, according to the suttas, is the cultivation of calm (*samatha*), which requires significant training and proper effort.

Mahasi naturally insisted that a focused mind was required for progress in *vipassanā*, but the degree of concentration required to succeed at his technique was small by traditional standards.⁶³⁴ Moreover, the requisite skill in *samatha* could be achieved in the course of one's *vipassanā* practice without the need for preparatory *samatha* exercises, thus taking a shorter and simpler path.

6.1.1.4 The 2nd key feature of the Mahasi method was the claim of **quick results**: "It will not take long to gain the object; possibly in a month, or 20 days, or 15 days; or, on rare occasions, even in 7 days for a selected few with extraordinary Perfection (*pāramī*)."⁶³⁵ According to Mahasi, the "goal" of his practice was none other than the experience of *nibbana* itself.

The initial "taste" of *nibbāna* is the attainment of streamwinning (*sotāpatti*)—the first of 4 levels of the path to awakening—which makes the meditator a "noble individual" (*ariya, puggala*) destined for freedom from the cycle of existence (*samsāra*) in a relatively short time. The claim that *nibbāna* can be reached in the course of a month or less is truly remarkable, given the widespread view among traditionalists that it is almost impossible for anyone to become a "noble individual" in modern times. In fact, hundreds of Mahasi's followers are said to have reached the 1st stage of awakening, and many are thought to have attained the higher stages as well.⁶³⁶ [6.1.2]

⁶³⁰ On Mingun Jetawana Sayadaw, see SD 60.1b (2.4.3.2).

⁶³¹ On Mahasi Sayadaw, see SD 60.1b (2.4.5)

⁶³² Amadeo Sole-Leris, *Tranquillity and Insight: An Introduction to the Oldest Form of Buddhist Meditation*. Boston: Shambhala. 1986:129.

⁶³³ **Mahasi** Sayadaw, *The Satipatthana Vipassana Meditation*, tr U Pe Thin. San Francisco: Unity Press, 1971; Jack **Kornfield**, *Living Buddhist Masters*. Santa Cruz: Unity Press, 1977:51-81; **Nyanaponika**, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*. New York: Samuel Weiser, 1970; *The Power of Mindfulness*. Mindfulness Series 3. San Francisco: Unity Press. 1972; and E H **Shattock**, *An Experiment in Mindfulness*. New York: Samuel Weiser, 1972.

⁶³⁴ Practitioners of Mahasi's method need only reach the stage of access or neighbourhood concentration (*upacāra-samādhi*, Nyanaponika 1970:89).

⁶³⁵ *Pāramī* ("perfection") refers to good karma we have cultivated in the past that specifically helps us in our practice. Mahasi Sayadaw 1971: Preface.

⁶³⁶ Mahasi Sayadaw seemed to have considered the attainment of *sotāpatti* a necessary and sufficient condition for becoming an "authorized" teacher of his method. Given the fact that many who attain *sotāpatti* possess neither the time nor the inclination to become teachers, the large number of Mahasi disciples who were

6.1.1.5 The Mahasi method is the most popular meditation in **Sri Lanka** today.⁶³⁷ It seemed to have been introduced there as early as 1939 but it was not until the arrival of 3 Burmese monks in 1955, at the invitation of the Sri Lankan prime minister, that the method gained great popularity.⁶³⁸ Like the Burmese government, the Sri Lankan government was then preparing for the 1956 celebrations of the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha's death, and the Mahasi method was given the official endorsement by both governments. In this connection too, a number of Mahasi's followers became prominent teachers in Thailand, India and SE Asia.

Mahasi Sayadaw thus provided the Theravada world with more than just an easy and simple meditation method, he also introduced a model of **an urban meditation centre** that worked as a catalyst for the spread of meditation among the laity.⁶³⁹ "One cannot overemphasize the significance of this development: Buddhists traditionally held that meditation was a risky business that should be undertaken only under proper supervision, that is, within the confines of the Sangha." (Sharf 1995: 256)

Before Mahasi, there was almost no opportunity for lay persons to do meditation; indeed, meditation practice was rare even amongst the urban Sangha.⁶⁴⁰ Yet, in the new climate of modern Buddhism, there are a growing number of facilities where eminent meditation masters teach meditation to lay practitioners. These networks of retreat centres run by their disciples and volunteers allow the laity and foreigners to practise *vipassanā* alongside the monks.⁶⁴¹

Even the more traditional temples, to stay relevant with the times and attract devotees, were obliged to offer meditation classes.⁶⁴² Very often, the lay members themselves would request for such meditation classes and courses. Gombrich and Obeyesekere noted that the spread of meditation among the laity was the "greatest single change to have come over Buddhism in Sri Lanka (and indeed in the other Theravada countries) since the Second World War."⁶⁴³

6.1.2 Measuring sainthood

6.1.2.1 Erik Braun's paper, "Local and translocal in the study of Theravāda Buddhism and modernity" (2009),⁶⁴⁴ is an interesting study in how the Mahasi organization certified those amongst their

in fact teaching throughout the world illustrates just how common *sotāpatti* had become in the Mahasi school. (Sharf 1995:294 n42)

⁶³⁷ Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933) tried to revive meditation on the basis of textual materials, such as *Manual of a Mystic*, which he found in 1892, formulating his own system of meditation which he taught his lay followers. See M Carrithers, *The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka: An Anthropological and Historical Study*, Delhi: OUP, 1983:240; and Gombrich & Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka*. Princeton, 1988:237 f.

⁶³⁸ For an account of the meditation revival in Sri Lanka, see esp R Gombrich, "From monastery to meditation centre: Lay meditation in modern Sri Lanka," in (edd) P Denwood & A Piatigorsky, *Buddhist Studies: Ancient and Modern*, London, 1983:20-34; Carrithers 1983:222-246; and Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988:238.

⁶³⁹ One of the leading Mahasi centres in Sri Lanka, which opened in 1956 at Kanduboda (c 70 km NW of Colombo)—the Kanduboda Siyane Vipassana Meditation Centre—provides meditation classes in Sinhalese as well as English, benefitting locals as well as foreigners (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988:238).

⁶⁴⁰ See Sharf 1995:242.

⁶⁴¹ Besides these prominent teachers, there were (and are) several dozen prominent teachers active in Burma, Thailand and Sri Lanka, many of whom teach their own techniques based on their personal practice as well as their knowledge of the Buddhist texts. Many such teachers, like Sunlun Sayadaw (1878-1952) in Burma [6.1.3], and Ajahn Buddhadasa (1906-1993) in Thailand [SD 60.1b (5.6-5.8)], have considerable followings.

⁶⁴² George D Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka: Religious tradition, reinterpretation and response*. Columbia: Univ of South Carolina Press, 1988b:173.

⁶⁴³ Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988:237; see also Donald K Swearer, "Lay Buddhism and the Buddhist revival in Ceylon." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 38 (3) 1970:255-275.

⁶⁴⁴ Erik Braun, "Local and translocal in the study of Theravāda Buddhism and modernity," *Religion Compass* 3,6, 2009: 935-950.

practitioners to have attained which level of the path (noble sainthood), even arhathood itself. This would, of course, interest the curious Buddhist and the concerned practitioner. Braun, however, used this event to show the dichotomy of textual Buddhism and “real-life” Buddhism, that is, Buddhism as taught in the Pali canon and Buddhism as lived or believed among ethnic Buddhists.⁶⁴⁵

For me, this dichotomy is a good start for investigating into how scholars think and see Buddhism. Perhaps, we can come to a better understanding of this scholarly trend of our time before it metamorphoses into a new development. When we look at the history of Buddhist studies since its rise in the mid-19th century, we can see how it began as discrete disciplines (starting with textual studies and Buddhology), and then other disciplines began to take an interest in it. We are now seeing different disciplines—*textual studies, Buddhology, archaeology, history, philology, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, psychology, law and literature*—using one another, even merging holistically, to understand Buddhism, and use it for their purposes and profit. In other words, in time, even this idea of an academic dichotomy would be outmoded—just as Weber’s ideas of religion and Buddhism are being sidelined, even rejected, today.

Buddhist practice will go on as we get better editions of the Pali canon, better translations, make in-depth close studies of the suttas, practise their teachings, and see them lucidly all over, as if for the first time, to look even deeper, to see what we have missed: all this for the sake of getting closer to the path of awakening. Hence, the dichotomy is not between textual Buddhism and ethnic Buddhism, but rather between the scholar’s Buddhisms—their socially constructed virtual Buddhist realities—and ethnic Buddhisms, the samsaric ground-level realities that we are likely to see when we go to a Buddhist house, group, society or temple. Learning from both these extremes of the dichotomy, we rise to **the middle of the middle way**, the noble eightfold path itself.

6.1.2.2 At the annual Mahasi festival in December 1994, Sangha representatives from each of the 332 branch organizations⁶⁴⁶ around the country convened and compiled the figures for the total number of yogis (meditators) who had attained insight (*nyanzin*) and perhaps awakening in their centres since the opening of Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha (MTY) in 1947.⁶⁴⁷ Officially, over a million (1,085,082) people had achieved a certifiable level of meditative attainment, including that of full awakening (arhathood). The Centre’s executive committee members and Sayadaw teachers all insisted that the meditation was not narrowly restricted to any one class of people, such as the urban middle class, farmers, or elderly people. In other words, interest in meditation was widespread among all sectors of Burmese society.⁶⁴⁸

The higher visibility of middle-class people in the movement, at least in Yangon, results from their having the surplus income and leisure time to be able to afford the opportunity to practise meditation, especially at any time for an unspecified duration. Furthermore, they were more economically, intellectually and professionally equipped to take up roles in the centres’ support and hierarchy.

Farmers, by contrast, were, as a rule, limited by the seasonality of their work. Nevertheless, in their off-season, many farmers visited centres to practise for shorter periods of time.⁶⁴⁹ During the

⁶⁴⁵ The details of the Mahasi organization’s exercise of classifying and registering the “path” attainments of its members is given in Ingrid Jordt, *Burma’s Mass Lay Meditation Movement: Buddhism and the Cultural Construction of Power*, Ohio, 2007:34-37.

⁶⁴⁶ In 2011, there were 564 registered Mahasi centres in Myanmar (Nimala, “An evaluation of significant meditation techniques in Myanmar (1850-2000).” PhD diss, Univ of Delhi, 2015:149).

⁶⁴⁷ Jordt notes that this number was, of course, much smaller than the total number of people who had spent some time meditating or being engaged in other *sāsana*-related work at the Centre. (2007:34 n33)

⁶⁴⁸ On attempts by the government to convert non-Burman minorities to Buddhism, see Jordt 2007:ch 5.

⁶⁴⁹ A nayaka sayadaw (abbot elder) explained: “In the village they have no time for meditation ... In a year they get only one time for a retreat—ten-day or twenty-day retreat. Otherwise, they are just doing *dāna* and *sīla* and on the Sabbath day they go to the *kyaung* as a yogi to take precepts and meditate.” (Jordt 2007:224 f n35)

off-season, busloads of yogis travel from the countryside to preferably meditate at MTY, which afforded human comforts that the other centres did not. The Hititi Voluntary Organization helped people of more modest means to pay for their stay.

6.1.2.3 The huge numbers [6.1.2.2] demonstrated the MTY's belief in a remarkable record of spiritual accomplishment. From the outsider's perspective, it also indicated a remarkable level of participation in meditation. Scholars often take such an example of widespread meditation practice as the hallmark of modern Buddhism.⁶⁵⁰ Scholars, of course, view the Mahasi organization's claim of so many (at least partially) awakened individuals as being highly unusual. Informed Buddhists are also at a loss at how to justify the measuring of something immeasurable, and if this is supported by the Buddha's teaching.

As Braun notes: "Not all modern Buddhists meditate, for one thing, and, so far as I know, even among those groups of Buddhists that do, no other—in Southeast Asia or beyond—has made a public claim of such numerical specificity and size. The distinctiveness of the Mahasi tradition in this regard suggests that different groups of modern Buddhists assign different values to meditation."⁶⁵¹ Such different values can then contribute to divergent understandings of lay practice, of the nature of monastic life, and of the role of Buddhism in society.⁶⁵² (2009:935)

Ethnographers (especially anthropologists and sociologists) find such a distinctive, even unique, activity of "rationalizing" meditation interesting, worthy of academic study and discussion. Yet, this practice has no basis in the canonical texts, by which informed Buddhists would discuss and discern this development. The scholars are basically arguing that textual Buddhism (that is, early Buddhism) is a "prescribed" teaching (a theoretical Buddhism), whereas Mahasi meditation and the Mahasi organization statistics-taking are "living" ethnic Buddhism.

When scholars make a living of studying such "living" experiences of modern Buddhism, practising Buddhists are unlikely to quarrel with it. Yet, it remains that they are not scholars: they too, are an integral part of "living" Buddhism, that is, as taught by the Buddha in the suttas. This may sound trite and traditional, but they say it with joy and commitment. The key difference is that Buddhist practitioners *live* it without making a *living* out of it.

6.1.2.4 Many scholars have noted that Buddhism as an object of study arose in Europe in the 2nd half of the 19th century. "Working with texts housed in Europe, Orientalists reified Buddhism into something essentially immutable but subject to the depredations of historical circumstances in Asia, in which local folks always imperfectly expressed its essence."⁶⁵³ The most comprehensive description and analysis of the creation of this idea of Buddhism in the West was given by Philip Almond in his *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Almond 1988).⁶⁵⁴

⁶⁵⁰ Donald Lopez Jr, in his overview of the development of modern Buddhism, writes: "The essential practice of modern Buddhism was meditation" (Lopez, *Modern Buddhism: Readings for the Unenlightened*. London: Penguin, 2002a: xxxvii). See also David McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, New York: OUP, 2008: 182-185.

⁶⁵¹ "Even if the most important factor for the Mahasi organization is the power of the public claim to such meditative accomplishment, rather than actual attainment, it still indicates a conception of meditation that allows such a claim to be made." (Braun 2009:944 n2)

⁶⁵² It is hard to see how meditation in itself works to attract the masses in a country or community. It seems that its attractiveness depends on how that culture views meditation, and of course its availability: see E Braun, *Ledi Sayadaw, Abhidhamma, and the Modern Insight Meditation Movement*, PhD thesis, Harvard, 2008, 2009: 944 f n3.

⁶⁵³ D S Lopez, Jr (ed), *Curators of the Buddha*, Chicago, 1995a:7; M Ivy, "Modernity," in (ed) Lopez, Jr, *Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism*. Chicago, 2005:317.

⁶⁵⁴ C Hallisey ("Roads taken and not taken in the study of Theravāda Buddhism," 1995), however, argues that Almond's focus on the West reproduces a sort of "latent Orientalism" that acknowledges little agency for Asians (Hallisey 1995:31 f). Later in the article, Hallisey suggests the concept of "intercultural Mimesis" to bring

Scholars thought that ethnic forms of Buddhism in Asia generally deviated from this constructed ideal and were seen as corruptions of early Buddhism, and thus of marginal importance compared with the authentic tradition found in the Pali canon. This view of a dichotomy between a putatively pure original and local corruptions created what Anne Hansen has called a “**core-periphery**” model of Buddhist history, “situating the core in the Indian origins of the religion and the periphery in the vernacular interpretations and practices of later Buddhists.”⁶⁵⁵

It was as if to validate the ethnographic study of Buddhism—Buddhism “on the ground level”—ethnographic scholars conjured up a “core-periphery” dichotomy, that the “core” was early Buddhism, and that in its “periphery” were the marginal or local ethnic forms corrupted by race and culture. Or, as Braun puts it: “This, then, was a rather neat conception of **the translocal** as a singular entity found in canonical Pali texts (now safely housed in Europe) and a rather diffuse notion of the local as populist and corrupted forms of Buddhism that usually found expression in the vernacular.” (2009: 937)⁶⁵⁶

6.1.3 The middle of the middle way

6.1.3.1 Scholars belong to a discipline—**textual studies, Buddhology, philology, archaeology, history, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, psychology and literary studies** [6.1.2.1]—which are the powerful coloured lenses with which they see, study and discuss Buddhism. Unlike committed Buddhist individuals who see Buddhism, especially early Buddhism, for what it really is, as the Buddha’s teaching for self-awakening, scholars work and think as a formal group guided by the principles of their academic discipline.

Broadly speaking, **archaeologists** study Buddhist structural remains; **historians** study what happened to Buddhism and made it what it is. **Anthropologists** and **sociologists** study how Buddhists behave in groups; while anthropologists study at the micro-level of an individual Buddhist as an example of a larger culture, sociologists study the bigger picture, such as the power relations of different groups and with each other. **Philosophers** study and analyse Buddhist philosophy and theory. **Psychologists** study Buddhist meditation and mind teachings, some of whom appropriate what they see as useful or profitable for their own practice in what is growing into a competitive field.

6.1.3.2 Textual studies refer to a broad spectrum of scholarship where specialists study and interpret, or translate the Buddhist texts: **the Buddhologists** are those who study the Buddhist texts and often Buddhist practices too, in connection with the texts; **the philologists** study the language/s of the Buddhist texts, especially Pali and Sanskrit, or make comparative studies of the early Buddhist suttas with their Chinese parallels (the Āgamas). That rare breed, **the literary scholars**, study Buddhism as literature, analysing the uses, technicality and beauty of text and textual language in terms of figures, myths and doctrines.

A Buddhist, true to the term, practises Buddhism. The only discipline that the Buddhist—as an individual practitioner—follows is that of the Buddhist moral teaching, for the sake of keeping his actions socially engaged (by respecting life, property and freedom) and keeping his speech truthful, unifying, refined and useful. The purpose of this personal discipline is for the sake of mental training in cultivating joyful calm and keeping the mind radiantly clear. All this is for the same objective of gaining liberating wisdom and self-understanding into the nature of true reality, ultimately becoming awakened like the Buddha himself. Hence, we can see that being **Buddhist** (not just *a Buddhist*) is far different from being any of the academic specialists.

Orientalist and Asian worldviews into interaction in which both parties have agency. Braun discusses this concept in 2009:939 f.

⁶⁵⁵ Anne R Hansen, *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia, 1860-1930*. Honolulu, 2007:8.

⁶⁵⁶ For a fascinating read on how the ethnographic scholars argue their case for this dichotomy, see E Braun, “Local and translocal in the study of Theravāda Buddhism and modernity,” *Religion Compass* 3,6 2009:935-950.

6.1.3.3 A key Buddhist teaching here is that of the worldly and the spiritual, or *the mundane* and *the supramundane*. **The worldly or mundane** (*lokiya*) aspect of Buddhism refers to our conduct and learning what's wrong and bad, and avoiding them, and what's right and good, and cultivating them, as unawakened beings. By respecting *life, property, freedom, truth and learning*, we become and remain **human**. When we kill, steal, misbehave sexually, lie or cloud up our mind, we lose our humanity and fall into a subhuman state.⁶⁵⁷

As **unawakened beings**, our primary task is to know when we have fallen into a subhuman state, and at once work to rise out of it by keeping the 5 precepts (against killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and intoxication). To ensure that we weaken the negative habits that pull us down into the dark depths of the subhuman, we keep up being mindful and cultivate mental concentration so that the mind is not dictated by the senses, but that we are in control of all our sense-faculties for the sake of beauty and truth in life, that is, material happiness and mental joy, for self and others.

6.1.3.4 Since most of religion is about faith in others, especially those we see as being above and beyond us, there will always be those who are regarded as Saints or "Highly Attained," and so on. Those who make such declarations surely must, consciously or unconsciously, deem themselves to be higher than those they canonize! This is a traditional practice in the Catholic Church, and we see this in ethnic Buddhist groups too.

I have Buddhist friends (Asian and foreign, monastic and lay) who have been certified as "stream-winners" and "once-returners." One of them once told me when he joined a group meditation session, he, as a certified streamwinner, had to sit right at the back, while those certified as "higher-attained" sat farther in front nearer the Buddha image. A well-known foreign monk once told me that he had been certified as a streamwinner too. A remarkably open friend, he would rarely disagree with me except for a subtle sniff whenever he disagreed.

One well-known Burmese teacher who bestowed "path-titles" to his followers was U Ko Lay. I was told by one of his students that in old age (in the early 21st century), he suffered from dementia, lost his memory, and sat disoriented all by himself. Another well-known meditation teacher, Boonman Punyathiro, in a magazine write-up entitled "The Jhana Underground" (Tricycle fall 2022) mentioned that the writer noted that he had mostly relied on Boonman's autobiography⁶⁵⁸ and interviews with his wife and students, but could not interview him because of "health and memory issues." My point is that even meditation teachers may have mental health issues which may have arisen due to past karma or present conditions.⁶⁵⁹

One last point before we close this section: Although the Mahasi organization went on to identify and register the path-attainments of practically all its members, Mahasi himself was never known to have declared his path-status at all (as far as I know). Now we go on to look at 2 famous Burmese meditation masters who actually gave details about their awakening process, even as arhats: Sunlun Sayadaw and Theinngu Sayadaw [6.2].

6.2 MEASURING THE BREATH (A MODERN ACCOUNT OF THE AWAKENING PROCESS)

6.2.1 Sunlun Sayadaw (1878-1952)

6.2.1.0 Pyi Phyo Kyaw (Pyi Kyaw,⁶⁶⁰ for short) is a Research Associate in Abhidhamma Meditation, connected with King's College, London, and a Burmese Buddhist practitioner. He has done a rare detailed study, based on her own practice and fieldwork, on "The sound of the breath: Sunlun and

⁶⁵⁷ There are traditionally these 4 subhuman states, which may be seen as our habitual psychological states in this life itself, thus: **preta**-like addictive behaviour, **animal**-like predictability chasing material desires, **asura**-like cold exploiting of others, and **hell**-like habit of violence with others. See SD 2.22 (1.7).

⁶⁵⁸ On Boonman, see SD 60.1b (6.1).

⁶⁵⁹ We will discuss meditation and mental health issues in some detail in SD 60.1e.

⁶⁶⁰ Pronounced "Pyé Jaw."

Theinngu meditation traditions of Myanmar” (2019), on which this section is based.⁶⁶¹ Since this is a documented study of the Buddhist awakening experiences in modern monks—Sunlun Sayadaw and Theinngu Sayadaw—I have adapted here relevant sections of Kyaw’s paper for our study. I will give my own reflections at the end of this section.

For her summary of the life of **Sunlun Sayadaw** (U Kavi), Pyi Kyaw drew from 3 sources: Kornfield (1977), Sobhana (1995) and Vara (2010).⁶⁶² These sources were written from different perspectives: Kornfield (1977) explored Sunlun Sayadaw’s life and teachings within the context of modern meditation teachers in SE Asia for western practitioners. The other two were Asian practitioners. Sobhana was a student of Sunlun Sayadaw, who succeeded him as the abbot of Sunlun Gu Monastery in Myingyan. Vara was the abbot of the Sunlun Meditation Centre near Kaba-aye in Yangon.

6.2.1.1 Sunlun Sayadaw was born as Kyaw Din in 1878 in Sunlun village, near Myingyan, approximately 57 miles SW of Mandalay, Burma’s old historical capital. Sobhana’s biography (1995) emphasizes his early unpromising condition as a dullard with poor education, despite having been sent to study with the monk Min-kyaung Sayadaw in Myingyan. This early lack served to contrast to his future spiritual prowess.

Kyaw Din took up meditation while he was working as a subsistence farmer. Between 1920-1940, under the agricultural and economic policies of the British towards their then colony, Burma often suffered from famine.⁶⁶³ His epiphany came just before that period, when, in 1919, on seeing the failure of others’ crops, rather than feel relief at his own success, he reflected on the Burmese saying, “When one’s worldly possessions increase, one will die” (Sobhana 1995:22).

He feared dying without having done any meritorious act (Pali, *kusala*; Burmese, *kútho*)⁶⁶⁴ and having achieved any spiritual worth. For a Buddhist, having merit, that is, the benefits of good acts, as one prepared for one’s death and/or at the time of death is crucial because the state of one’s rebirth to some extent depended on the amount of merit one has. In other words, one should have done wholesome acts, such as charitable giving (*dāna*), taking refuge in the 3 jewels, and practising meditation, so that merit accrued from such good acts will lead to a good rebirth.

6.2.1.2 Though married with 4 children to support, Kyaw Din set about offering food and other requisites to the Sangha, said to be the “supreme field of merit.” It was at one of such offering ceremonies that he heard of the meditation teachings of pioneering meditation master Ledi Sayadaw.⁶⁶⁵ Reassured by his informant, a mill clerk, that his lack of familiarity with sacred texts would be no bar to meditation, he began meditating on the breath following the mill clerk’s instructions.

Over time, he received sundry advice and instructions from others, which he combined with his own insight, and practised accordingly. A traditionally learned Buddhist would probably explain here

⁶⁶¹ Pyi Phyto Kyaw, “The sound of the breath: Sunlun and Theinngu meditation traditions of Myanmar,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 20,1-2 2019:247-291.

⁶⁶² Jack Kornfield, *Living Buddhist Masters*, Santa Cruz, CA, 1977b; rev *Modern Buddhist Masters*, Kandy 1988a, 2nd ed 2007. V Sobhana, *Sunlun Sayadaw Hpayàgyi Eí Htei-Rok-Pat-Tí Hnín Ta-Yà-Tàw Myà* (Biography of Sunlun Sayadaw and His Dhamma-Talks), Yangon: Kyar Youngsone Press, 1995. V Vara, *Sunlun Wí-Pa-Tha-Na À-Htok-Nè* (Method of Sunlun Vipassanā), Yangon: Kaba Aye Sunlun Vipassana Meditation Centre, 2010.

⁶⁶³ J L Richell, *Disease and Demography in Colonial Burma*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2006:213.

⁶⁶⁴ Early Buddhism differentiates between “the meritorious” (*puñña*) and “the wholesome” (*kusala*). *Puñña* is the pre-Buddhist concept of consequentialist good karma (rooted mostly in giving and ritual observance of the precepts), bringing good fruits now and better rebirth. *Kusala* is the Buddhist teaching on wholesome habits in terms of the 3 trainings (moral conduct, concentration and wisdom): SD 54.2c (2.1). Ethnic Theravada Buddhists tend to conflate the sense of the 2 terms as *puñña-kusala*; Burmese ကုသိုလ်ကောင်းမှု *kuthol-koung mhu*, and Thai บุญกุศล *bun-kuson*. Also see P D Premasiri, “Interpretation of two principal ethical terms in early Buddhism,” *Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities* 2,1 1976:63-74.

⁶⁶⁵ On Ledi Sayadaw, see SD 60.1b 2.3.3-2.4.2); E Braun, *The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, and the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw*. Chicago, 2013.

that Kyaw Din was benefitting from the ripening of his past good karma (*pāramī*) in this connection. In due course, it is said, he gained arhathood, which included these spiritual attainments:

- (1) appearance in his mind's eye of the "sign" or "mental image" (*nimitta*) of different colours, including red, golden, white and tawny (Sobhana 1995:28 f);
- (2) gaining access to heavenly realms in his meditation (Sobhana 1995:29) and
- (3) having clairvoyance (*dibba, cakkhu*), one of the 6 "higher knowledges" (*abhiññā*) (Sobhana 1995:30).

6.2.1.3 According to the disciples of Sunlun Sayadaw, his attainment of each stage of liberation falls on the 13th day after every full moon (in the Burmese calendar) at 10 in the evening (Sobhana 1995:31, 34, 40; Vara 2010:13), dating his attainment of arhathood to 9 November 1920 (Houtman 1990:292). There is a belief in the tradition of practice that one remembers the date, time and place of one's attainment of the stages of liberation.⁶⁶⁶

We are not told how Kyaw Din knew about the traditional belief that a lay person who becomes an arhat must ordain the same day or he will die (attain final nirvana). Understandably, this view is well-known in Theravāda communities though it is not found anywhere in the suttas or the Tipiṭaka.⁶⁶⁷ Kyaw Din, recognizing his own attainment, persuaded his initially reluctant wife⁶⁶⁸ to grant him permission to ordain. He became a novice monk on 1 November 1920, that is, 8 days before he attained arhathood. [3.3.4.3]

6.2.1.4 Sunlun's hagiographies emphasized the miraculous events in his life and the visions he saw, confirming his awakening. For instance, Sobhana (1995:40 f) writes that minutes before Kyaw Din attained arhathood, he saw in his mind's eye 5 gods (*devas*), including Sakra, lord of Tāvātimsa Heaven, in his flying chariot. He knew that they had come to protect him as he was about to attain arhathood. Hence, he continued with his own practice without being distracted by them. Once he had attained arhathood, he noticed that the gods had vanished.

We are told that due to his attainment of arhathood he was able to see everything clearly from the highest point of existence (*bhav'agga*) to the lowest point of existence, that is, the Avīci Hell (Sobhana 1995:41) [6.2.4.10]. A few months later, on 4 April 1921, he received higher ordination in the ordination hall (*sīmā*) of Yei-le Monastery, Meikhtila Town, upper Myanmar. He was 44 years old.

The following year, in 1922, he moved to a monastery near his village, donated to him by his former wife. It was then known as Sunlun Chauk Monastery, but later was renamed Sunlun Gu Monastery. Sunlun Sayadaw taught meditation at this monastery until he died 30 years later, on 17 May 1952, at the age of 74 (Sobhana 1995:223).

⁶⁶⁶ Yuki Sirimane's study of experiences of the stages of the Buddhist path in contemporary Sri Lanka also reports her informants' claims that they remember the date, time and place of their attainment of the stages of liberation. (*Entering the Stream to Enlightenment: Experiences of the Stages of the Buddhist Path in Contemporary Sri Lanka*, Bristol, 2016:55-63)

⁶⁶⁷ Miln 164,8-11, 264 f. **Kathā, vatthu** says that a lay person can be an arhat, and instances Yasa the youth, Uttiya the house-holder, Setu the brahmin youth (Kvu 267). On the fate of laymen arhats, see SD 8.6 (19); that they must ordain that same day or die: SD 39.3 (1.4.5). It should be noted, however, that the Burmese Buddhist authorities accept the Milinda, pañha, which records the monk Nāgasena's view, as canonical, ie, one of the books in the Khuddaka Nikāya.

⁶⁶⁸ Sobhana's hagiography of Sunlun Sayadaw portrays his wife, Daw Shwe Yee, in a negative light despite her later donation of the monastery to him. During his practice, she tried to disrupt his meditation, once by removing the floor [sic] of their house, and, on another occasion, by setting the cattle loose. She did these so that he would get up from his meditation (Sobhana 1995:32). In contrast, Theinngu Sayadaw's hagiography describes how his 3rd wife became instrumental in encouraging him to pursue the path of meditation. For details, see Pyi Phyaw Kyaw 2019:7-9.

6.2.1.5 Sunlun's attainment of arhathood became known among learned monks (Kornfield 2007: 88). Sobhana records 9 occasions when Sunlun was questioned by different authorities, including scholar monks such as the Aggamahāpaṇḍita⁶⁶⁹ Taung-tha Sayadaw (U Aggavaṃsa) and Nyaung-lún Sayadaw (U Medhāvī), as well as Prime Minister U Nu, on a range of topics, such as his own practice (1995:106-107), practice of the 10 types of *kasīna* objects (47, 54), *nibbāna* (67-69), and the issue of suicide from the perspective of monastic discipline (*vinaya*) (130 f).

Sobhana also describes how a learned monk, Nyaung-lún Sayadaw, was initially doubtful of his replies, but when his answers were checked against the Pali canon, the Sayadaw found many important passages to corroborate his statements (Sobhana 1995:53-57). He was so impressed with Sunlun's understanding of the Dharma that he told his disciples about it and encouraged them to practise in the same way as Sunlun (Sobhana 1995:57).

Although it is a commonly accepted view among Buddhists in Myanmar that Sunlun Sayadaw was awakened, Houtman documents an informant's claim that he was not (1990:167). Notwithstanding this claim, Sunlun had many followers, including some of the most learned monks in the country.

6.2.2 Theinngu Sayadaw (1913-1973)

6.2.2.0 Pyi Kyaw, for her biography of Theinngu Sayadaw, drew on the following sources: Theinngu Sayadaw's autobiography, *San Shìn* (1972), *Theravāda Buddhist* (1992), *Paññājota* (2003), and *Òhn Khin* (Undated).⁶⁷⁰

Paññājota and Òhn Khin were senior disciples under Theinngu. Paññājota, as a layman, wrote several books on the life and practice of Theinngu Sayadaw under the penname Maung Bho (Ákalí-kàw). Pyi Kyaw had yet to identify the specific affiliation of San Shìn and "Theravāda Buddhist," but all the 4 present Theinngu Sayadaw's life, practice and teachings from the perspective of the Theinngu meditation tradition.

6.2.2.1 Theinngu⁶⁷¹ Sayadaw (U Ukkatṭha) was born 35 years after Sunlun Sayadaw and his own practice was in part inspired by him. He was born in 1913 in Hnàwkone village near Hmàwbi, about 48 km (30 miles) north of Yangon. He was named Aung Tun, and at a young age was sent to a monastery in his village for his education. Like the young Sunlun, we see in Aung Tun a contrast between his poor schooling when young and his later spiritual prowess.

Paññājota wrote that Aung Tun was not a good student, skipping classes whenever he could. He soon started hanging out with the wrong crowd, and began smoking and drinking (2003:16). His studies suffered as a result, and when he left formal education he could barely read (San Shìn 1972: 22 f; Paññājota 2003:16 f). However, though he was not good in his studies, he was astute, sociable and good at sports (Paññājota 2003: 17 f).

6.2.2.2 Before he undertook the practice of meditation, Aung Tun was married four times. He married his first wife, Ma Hpwa Nyunt, at the age of 14 (Theravāda Buddhist 1992:3). Paññājota wrote that while Aung Tun was finding it hard to make ends meet for his family, he was also involved in gambling (2003:22). Then, he started committing robberies, and soon his criminal acts caught up

⁶⁶⁹ Honorary titles such as Aggamahāpaṇḍita (the foremost great scholar) and Abhidhajamahāraṭṭhaguru (the great teacher, supreme banner of the nation) are conferred to scholar-monks by the state.

⁶⁷⁰ **San Shìn**, *Deík-htí-pyók Ta-nha-khyók* (Removal of Views, Cessation of Craving), Yangon: Aye Aye Publication, 1972. **Theravāda Buddhist**, *Theinngu Sayadaw Hpayàgyi éi Htei-rok-pat-tí hnín ta-yà-àhtok-nè* (Biography of Theinngu Sayadaw and His Meditation Methods), 1992. **Òhn Khin**, *Theinngu Sayadaw Hpayàgyi Éi Ta-Yà Sàung-Pà-Myà* (Articles on Theinngu Sayadaw's Teachings), Yangon: Ba-má-hkeík Sa-pay, nd. **V Paññājota**, *Mulá Theinngu Sayadaw Hpayàgyi Bhaddanta Ukkatṭha Ma-Hte Éi Htei-Rok-Pat-Tí Ka-Hta* (Biography of Theinngu Sayadaw Bhaddanta Ukkatṭha Thera) vol 2, Yangon: Chotaythan Sapay Tike, 2002.

⁶⁷¹ Or Tae-inn-gu, or simply The-inn.

with him. Although he was not formally charged for the crimes due to lack of evidence, he was transferred to a nearby village called Hlèlànkhù and put under the surveillance of the village headman in 1932 for 2 years. By that time, he already had three children (Paññājota 2003:22).

In 1934, as soon as he was allowed to return to his family, he committed another robbery on his way home. In this case, his collaborators gave evidence, and he was charged and sentenced to 7 years imprisonment (Paññājota 2003:25). Aung Tun was moved from prison to prison around the country, and when World War II broke out, he was moved to Mandalay prison.⁶⁷² Around 1940, in a general amnesty at the height of World War II, all prisoners, including Aung Tun, were released (Paññājota 2003:27). On his journey home, he was caught up in a battle just outside of Mandalay, which delayed him. When he arrived at his village, he found that his father had died, and his first wife and three children had left him (Paññājota 2003:31).

6.2.2.3 Such personal difficulties only pushed him deeper into the world of crime: we are told that he engaged in all kinds of criminal activities, not only around his village but also in Yangon. At 28, he remarried and had a child, but both his wife and child died shortly after (Paññājota 2003:32). He soon married for the third time to a Karen woman named Daw Si, who was from a nearby village (Paññājota 2003:33).⁶⁷³

At the same time, Aung Tun had another wife in Yangon, who was called Daw Than Shein (Paññājota 2003: 33). Daw Than Shein, who had been attending meditation retreats at a centre in Yangon, induced Aung Tun to take up meditation. Sunlun Sayadaw attributed his epiphany to her:

When she [Daw Than Shein] came back from meditation, she bought Sunlun Sayadaw's biography from a book shop at the Shwedagon Pagoda. ... She said, "This is the book [on] Sunlun. ... Sunlun Sayadaw was said to be an arahant." ... [I] flicked through the book, looking at the pictures [in it]. I came across [the words]: body, sensations, mind, and dharmas. When I finished reading about the 4 foundations of mindfulness, [I experienced] tingling sensations spreading across the whole body and then cessation [of those sensations]. ... [I thought], "If he [Sunlun Sayadaw] was an arahant, I too can be an arahant with practice."
(Shin 1972:34; Paññājota 2003:44; tr Pyi Kyaw)

6.2.2.4 Despite his budding interest in meditation, Aung Tun committed another robbery in late August 1959 (Paññājota 2003:47). During this robbery, the house owner attacked Aung Tun with a knife, injuring his head, as a result of which he developed what, in Buddhism, is called "spiritual shock" (*saṃvega*). In his Dharma-talks, Theinngu Sayadaw often retold how *saṃvega* arose in him, thus:

I have to thank him [the man who attacked him]. I could have died, if he had attacked me with a spear ... , but I am not dead. He did this to me so that I would meditate.
(Ukkatṭha 1962 25:52-26:12; translation mine)

Even before his injury was properly healed, he left his wives, Daw Si and Daw Than Shein, to undertake meditation practice, telling them that they should no longer depend on him and that they were free to remarry if they wished (Paññājota 2003:48).

⁶⁷² Paññājota writes that on the eve of World War II, prisoners across the country who were imprisoned for their involvement in various anti-British movements such as the Saya San Rebellion and Dobama Asiayone, and for their criminal acts were moved to Mandalay prison. (2003:27)

⁶⁷³ Daw Si later practised meditation under the guidance of Theinngu Sayadaw and became a precept-nun (*thilashin*).

6.2.2.5 On 7 September, 1959, Aung Tun, having observed the 9 Precepts,⁶⁷⁴ started practising meditation in the ordination hall of the monastery in his village (Paññājota 2003:51). Like Sunlun Sayadaw, he practised mindfulness of breathing, and tried to be mindful of both the touch of the breath at the entrance to the nostrils and the awareness of the touch of breath (Paññājota 2003:71). The rate of his in-breath and out-breath was rapid.

According to Paññājota, it reached approximately 120 times per minute (2003:51). He did not change the breath-rhythm nor the spot of breath-contact. Although he was breathing rapidly, he did not force it, that is, it was a natural process. When he became sleepy or unfocused, or was heavy with a wandering mind, he increased the breath-rate. When he had a better understanding of the breath-rate, he experimented with various bases of the breath:⁶⁷⁵

- (1) shallow breath coming from upper part of the lungs or from the throat;
- (2) medium-length breath coming from the chest; and
- (3) long breath coming from the navel.

He spent 16 hours a day practising in this manner, and the remaining hours worshipping the Buddha, eating and sleeping.

6.2.2.6 In due course, Theinngu Sayadaw explained that he only realized that he attained the initial stages of freedom (*vimutti*) after he had already reached the 3rd stage of freedom—in other words, by way of “review knowledge” (*paccavekkhana, ñāṇa*), by which he reviewed and recalled his path and practice. In fact, the first 3 stages of freedom arose in him before his higher ordination. He went on to attain arhathood within 21 months of his initial practice, dating it to 20 May 1961 (Theravada Buddhist 1992:6).

As with Sunlun Sayadaw, we find divine beings appearing as witnesses to confirm his attainment. Theinngu Sayadaw said that gods, including those from the Brahma world, visited him, encouraging him to undertake higher ordination.⁶⁷⁶ As in the case of Sunlun Sayadaw, many learned monks tested Theinngu Sayadaw’s meditation practice and attainment, and checked his answers against Pāli canonical and Commentarial texts. Eventually, his practice and teachings were accepted by the most learned monks, including the Abhidhajamahāraṭhaguru Masoyein Sayadaw of Mandalay (Öhn Khin undated 17 f).

6.2.3 Sunlun Sayadaw’s meditation practice and experience

6.2.3.1 We will here note some key techniques or points in Sunlun’s meditation practice, and notice how they relate to the sutta teachings. The first point concerns his use of **impersonal language** while meditating. As a rule, he referred to the process without “owning” it as “I,” “me,” or “mine.” Hence he spoke of “the touch of the breath at the entrance to the nostrils,” and “the touch-consciousness-mindfulness” [see below] to refer to the process of establishing mindfulness of the breath without the use of any personal pronoun.

This, of course, sounds very much like the meditation language of the suttas. Yet there is another vital purpose, that is, to prevent or overcome fear when we experience something unfamiliar, such as in watching the “foul” (*asubha*) nature of the body. Instead of saying, “he became fearful of the *foul* nature of his body,” Sunlun Sayadaw said, “The mind became fearful of the foul nature of the body.” Instead of identifying with the state, he watched the process without being attached to his own body or mind.

⁶⁷⁴ In Myanmar, laypeople and some precept-nuns staying at a monastery or a meditation centre observe the 9 Precepts, which are the traditional 8 Precepts plus the practice of lovingkindness (*mettā*) as the 9th precept.

⁶⁷⁵ Paññājota 2003:51. Pyi Kyaw states that she had not come across any other sources on the Theinngu tradition which mention such an experimentation with breathing by Theinngu Sayadaw.

⁶⁷⁶ Ukkaṭṭha Undated 2, 54:20-55:35.

6.2.3.2 Kyaw Din started practising mindfulness of breathing after his encounter with the mill clerk who taught him to verbally note: “Breathing in” and “breathing out” [6.2.1.2]. One day another friend told him that such verbal noting of breathing in and out alone was not sufficient, and that he had to be aware of **the touch of the breath** (Sobhana 1995:27; Kornfield 2007:88). Not only should one be “aware” of the touch: it should be done with the same non-identifying manner.

The Burmese expression used by his friend, as described by Sobhana [above], is *athí-lite*, which literally means “to be accompanied by awareness.” In meditation context, this is similar to the expression “choiceless awareness”⁶⁷⁷ in the sense that one is aware of whatever arises without reacting with liking or disliking. This non-reactive detached awareness as one of the key characteristics of mindfulness (*sati*) is well-known even in modern meditation by both practitioners and scholars.⁶⁷⁸

This awareness of touch needs to be guarded and watched with mindfulness. This, in fact, corresponds with how, for Kyaw Din, the practice of mindfulness of breathing entailed 2 steps, initially (Sobhana 1995:27):

- (1) to be aware of the touch of the breath at the entrance to the nostrils, and
- (2) to guard and watch this awareness with mindfulness.

6.2.3.3 Although he had no teacher to instruct him, he added a further step which would later become integral to his teaching method. He took the breath as a meditation-object and tried to be aware of not only the touch of the breath but also **the sense-consciousness** of the breath’s touch.

Sunlun Sayadaw, in his meditation instructions, explained the practitioner’s task as follows:

Touch and sense-consciousness—one must be rigorously mindful of these two. When there is touch, sense-consciousness arises. When we guard and watch the sense-consciousness [of the object] with mindfulness, our job [task] is done.⁶⁷⁹ (Vara 2010:14; tr Pyi Kyaw)

The Pali term *phassa* is translated into English either as “touch” or as “contact,” meaning that there is a meeting between the sense-faculty and the sense-object, either in a broad sense (any sense-faculty) or in a narrow sense (in the case of the body).⁶⁸⁰ Pyi Kyaw translated the Burmese word *htí-mhú* as “touch” rather than “contact.” She explained that here, it is touch, not *contact*, because “it relates to an analysis of which senses are involved in the understanding of the meditation.” The sense here is the body where *the touch* of the breath is felt.⁶⁸¹

From this **touch** there arises consciousness, that is, consciousness of the touch of the breath. This is “sense-consciousness,” that is, *thí-mhú* in Burmese. This is, in fact, what happens when the breath touches the opening of the nostrils: it is there that consciousness of the touch of the breath arises.

The Burmese phrase *thí-mhú* can be used in a broader sense, to refer to the meeting between *any* sense-faculty and its object, that is, a cognitive act which identifies the objects of sight, hearing, etc. In addition to *htí-mhú* “touch” and *thí-mhú* “sense-consciousness,” the expression used by Sunlun in his explanation of the task of a practitioner includes *thatí-kyát-kyát-pyu-pa*, “be mindful, be fully aware,” referring to the Pali terms, *sati, sampajañña*.

⁶⁷⁷ Kornfield, *Modern Buddhist Masters*, 2nd ed, Kandy, 2007:12; Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna: The direct path to realization*, Cambridge, 2003:58 n61.

⁶⁷⁸ Anālayo 2003:58; R Gethin, “On some definitions of mindfulness.” *Contemporary Buddhism* 12 2011a: 263-279.

⁶⁷⁹ In Burmese, this is *Htí-mhú thí-mhú thatí-kyát-kyát-pyú. Htí tót thí mae. Thítáe-apàw-thatí-htàyin-alote-kate-sa-À-hpyin-pè-pathi*.

⁶⁸⁰ On the triangle of experience, see **Madhu, piṇḍika S** (M 18,16) + SD 6.14 (4); **Mahā Hatthi, padôpama S** (M 28,27-38), SD 6.16; SD 60.1d (1.1.1.3).

⁶⁸¹ K Kim, “A comparison of the lists and categorisation of meditation practices (*kammaṭṭhāna*) in the *Visuddhimagga* and **Vimuttimaggā*,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 20,1-2 Sep 2018:87.

6.2.3.4 This means that we should not observe *what* is going on but *how* (it) is going on. The “it” is just a grammatical tag to help us direct the mind. There is no *what* in our insight into any experience, only the *how*. We can only know the meditation-object and that object is our own mind: it is *how* we see, hear, smell, taste, touch and think.

When we are merely “minding” the mind-object, we may see it as being “out there”; then, we are likely to identify with it. We see it as “I, me, mine,” instead of *how* it really is,⁶⁸² that is, mind-made and impermanent. To be “fully aware” means to *fully know* what it really is: impermanent, changing, becoming other. In other words, the object is not different from the mind itself. In this way, the mind is able to sustain proper attention of the meditation-object.

6.2.3.5 Another expression often used is *thatí-htà-pa*, which literally means “to place *sati*,” that is, we should keep our mindfulness on the meditation-object, so that there is “presence of mind” (*upatthitā, sati*) (Gethin 2011:270). We also find the expression *thatí-kat-pa*, which literally means “to fix *sati*” to the object of awareness, requiring the practitioner to stay with the object of awareness so that there is “absence of bobbing or floating away” (*apilāpanatā*). In other words, the mind does not wobble or bob about “like a gourd floating on the surface of water” (Gethin 2011:271).⁶⁸³

The mind of the practitioner with *sati* becomes steady with a minimum of bobbing or a total absence of it. The capacity of the mind to stay with the object of awareness for a sustained period of time is related to the quality of not being forgetful, which is captured in the expression *thatí-myaē-thi*, meaning “having sustained presence of mind.”

These Burmese phrases—*thatí-kyāt-kyāt-pyu-pa*, *thatí-htà-pa*, *thatí-kat-pa*—reminds a practitioner what to do with *sati* during meditation. *Thati* is, of course, *sati*, “mindfulness”; *kyāt-kyāt*, “diligently, zealously, eagerly, strictly”; *pyu-pa*, “do, make, have (effort).” This is a familiar exhortation by a meditation teacher: “Diligently cultivate mindfulness!”—a modern Burmese echo of the Buddha’s last words: “Strive on heedfully!” (*appamādena sampadetha*).⁶⁸⁴

6.2.3.6 The Burmese expression, *htí-thí-thatí*, which literally means “touch-consciousness-mindfulness,” was used among the practitioners of the Sunlun method to refer to the process of establishing mindfulness of the breath (Vara 2010:4). The guidance offered within the Sunlun system is that once our meditation becomes more established, the touch of the breath, the sense-consciousness of the touch of the breath and the mindfulness (*thatí*) of the two aspects of the practice—the touch (*htí*) and the sense-consciousness (*thí*)—will coincide (Sobhana 1995:29). In other words, a practitioner will become mindful of both the touch of the breath and the sense-consciousness of the touch of the breath as soon as they arise.

In addition to developing these 3 steps to mindfulness of breathing, the biographies emphasize how Kyaw Din tried to establish mindfulness not just during meditation but in everything he did.⁶⁸⁵ As he breathed, he tried to be aware of the touch of the breath at the entrance to the nostrils, or the touch of the sound of chopping at the ear as he chopped corn cobs, or the touch of the ground as he walked. With more intensive continuous practice, the bodily sensations were sometimes intensely unpleasant. Such an experience of unpleasant sensations did not deter him.

⁶⁸² We can, of course, say “*what* it is really like,” but the sense is the same.

⁶⁸³ See SD 40a.9 (2.2.3.2); SD 60.1b (8.2.2.1). On *pilāpana*: SD 15.1 (8.5.2).

⁶⁸⁴ **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16,3.51), SD 9. This exhortation to *appamāda, sampadā*, “the full possession of heedfulness” (CPD) (S 5:30,30, 32.8, 33,32, 36,17, 37,23). The “accomplishment” (*sampadā*) should be directed to those of moral virtue (*sīla, sampadā*), of concentration (*samādhi, sampadā*) and of wisdom (*paññā, sampadā*). On the accomplishment of a lay follower, which incl *sīla*- and *paññā, sampadā*: **Dīgha, jānu S** (A 8.54,10-15), SD 5.10. (**Pañcaka**) **Sampadā S 1** (A 5.91/3:118) gives the whole path: *sīla, sampadā, samādhi, sampadā, paññā, sampadā, vimuttisampadā* and *vimutti, ñāṇa, dassana, sampadā*, ie, a summary of the 10 rightnesses (*sammatta*), SD 10.16 (1.1.1.4, 1.8-1.15).

⁶⁸⁵ Sobhana 1995:27; Kornfield 2007:88.

As with other meditation objects, he tried to be mindful of the awareness of *the unpleasant sensations*. Moreover, he found that by continuously breathing in his characteristically rapid sequence, he generated more energy, enabling him to develop more rigorous mindfulness (Sobhana 1995:30). In this manner, he was able to observe the unpleasant sensations with little or no reaction (Kornfield 2007:88). Although the strong, rhythmic breathing has come to be associated as the Sunlun meditation, Sunlun's hagiographies, as we shall see below, oddly contain very little information on his breathing technique.

6.2.4 Theinngu Sayadaw's meditation practice and experience

6.2.4.1 When Aung Tun (Theinngu's lay-name) started practising meditation in the ordination hall of the monastery in his village, he had to battle with intense pain during the first week of his meditation. In spite of this, he continued with the strong, rapid breathing and did not change his posture. Sometimes the pain was so intolerable, he would fall to the floor, but even then, he maintained mindfulness of the painful feelings and only got up from the floor when they had completely disappeared (San Shìn 1972:36).

Sometimes he experimented with different breathing rates in order to deal with the unpleasant feelings. He adjusted the rate of inhalation and exhalation according to the intensity of the sensations (Paññajota 2003: 52). That is, he used strong and rapid breathing to counter gross pain; and weaker, slower breathing when the pain was subtle.

He noticed that as he struggled to cope with these intense feelings, the mind was dominated by the thought of the pain. When that happened, he tried to strengthen mindfulness of the touch of the breath at the nostrils by increasing the breathing rate, so that the mind was no longer preoccupied with the painful feelings (San Shìn 1972:36).

6.2.4.2 Aung Tun soon learned that the mind did not stay with the breath at the nostrils for long; it became aware of the painful feelings (San Shìn 1972:36), which was a more dominant meditation-object than the breath. As his awareness moved between his painful bodily feelings and the touch of the breath at the nostrils, he noticed the concentration (*samādhi*) became stronger, and that with stronger concentration, the tolerance of painful feelings also increased.

He realized that when mindfulness and concentration were more established, the mind was no longer shaken by the intense painful sensations. As he continued with his practice, concentration became more established to the extent that he was able to mindfully observe the arising and ceasing of feelings without changing posture for 3 hours or more (San Shìn 1972:38). According to his own later account of his practice, he began to perceive the continuous arising and ceasing of bodily and mental processes, such as those of bodily feelings, of hearing, knowing, and so on.

6.2.4.3 When Aung Tun realized the arising and ceasing of things that were *within* himself (in the mind), he also saw the nature of **impermanence** in things that are outside of himself.⁶⁸⁶ Once the knowledge of arising and ceasing arose in him, he noticed the nature of **suffering** in everything and its cause (44:00-46:00). He realized that suffering arises because of clinging,⁶⁸⁷ and that clinging arises because of perversion of perception (*saññā, vipallāsa*).⁶⁸⁸

⁶⁸⁶ Ukkaṭṭha Undated 1, 41:35-42:15.

⁶⁸⁷ Theinngu used a Burmese loanword from Pāli, *tha-mú-dá-yá* (*samudaya*, "arising"). In Burmese, the term *tha-mú-dá-yá-thít-sa* (P *samudaya, sacca*), refers to the truth of the arising of suffering, the 2nd noble truth, ie, from craving. However, *tha-mú-dá-yá* on its own has come to mean "clinging" [Pyi Kyaw uses "attachment"].

⁶⁸⁸ **Vipallāsa S** (A 4.49) states how the 3 kinds of perversion—those of the perception (*saññā, vipallāsa*), of thought (*citta, vipallāsa*) and of view (*diṭṭhi, vipallāsa*)—each distorts how the mind works and misapprehends in 4 ways, ie, (1) what is impermanent as permanent, (2) what is painful as pleasant, (3) what is nonself as a self, and (4) what is impure as pure (SD 16.11). Visuddhi, magga (Vism 2.47, 53, 68) describes a streamwinner as someone who has discarded these 3 kinds of perversion. Mahasi Sayadaw in *A Discourse of the Sīlavanta-sutta*

He contemplated how he had formerly not realized this and held erroneous **perceptions** (*saññā*) about the nature of suffering. He realized that he had not seen these feelings simply as feelings. He realized he had previously perceived bodily feelings such as heat, pain and numbness as “I am hot,” “I am in pain,” “I feel numbness” and so on (San Shìn 1972:51). In this way, he had mistaken the natural processes of the body and mind as being unique to “him,” personalizing these unpleasant feelings.

With the realization of impermanence and suffering as well as their causes and effects, Aung Tun came to see what we call “I,” “man,” “woman,” “dog,” etc, are but a compound of the 4 elements (Paññājota 2003: 54). By the end of the first 9 days of his practice, he was said to have gained an understanding that the arising and ceasing of both bodily and mental processes happen naturally, and that these processes occur because of the arising and ceasing of causes and their effects.⁶⁸⁹ Later, in his account of his practice, Theinngu Sayadaw claimed that he attained the 1st stage of liberation on the 9th day of his practice (Ukkaṭṭha Undated 1, 1: 17:04).

Although Theinngu Sayadaw did not explain the stages of the growth of his insight—such as his realization of the knowledge of the arising and ceasing of things, the knowledge of the nature of suffering and the knowledge of the nature of impermanence—as the stages of the “**insight knowledges**” (*vipassana,ñāṇa*)⁶⁹⁰ his descriptions of his growth in insight were, in fact, those of the insight knowledges (P P Kyaw 2019:15 f). These insight knowledges arose in Aung Tun pari passu with his attaining of the stages of the path.

6.2.4.4 According to Paññājota (2003:72), a meditation sign (*nimitta*)⁶⁹¹ or “mental image” (simply, “sign”) of white light appeared as mindfulness (*sati*) and concentration (*samādhi*) became more established in Aung Tun. With this deeper concentration, the sign of foulness (*asubha*), that is, impure aspects of the body decomposing, arose in him: he saw his own body decomposing. Theinngu’s own account⁶⁹² of **his experience of asubha meditation** can be summarised as follows:

There appeared in his mind’s eye a sign (*nimitta*) of his own body, which became foamy and bubbling; a bloated stomach then appeared, and the eyes began to bulge; smelly liquid and blood oozed out of the mouth; the bulging eyes popped out; the face became very bloated and foamy; colonies of maggots began to infest the rotting body. All the maggots and foul-smelling liquids and blood then disappeared. The body started to burn in a scorching fire, turning the flesh into bones and then into ashes.

The sign of the *asubha* meditation is said to have become so strong and sustained that even when he was not meditating, there appeared in his mind’s eye a sign (*nimitta*) not only of his own decomposed body but also those of others, such as those of his former wives and of animals, but also of inanimate things such as trees, Buddha images, and so on.⁶⁹³ The effect of these signs was that they weakened his sensual desire (*kāma,rāga*).

points out that although a streamwinner is incapable of falling from the view of impermanence, he is still not free from self-conceit derived from the view of the existence of “I” (ed Bhikkhu Pesala, tr U Htin Fatt, 2013:78).

⁶⁸⁹ Ukkaṭṭha nd 1, 47:30-48:13; San Shìn 1972:127.

⁶⁹⁰ The insight-knowledges (*vipassana,ñāṇa*), an Abhidhamma list, vary in number: (1) **Paṭisambhidā,magga**, 8 stages, Pm 1.1; (2) **Visuddhi,magga** 9 stages, Vism 20.93-135/630-671; and (3) **Abhidhammaṭṭha,saṅgaha**, 10 stages (Abhs 9.25, Abhs: BRS 346 f). The 10 stages are: knowledges of: (1) comprehension (*sammāsana,ñāṇa*); (2) rise and fall (*udaya-b,baya,ñāṇa*); (3) dissolution (*bhaṅga,ñāṇa*); (4) fearfulness (*bhaya,ñāṇa*); (5) danger (*ādīnava,ñāṇa*); (6) revulsion (*nibbidā,ñāṇa*); (7) desire for liberation (*muñcitu,kamyatā,ñāṇa*); (8) reflection (*paṭisankhā,ñāṇa*); (9) equanimity towards formation (*saṅkhār’upekkhā,ñāṇa*) and (10) conformity (*anuloma,ñāṇa*): SD 28.3 (1.3); also BDict: vipassanā.

⁶⁹¹ See **Nimitta**, SD 19.7. See also L Crosby, “Abhidhamma and *nimitta* in 18th-century meditation manuscripts from Sri Lanka: A consideration of orthodoxy and heterodoxy in *Boran Kamaṭṭhāna*,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 20,1-2 2019: 111-151; P Choopopolpaisal, “Nimitta and visual methods in Siamese and Lao meditation traditions from the 17th century to the present day,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 20,1-2 2019:152-183.

⁶⁹² Ukkaṭṭha Undated 1, 50:52-53:00.

⁶⁹³ Ukkaṭṭha 1962 36:07; San Shìn 1972:139-143; Paññājota 2003:72.

6.2.4.5 For Aung Tun, *asubha* meditation was a crucial step in removing craving (*taṇhā*), the root of desire in its various forms, including its opposite dislike, hate and so on. As the *asubha* meditation became more established, according to Theinngu, the mind not only became fearful of the foul nature of the body, but it simply did not want to see the foul, much less meditate on the repulsive aspects of the body. He went on to have the wish to discard the *asubha* meditation experience, and to find a way to avoid it. (San Shìn 1972: 144)

Theinngu used the word ***do-tha*** (Pali *dosa*), meaning “hate” or “anger,” to refer to the aversion to the *asubha* meditation and the desire (rooted in *do-tha*) to escape from it. At this juncture, this mind, rooted in hate (an unwholesome mental state), became a vital transitional phase on the path. Thus, one becomes **revulsed** with the body (*rūpa*), not only of one’s own but also those of others.

One realizes then that what ordinary people take to be pleasant (*sukha*) is really unpleasant (*dukkha*). For instance, when Aung Tun experienced the world through the sense-faculties, he saw them as unpleasant bodily feelings and mental feelings (*dukkha, vedanā*) because he saw only their decaying and decomposing nature (San Shìn 1972:147). Theinngu claimed that he achieved the 2nd stage of liberation 1 month and 3 days after the start of his practice, in which he saw everything as decaying and repulsive, and experienced them as *dukkha, vedanā*.⁶⁹⁴

6.2.4.6 Theinngu described how he overcame the desire not to meditate on the *asubha* nature of the body and moved onto another stage. As he continued to contemplate the foul aspects of the decaying body, he came to realize that the bones were merely the **earth** element, with the characteristic of hardness; the pus and blood oozing out of the body were merely **water**, the element with the characteristic of oozing; the scorching fire burning away the body was merely the **fire** element, with the characteristic of heat; the bloated body-parts and bulging eyes were the **wind** element, with the characteristic of distension.⁶⁹⁵

Once he saw the 4 elements in the foul nature of the body, he contemplated the whole process of the *asubha* meditation in terms of the arising and ceasing of **the 5 aggregates** (San Shìn 1972:166 f). For example, when he saw in his mind’s eye his own body decomposing, he reflected that it was the arising and ceasing of the aggregate of form (*rūpa-k, khandha*); when he experienced unpleasant feelings with regards to seeing his body decomposing, he contemplated that it is the arising and ceasing of the aggregate of feeling (*vedanā-k, khandha*); when he saw the body decomposing and the mind labelling it as “decaying,” “breaking up,” and so on, he contemplated that it was the arising and ceasing of the aggregate of perception (*saññā-k, khandha*).

Once the knowledge of the arising and ceasing of the 5 aggregates arose in him, he started to investigate the arising of the mind that did not want to see or meditate on the decomposing body. He came to realize that it arises because of the perversion of perception (*saññā, vipallāsa*) with regards to the foul nature of the body (San Shìn 1972:167). How had an erroneous perception arisen in him? When the sign of the foul arose in him, he had perceived it as foul, and then labelled it as “decaying,” “swelling,” “decomposing,” and so on.

6.2.4.7 Although such a perception is in a way true, according to Theinngu, because of such labelling, **clinging** (*upādāna*) had arisen.⁶⁹⁶ The mind had erroneously perceived and clung onto the sign of the foul to be a reality, rather than seeing it as a mere *sign*. Because of clinging, the *asubha* meditation had become so strong and lasting for him that he had spent several months meditating upon it, resulting in revulsion to the whole process; hence, the desire not to meditate on the foul nature of the body and the desire to escape from it.

Theinngu’s dealing with the *asubha* meditation is a case of not being attached to anything, even the *dhamma*, here meaning both the teaching and the experience (or state) that affirms the teaching,

⁶⁹⁴ Ukkatṭha Undated 1, 1:17:5–10; San Shìn 1972:145-148.

⁶⁹⁵ San Shìn 1972:165 f; Paññājota 2003:88.

⁶⁹⁶ San Shìn 1972:168 f; Paññājota 2003:110.

that is, the truth. The foulness experienced is the truth of reality—this body is foul by nature—we can only know it but cannot hold on to it. Only in letting go of this provisional truth (all this is provisional in an unawakened person), one moves on to a higher stage of the path of freedom. We *know* reality, we see it as truth; thus we know and see: it is real and true.

The parables of the water-snake and of the raft in **the Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22) illustrate the significance of Theinngu's meditation strategy. **The parable of the water-snake** relates how a snake-catcher catches and holds the snake safely by the neck. This means that the Dharma should be studied and practised for the right purpose, that is, renunciation and awakening. Buddhaghosa extends this parable by adding that when a fisherman catches a water-snake by accident, he would hold it safely by the neck and then cast it as far away from him as possible. Similarly, we should not be attached to views, and in meditation practice, we progress by letting go of even the profoundest states for a higher one.

As for the teaching of **the parable of the raft** in the Alagaddûpama Sutta (M 22): we craft a raft and paddle across the waters for the far shore; having reached it, we have no need for the raft any more. Each state we master in meditation is but a step to move higher on the path to awakening. We should neither remain on a ladder for too long nor stay on the open path for too long. We simply must move on until the goal is reached.⁶⁹⁷

6.2.4.8 We have noted how Aung Tun observed the foul nature of the body as arising and ceasing of the 5 aggregates [6.4.2.6]. This is the natural process of causes and effects, that is, the principle of **conditionality** (*idap,paccayatā*) working as **interdependent arising** (*paṭicca,samuppāda*): *when there is a there is b; when a ceases, b ceases*.

Applying this principle and process, Aung Tun noticed how the arising of the foul sign is the cause, and how seeing it is the effect; because of seeing it, the mind perceives it and labels it as "foul." Because of labelling, there is the desire not to see the foul nature of the body; and because of the desire, the mind clings to the foul nature of the body; because of clinging, the whole process repeats itself.⁶⁹⁸

Once he gained this realization of how causes and effects come about, instead of contemplating and perceiving it as *asubha*, he recognized the *asubha* meditation in terms of causes and effects, that is, conditionality. In this way, seeing the foul nature of the body now transports him to a new level of seeing the body and reality, beyond the label, just as it is.

6.2.4.9 According to Theinngu, this mere seeing stops the cyclical process of causes and effects, and so ends the arising of the desire to escape from the *asubha* meditation. In this manner, hate with regards to the *asubha* meditation no longer arises. Moreover, he came to realize that the mind has constructed the mental image of the foul, which covers what actually is a complex yet subtle **materiality** (*rūpa*).

As Aung Tun continued with the contemplation of causes and effects, he saw in his mind's eye the arising and ceasing of **the material clusters** (*rūpa,kalāpa*) or "atomic units of matter."⁶⁹⁹ Theinngu referred to his experience of seeing the arising and ceasing of the atomic units of matter in everything he did as the "disintegration of the appearance of solidity."⁷⁰⁰ He used a Burmese loanword

⁶⁹⁷ On the parables of the water-snake (M 22,11) and of the raft (M 22,12-14), see SD 3.13.

⁶⁹⁸ San Shìn 1972:167-169; Paññājota 2003:110.

⁶⁹⁹ San Shìn 197:169. The term **rūpa,kalāpa** or "material cluster" is an Abhidhamma concept. It refers to a group of material dhammas that consists solely of the 4 great essentials (earth element, water element, fire element, wind element), and 4 derivatives (colour, smell, taste, and nutritive essence). The material cluster made up of these 8 material phenomena is known as "inseparable matter" (*avinibbhoga,rūpa*) (Abhs:BRS 246). Pyi Kyaw uses the phrase "atomic units of matter" for *rūpa,kalāpa* because Theinngu sometimes used the term *paramāṇu*, "atom, particle," conveying the concept of minute, subtle nature of *rūpa*. Pa-Auk Sayadaw too, often speaks of *rupa,kalāpa*: SD 60.1b (11).

⁷⁰⁰ Ukkaṭṭha undated 1, 1:19:21; San Shìn 1972:169.

from Pāli, *ghana-kyae*, “disintegration of solidity,” to refer to his realization of the complex nature of discrete, individual constituents of matter, thus penetrating its appearance of unity and solidity. Hence, Pyi Kyaw renders *ghana-kyae* as the “disintegration of the appearance of solidity.”

As Karunadasa—writing on the Theravāda theory of *dhmma*—puts it: “With the ceasing of the appearance of unity (*ghana, vinibbhoga*), the oneness disappears and the complex nature is disclosed.”⁷⁰¹ In terms of Aung Tun’s meditation, it means that when he saw a woman, a tree, or even the Shwedagon Pagoda, which ordinary people would perceive as unified, stable and solid, he saw them in his mind’s eye as the mere arising and ceasing of the atomic units of matter (San Shìn 1972:171 f).

For him, such appearances as discrete entities had ceased, and the complex nature of their component parts—the material clusters—were apparent. Theinngu declared that he was thus freed from concepts (*paññatti*) such as “woman,” “man” and “beauty”. Being freed from such concepts, the attachment to and the craving to see them no longer arose in him. This, in turn, led to the abandonment of “sensual lust” (*kāma, rāga*) (San Shìn 1972:173).

6.2.4.10 According to Theinngu, he reviewed his practice and path when he gained the realization of the disintegration of the appearance of unity, realizing that he had reached the 3rd of the 4 stages of liberation, that of **non-returning** (San Shìn 1972:176). We are told that in his meditation, he also reviewed the past, present and future, as well as the different realms of **the Buddhist cosmos**:

When I looked at ... the 20 heavens of the abode of the Brahmas, ... the Avīci Hell, I can see everything. ... I reviewed the past, [thinking] “Where did I come from?” What I saw was that because of the wish I made during the time of Padumuttara Buddha, I practised the Dhamma and reached this stage during the dispensation of this [Gotama] Buddha. ...

I looked into the future, [thinking] “Where will I go if I die now?” I saw 20 heavens of the abode of the Brahmas, [thinking], “It is a group of 5 heavens of the pure abodes.” ... I saw the heaven where I will be reborn. It is the Akaṇiṭṭha Heaven, [where] the 5 factors of jhāna [“meditative absorption”] are developed. ... I saw my own body there [ie, the Akaṇiṭṭha Heaven]. ...

Although the body of a brahma is very big, it is extremely delicate [to the extent that] one cannot physically touch it. It is also very bright. ... Thus, the mind of a noble person is said to have already inclined towards their destination of rebirth⁷⁰² even before they die. Even before I die I knew that it is this place I will be reborn in. The noble people are never afraid of death. ...

When I looked at the present moment, there was form-sphere consciousness⁷⁰³ and attachment to the aggregate of form [in me]. [Nonetheless], the mind at the present moment did not have *vitakka* [“initial application”] and *vicāra* [“investigation”]. With cessation, the mind had become fully present and calmed down. ... I was aware that the mind no longer wanders.

(San Shìn 1972:176-179; tr P P Kyaw)

⁷⁰¹ Y Karunadasa, “The Dhamma Theory: Philosophical cornerstone of the Abhidhamma.” [1996] Kandy: BPS, 2011:44.

⁷⁰² Theinngu used the Burmese expression *nan-nyant-hta*, “the mind is already inclined towards.” Here, it could mean that a noble person may often think about or contemplate the destination of their rebirth, and he may thus embody subtler states of consciousness. (Pyi Kyaw 2019:40 n20)

⁷⁰³ The 121 varieties of consciousness (*citta*) in the classical Theravāda Abhidhamma are subdivided into the 4 levels of planes of existence—the sense-sphere, the form sphere, the formless sphere, and the supramundane—seen in both cosmological and psychological terms (Gethin 1997:192 f; Bodhi 2000:28). The term “form-sphere consciousness” (*rūpāvacara-citta*) refers to the mind of beings of the form-sphere, and the term “form world” (*rūpa, loka*) is the abode of form-based beings.

While Sunlun's hagiography claims that he gained access to all the realms of the cosmos from the highest to the lowest when he achieved arhathood [6.2.1.4], Theinngu's access to all realms is said here to have occurred when he achieved the 3rd stage of liberation. This statement makes important claims about his status as well as confirming traditional Buddhist views about the cosmology and path.

Padumuttara Buddha was the 10th of the 24 Buddhas. Many of our Buddha's eminent disciples were said to have first conceived their desires for their respective positions in the time of Padumuttara Buddha.⁷⁰⁴ Hence, Theinngu, by this declaration was proclaiming himself a "noble disciple" (*ariya, sāvaka*), a disciple of the Buddha despite the great distance in time: he has attained the time-free death-free nirvana. Hence, there is no fear of death.

6.2.4.11 As Theinngu continued to observe the arising and ceasing of the atomic units of matter, fear arose in him. This time fear arose because he had seen how defilements such as delusion (*moha*) lead to renewed existence (*jāti*) (San Shin 1972:182). He then noticed material and mental states as being impermanent, and became aware of the nature of impermanence all the time. As with the *asubha* meditation, the desire not to see the arising and ceasing of material and mental states developed in him. Despite such a desire, he continued to experience it in his mind's eye. He thus came to see the nature of suffering and nonself (San Shin 1972:182).

Theinngu explained that non-returners still have defilements (*kilesa*) with regards to form (*rūpa*) and the formless (*arūpa*) (Ukkaṭṭha 1968, 2:15:47-2:16:02). He used the expressions *rūpa, kilesa* and *arūpa, kilesa*, rather than the standard terms, *rūpa, rāga*, "lust for form" and *arūpa, rāga*, "lust for the formless," as found, for example, in **the Saṃyojana Sutta** (A 10.13/5:17). *Rūpa, rāga* and *arūpa, rāga* are often understood as lust for rebirth in the form world and the formless world respectively, and are 2 of the 5 higher fetters⁷⁰⁵ eradicated by an arhat.

It should be noted that Theinngu, talking from the perspective of meditation practice, referred to *rūpa* and *arūpa* in terms of clinging to material and mental states, rather than the lust for rebirth in the form and the formless worlds. Although Theinngu related his meditative experience as a non-returner in both cosmological and psychological terms [6.2.4.10], he gave greater stress on the psychological aspects of Buddhist cosmology when he explained his practice to achieve the 4th and final stage of liberation.

6.2.4.12 Theinngu went on to explain **the latent defilements** (*anusaya, kilesa*), that they arise with regards to external bases (*bāhir'āyatana*) and internal bases (*ajjhatt'āyatana*). This correlates with the Theravāda Abhidhamma analysis of the relationship between the external world and one's experience into the 12 "sense-bases" (*āyatana*) on which experience relies. The 6 sense faculties—the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind—are called "**internal sense-bases**" (*ajjhatt'āyatana*), and their respective objects, that is, visible objects, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and thoughts, are called "**external sense-bases**" (*bāhir'āyatana*). For Theinngu, he saw in his mind's eye the external sense-bases such as visible objects, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and thoughts, as the arising and ceasing of atomic units of matter (*rūpa, kalāpa*) [6.2.4.9].

However, he did not realize that these atomic units of matter are material states which arise from the mind (*cittaja, rūpa*).⁷⁰⁶ Not knowing reality, he clung to these material and mental states and contemplated them as being impermanent, subject to suffering and not self. He realized that he was not yet free because he still perceived in his mind's eye the arising and ceasing of mental states (San Shin 1972:185). He therefore investigated the mental states that are associated with the internal bases such as the eye-base, the ear-base, etc. He reflected on his own mind, examining whether

⁷⁰⁴ DPPN 2:136 f Padumuttara. On the 24 past buddhas, see SD 36.2 (3.3.1, 3.4.3).

⁷⁰⁵ On the 10 fetters (*dasa saṃyojana*), see SD 10.16 (1.6.6-8); SD 11.1 (5.1.4); SD 3.3 (2); SD 56.1 (4.4). On the 5 higher fetters (*uddhambhāgiya saṃyojana*) (eradicated by the arhat), see **Uddham, bhāgiya S** (S 45.180) + SD 50.12 (2.4); SD 10.16 (1.6.8).

⁷⁰⁶ Ukkaṭṭha 1968, 2:18:26-2:18:32; Ukkaṭṭha 1969, 1:15:50-1:15:52.

or not there are the mental states that wish to see, to hear, to taste, to touch, to know good and bad, and to go here and there.⁷⁰⁷

He noticed that such wishes to see, to hear, etc, were absent from his mind.⁷⁰⁸ Although such mental states did not arise in him, he knew that he was not free from the latent defilements. Therefore, he alternated repeatedly between the observation of the 3 characteristics of material states, that is, impermanence, suffering and nonself, and the investigation of mental states such as the wish to see, to hear, to touch, etc.⁷⁰⁹ Theinngu explained that this gradual, repetitive process of the contemplation and investigation of the material and mental states was a way of uprooting the latent defilements.⁷¹⁰

6.2.4.13 As Aung Tun (Theinngu as a layman) continued to practise in this manner, a realization arose, as if someone had spoken into his ear, thus:

What is “impermanence”? What is “suffering”? What is “non-self”? You cling onto the material states [the *rūpa, kalāpa*] which arise due to the mind. ... Because of the mind, you perceive the material states as “arising” and “ceasing.” You do not stop at simply seeing. You contemplate them as being impermanent, suffering and non-self. They [the 3 characteristics] are mere concepts.⁷¹¹ (Ukkaṭṭha 1968, 2:25:32-2:26:07; tr Pyi Kyaw)

Theinngu explained that this realization led him to the understanding that there was nothing left to observe. Whatever arose at each of the 6 sense-doors was no longer attractive to him nor bothered him. He simply saw, heard, sensed and cognised⁷¹² (San Shìn 1972, 191). He thus concluded:

I take the material states that do not exist as being in existence, and misapprehend them as being impermanent. That is why mental states that label it as “impermanence,” “suffering,” and “nonself” arise in me. ... “Impermanence” is a concept; “suffering” is a concept; “non-self” is a concept. ... All defilements and cankers have dried up in me. No need to practise any more. I have reached the end of the path. (San Shìn 1972:191; tr P P Kyaw)

Expressions such as “all defilements and cankers [influxes] have dried up” and “no need to practise any more” are similar to standard descriptions of the arhat, which are found in many places in the Pāli canon. **The (Khandha) Arahanta Sutta** (S 22.110) describes an arhat as follows:

This, bhikshus, is called a monk who is <u>an arhat</u> ,	<i>arahato</i>
one whose influxes are destroyed,	<i>khīṇ’āsava</i>
who has lived the holy life,	<i>vusitavā</i>
done what had to be done,	<i>kata, karaṇīya</i>
laid down the burden,	<i>ohita, bhāra</i>
reached his own goal,	<i>anuppatta, sad-attha</i>
utterly destroyed the fetters of existence,	<i>parikkhīṇa, bhava, saṃyojana</i>
one completely [rightly] liberated through final knowledge.	<i>samma-d-aññā, vimutta</i>
	(S 22.110/3:161), SD 56.16e

⁷⁰⁷ Ukkaṭṭha 1968, 2:19:30-2:20:15; San Shìn 1972:185.

⁷⁰⁸ Ukkaṭṭha 1968, 2:20:17-2:19:21.

⁷⁰⁹ Ukkaṭṭha 1968, 2:18:15-2:22:55.

⁷¹⁰ Ukkaṭṭha 1969, 1:26:10-1:26:15.

⁷¹¹ Theinngu used the Burmese expression *pyit-nyat* (from Pali *paññatti*, “name, concept, designation.” As Karunadasa observes, although the 3 characteristics are known as universal characteristics of all dhammas, ie, elementary components that make up the experienced world, they turn out to be conceptual constructions with no objective reality. (*Theravāda Abhidhamma*, HK, 2010:52)

⁷¹² On this well-known sutta phrase, *diṭṭha, suta, muta, viññāta*, see SD 3.13 (5.2); SD 53.5.

In this instance, Theinngu did not claim explicitly that he had attained arhathood, but it is clearly implied here. On other occasions, however, he explicitly declared himself to be so [6.2.4.10].

6.2.4.14 Based on these accounts, Theinngu Sayadaw's meditation practice and path can be summarized as comprising the following stages:

(1) The removal of self-centred views through the realization of impermanence and suffering with regards to unpleasant bodily sensations, overcoming the notion of "I," "hand," "leg," etc, with regards to bodily sensations.

(2) The weakening of craving (*taṇhā*) and sensual lust (*kāma, rāga*) through the realization of the *nimitta* of the *asubha* nature of the body and *asubha* meditation, overcoming the notions of "I," "beauty," "pure," "happiness" etc. with regards to one's body and those of others.

(3) The realization of the disintegration of the appearance of unity, which means seeing the complex nature of what are conventionally regarded as stable and solid entities such as "woman," "tree," "mountain," 'Buddha images' etc., overcoming the notion of oneness and sensuous desire.

(4) He contemplated and investigated the latent defilements such as the attachment to subtler material states and mental states, abandoning the notion of impermanence, suffering and nonself.

Now, at every stage of the path, the contemplation and realization of (1) impermanence, (2) suffering, (3) fearfulness, (4) causality, (5) perversion of perception (*saññā, vipallāsa*) with regards to concepts (*paññatti*) and (6) hate (*dosa*) seem to have played an important role. Mental qualities such as concentration (*samādhi*) and mindfulness (*sati*) also played an important role, especially in dealing with the unpleasant bodily feelings at the 1st stage.

This does not mean that concentration and mindfulness become less important for the practice at higher stages of meditation attainments: Theinngu often said that to achieve the 2nd stage of liberation one needs to develop concentration twice as strong as that of the 1st stage of liberation (Paññā-jota 2003:71), and that for the attainment of the 3rd stage of liberation, concentration needs to be twice more than that of the previous stage (Paññājota 2003:101). According to his explanation, then, with each stage of transformation, the understanding and quality developed with regards to these factors becomes more and more refined.

When we look at Theinngu's spiritual life as a whole, we can see two structural aspects to it. They are (1) Theinngu's meditative development closely correlates with his progress through the 4 stages of the path to awakening and (2) his specific meditative experiences described here are the stages of the insight knowledges (*vipassana, ñāṇa*), which are the underlying structure of the progress through the stages of the path. The correlation between Theinngu's meditative experiences and the stages of the insight knowledges is worth exploring. We should note that these levels of insight knowledges are regularly included as "insight meditation subjects" (*vipassana, kammaṭṭhāna*) in Siamese and other *boran kammathan* meditation texts.⁷¹³

6.2.5 Authority and controversy

6.2.5.1 In this subsection, we examine how the 2 Sayadaws—Sunlun and Theinngu—gained authority as meditation teachers, and challenges that their traditions faced. In terms of **authority** that validates them as authentic saints whose teachings are orthodox, there are 2 kinds: (1) internal authority, and (2) external authority. We can take "internal authority" as the stories, meditative states and teaching skills that empower the Sayadaws as saints and virtuosi (geniuses and experts in Buddh-

⁷¹³ See A Skilton, "Meditation and its subjects: Tracing *kammaṭṭhāna* from the early canon to the *boran kammathan* traditions of Southeast Asia," *Contemporary Buddhism* 20,1 2019:36-72. For a comparison of the meditation methods of Sunlun Sayadaw and of Theinngu Sayadaw, see PP Kyaw 2019:23-29; for comparison with modern mindfulness, 29-31.

ism). “External authority” refers to the worldly authority that empower the Sayadaws or the powers they have to contend with.

We also have (3) personal authority, that is, how practitioners and the public perceive the Sayadaws, especially how the former have benefitted from the latter’s teachings and practices. This 3rd authority is very personal and subjective, but plays no small role in attracting and keeping followers and patrons of the meditation traditions. In a significant way, it is this 3rd authority that projects the public image of these Sayadaws; for, what is a teacher without pupils. The size and status of the teacher’s followings significantly determines how he is perceived publicly. This, then, is a teacher-centred group.

6.2.5.2 Internal authority basically refers to the Sayadaws’ *stories, states and skills* that impressed and drew followers and admirers to them. Their followers, perceiving them as saintly teachers, attributed charisma to them on account of their life-stories, the spiritual states they were said to have, and the skills they showed in teaching and managing their followers. The Sayadaws’ stories, states and skills thus authorized them to be what they were: saintly meditation teachers.

When we “attribute charisma” to such teachers, it means that we see them as being “apart” from us: they have certain qualities that we do not have, even will never have (such as being arhats). Hence, by associating with them, we will feel that we will benefit from their meditation practices, or simply benefit from their goodness and power, which is what they are, **the state** (when these are true) or simply status (when followers see or imagine those powers and qualities in them). Charisma plays a significant role when we look up to a teacher (either of these Sayadaws) as the final authority in the teachings and practices that we follow.⁷¹⁴

6.2.5.3 As believing Buddhists, we are likely to be impressed by supernatural and saintly **life-stories** of meditation teachers. Even when such stories sound incredible and miraculous by normal standards, we are likely to believe them: they are, after all, not “normal” individuals. Moreover, we are unlikely to question such stories: we simply do not know what to ask, or, when we do ask, we feel that we will sound unfaithful or disrespectful, especially in a traditional culture that looks up to monks as being of a status superior to that of the laity. These characteristics are those that make Buddhism a “**religion**” [3.1].

Moreover, the stories of such saints are, as a rule, very well written texts that often sound like the suttas themselves, replete with metaphors, superhuman acts, divine beings, miraculous events and teachings that highlight the special attainments, even unique status, of such individuals. In fact, we have in the ethnic Buddhist communities of Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand various hagiographies (sacred life-stories) of special individuals, usually monks. These stories are either told by the individuals themselves or by their disciples.⁷¹⁵ They usually attribute charisma to those special individuals, but such stories may also be a means of attracting charisma to the biographer himself.⁷¹⁶ Either way, such literature serves as a part of the internal authority used by these individuals or their followers to authenticate the masters’ experiences and teachings—as in the cases of Sunlun and of Theinngu.

6.2.5.4 Gustaaf Houtman [5.2.1.1] made a detailed analysis of the place of **monk hagiography** in the context of Burmese monastic literature. P P Kyaw, in preparing her paper (2019), researched various Burmese-language biographies of Sunlun Sayadaw [6.2.1.0] and Theinngu Sayadaw [6.2.2.0]. She says that “The functions of ‘monk biography’ in Burmese Buddhism are manifold” (31), but these 3 are the best-known:

⁷¹⁴ Such an attitude, of course, invites controversy, which is discussed in **The teacher or the teaching?** (SD 3.14).

⁷¹⁵ As in Y Sirimane, *Entering the Stream to Enlightenment* (2016), on such claims in Sri Lanka [6.2.1.3].

⁷¹⁶ As in the case of Maha Bua’s hagiography of *Venerable Ācariya Mun Bhūridatta Thera* (2003) [5.3.4.10].

- (1) to invoke the reader's or listener's faith in and reverence towards both the biographical subject and the Buddha's religion (*sāsana*);
- (2) to establish the authenticity and legitimacy of the biographical subject as a sacred being with historical continuity back to the lineage of the Buddhas; and
- (3) to educate the reader about the subject's quality of sacredness, including the "practice" or "training" (Burmese, *kyín-sin*), as well as the meditative attainments.⁷¹⁷

In these sources, the internal verification initially comes in 2 ways. One type of verification is through the accounts of the gods' affirmation and support and through other affirming visions. These are all based on traditional Buddhist understanding of Buddhist cosmology, the Buddha life-story, and the relationship of our historical Buddha to the past buddhas.

6.2.5.5 Another type of internal verification or legitimizing process by Burmese Sayadaws comprises their own **skills** or perceived attainments in rising through the stages of the path and attaining its goal, arhathood. We see this in how each of them, by their own effort and intuition, correlate between the stages of their meditation and the 4 stages of the noble path [6.2.4]. This is then further confirmed or legitimized by various decisions in the master's life, specifically the decision to renounce as a monk, a necessary step for a layman arhat or one on the brink of arhathood who wishes to continue to live [6.2.1.3]. This belief is well-known enough in any ethnic Theravada community. The point remains anyway that a person with such a realization would be inclined to move away from the world and live apart from society as a renunciant.⁷¹⁸

Despite the wide acceptance of the 2 Sayadaws' teachings and meditations, these very things were scrutinized by **external** authority that is, by way of a tribunal (*vinicchaya*) trial. The question was an obvious one: whether or not their meditation methods were right and proper. One criticism was that strong, fast breathing and long hours of sitting were an extreme practice, a self-mortification (*atta,kilamathānuyoga*), rejected by the Buddha in **the Dhamma,cakka Pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11).⁷¹⁹

There is also debate about whether or not Theinngu Sayadaw's meditation practice—especially the *asubha* meditation and the emphasis on *samādhi*, that is, calming meditation (*samatha*), was suitable for the laity. Those who argue against such practices would of course not participate in them. However, a growing number of people were inspired or curious enough to give them a try. In other words, the traditions grew in reputation and size.

6.2.5.6 The life-stories of Sunlun Sayadaw and Theinngu Sayadaw include their humble, almost illiterate, backgrounds, with neither education nor scripture study to begin with. Yet, in due course, they both correctly answered questions on the teachings, their practice and their attainments of supramundane fruits, posed by monastic and lay literati. That these questions took place was well recorded. For instance, there are 5 hours of audio recording of the catechism⁷²⁰ that took place in 1963 between monks from the Kyauk-thìn-bàw meditation tradition—whose teachings were

⁷¹⁷ For a detailed analysis of the place of monk hagiography in the context of Burmese biography, see G Houtman, "Traditions of Buddhist Practice in Burma," PhD diss, Univ of London, 1990. Published 1991.

⁷¹⁸ For a lay Buddhist to start and run a lay Buddhist movement by itself in Myanmar is likely to be an uphill task, as evident in the case of **U Nyana**: SD 60.1c (13).

⁷¹⁹ S 56.11,3/5:421 (SD 1.1).

⁷²⁰ P P Kyaw: "Although 'catechise' and 'catechism' have a more technical meaning in learning Christian church doctrine, I use these terms in this article, rather than using the term 'interview'. This is because I suspect there is an element of 'catechism' in the interactions between the learned monks and Theinngu Sayadaw to the extent that Theinngu Sayadaw learned Theravada technical terms through such interactions." (2019:39 n4). In other words, so long as the person interrogated was able to give the "right" answers accepted by the interrogators, the former would be deemed as "keeping the faith." In an interesting sense, this is a "churching" of Buddhism, ie, a religion.

subjected to an ecclesiastical tribunal or legal case (*vinicchaya*) in 1981⁷²¹—and Theinngu Sayadaw, testing his meditation practice and achievements.⁷²²

Here, I will briefly mention the ecclesiastical courts or tribunals (*vinicchaya*) set up by General Ne Win in 1980 under the jurisdiction of the State Sanghamahanayaka Committee (Mahana, for short). From 1981–2011, a total of 17 tribunals⁷²³ were held, the first (Tribunal 1) of which was the Kyauk-thin-baw case (1981), and the last one (Tribunal 17) that of the Moepyar Sect, led by the lay teacher U Nyana (2011), whom we have studied in some detail in **SD 60.1c** (13).

Pyi Kyaw, in her study of Theinngu Sayadaw (2019:33–35), has uncovered evidence (tribunal reports and related documents) that he was himself tried before such a tribunal (*vinicchaya*). Although the names of such tribunals were given, there were no records of any conviction in his case, unlike U Nyana, who was jailed several times for many years [SD 60.1c (13.1.3)]. We may thus assume that no wrong was found in the case of Theinngu.⁷²⁴

Why was **the *vinicchaya* system** introduced in the first place? Its function was clearly that of identifying and correcting what was not-Dharma (*adhamma*) and what was not-Vinaya (*avinaya*); in other words, what was against the Buddha's teachings, as defined or accepted by the state. Then, again, we see this happening in Thailand too, where we have bad monks in every generation. Although *pārājika* monks (who often break the 1st *pārājika*,⁷²⁵ entailing “defeat,” ie, fall from the monk-state) were expelled from their Temples⁷²⁶ or disrobed by the order of the Sangha.⁷²⁷ [6.2.6.2]

In Sri Lanka, however, we almost never hear of monks being disciplined in terms of Dharma-Vinaya, for 2 key reasons: the monks exist almost independently above the state, and most of them do not keep to the Vinaya.⁷²⁸ In Thailand too, not all wayward monks were disciplined. Two well-known examples were Maha Bua Ñāṇasampanno, author of Ajahn Mun's hagiography (2003), but who was not only politically motivated but also raised funds nationally for the country;⁷²⁹ and Kittivuddho who infamously declared that Communists were not human.⁷³⁰

The key reason for the Burmese authorities instituting the *vinicchaya* courts, as expressed by Pyi Kyaw, was “perhaps as expressions of the heightened fear and anxiety among the Burmese Buddhists since the colonial period with regards to the decline and disappearance of the Buddha's religion

⁷²¹ For a summary of the *vinicchaya* case on Kyauk-thin-baw Sayadaw's teachings, see A Janaka & K Crosby, “Heresy and Monastic Malpractice in the Buddhist Court Cases (*Vinicchaya*) of Modern Burma (Myanmar),” *Contemporary Buddhism* 18,1 2017:199–261.

⁷²² See Ukkatṭha (1963) for an example of the recording between the monks from Kyauk-thin-baw meditation tradition and Theinngu Sayadaw. Based on the available sources on the catechism, we cannot be sure whether or not it was the 1st Kyauk-thin-baw Sayadaw Ven. Kesava (1902–1967) who tested Theinngu Sayadaw. Kyauk-thin-baw Sayadaw Ven Visuddha (1930/31–2003) that Janaka and Crosby (2017:217) mention in their article was the 2nd abbot of the Kyauk-thin-baw Monastery in Kyaukse, which is now known as Nyein-chàn-yà (Peace) Monastery (P P Kyaw 2019:41 n28). For further details, see Kyaw 2019:33–36.

⁷²³ For a full list of the 17 tribunals, see SD 60.1c (Table 13.4): see the notes there.

⁷²⁴ On Theinngu's *vinicchaya* cases, see Kyaw 2019:33–35.

⁷²⁵ On *pārājika*, see SD 52.12 (1.2.1.1); SD 58.4 (2.1.1.3). The 1st defeat offence is that of any kind of sexual intercourse; monastics are forbidden from masturbating, the 1st of the *saṅghādisesa* offences (immediately following the 4 *pārājika* offences. This offence entails confession by the offender and rehabilitation by the sangha. On *pārājika* 1, SD 31.7 (2.2.6).

⁷²⁶ As in the case of Mettavihari (Thiraphan Nawang), a Thai monk in the Netherlands, SD 7.9 (4.3.4.1) n; SD 60.1b (2.4.5.2) n.

⁷²⁷ As in the case of the globe-trotting Yantra Amaro in Thailand: Piyasilo, *Charisma in Buddhism*, Malaysia, 1992h: 113–137 Phaesuan, Chanchira, “Process of mass media news presentation in case of Phra Yantra.” [Thesis.] Chulalongkorn Univ, 1996, <http://library.car.chula.ac.th>.

⁷²⁸ See H L Seneviratne, *The Work of Kings*, Chicago, 1999:149–168.

⁷²⁹ SD 60.1b (5.11.6 f).

⁷³⁰ SD 60.1c (15.2.2).

(*sāsana*) and as continuous attempts to safeguard the Buddha's *sāsana* from what they perceived as threats—real or imagined, internal or external—to the survival of Buddhism in Myanmar.”⁷³¹

6.2.6 So, you're an arhat! Charisma and Dharma

6.2.6.1 Most of us reading this for the first time, would be surprised, even mildly shocked, that there are actually arhats today, and that such meditations are possible. What are we to make of this? We know that blind faith, or worse, ignorance, can make us believe anything a well-known teacher, even our friends, tell us. The more cautious informed Buddhist will ask: How do we know all this is true? Or, that such meditations are safe and efficacious? The Buddha never taught them; in fact, warned us against them.

The point remains that these practitioners—Sunlun Sayadaw and Theinngu Sayadaw—used these meditations themselves; they not only survived, but attained arhathood by them. We do not have to take their word for it, but try them out for ourselves. How “extreme” is the practice itself is how far we take it. So long as we know our limits, and practise sensibly, with proper instructions and spiritual friendship, and note the benefits, we may carry on with it. The vital question then is: **What do I learn from this?**

6.2.6.2 The next problem we must deal with is this: In following such new meditation methods based on the special teachings of these Sayadaws, are we not putting the teacher above the teaching?⁷³² Are we not following private truths (*pacceka,sacca*),⁷³³ not the Buddha's teachings? One helpful answer is that: Buddhism is **a living religion**, which means that we see the best amongst the Buddhists using their ideas and strategies for learning and meditating. The proof is in the pudding: if it works for us in a wholesome manner, then there is a good reason to practise it.

When a monk declares that he has attained a superhuman state, such as dhyana or arhathood, we should well know that if he is lying or if he is wrong, then, he has committed the heavy offence of the 4th “defeat” (*pārājika*), that is, claiming to have a superhuman state that one lacks, entailing that he automatically falls from the monk/nun-state⁷³⁴ [6.2.5.5]. In other words, such a claim is a serious matter that should not be lightly taken by the claimer nor by us.

In the **Vīmaṃsaka Sutta** (M 47), the Buddha instructs his disciples to investigate the following even in the Buddha himself, thus:

- (1) Does the teacher act and speak with defiled states?
- (2) Does the teacher act and speak with “mixed states” (inconsistencies)?
- (3) Does the teacher act and speak with purified states?
- (4) Is his wholesome attainment (spiritual quality) sustained or only temporary?
- (5) Do fame and honour affect him negatively?
- (6) Is his conduct motivated by fear or by having overcome lust?
- (7) Is his good conduct *consistent* whether he is in public (with others) and when alone?
- (8) We should confirm all this with the teacher himself. (M 47,4-11/1:318 f), SD 35.6

⁷³¹ For discussions of how socio-political, religious and cultural factors contributed to the Burmese Buddhist worldview of a continuous struggle to purify, preserve and propagate the Buddha's *sāsana*, see J A **Carbine**, *Sons of the Buddha*, NY, 2011; E **Braun**, *The Birth of Insight*, Chicago, 2013; P P **Kyaw**, “Paṭṭhāna in Burmese Buddhism,” PhD thesis, London, 2014; and A **Turner**, *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma*, Honolulu, 2014.

⁷³² On rightly putting the teaching above the teacher, see **Gārava S** (S 6.2), SD 12.3.

⁷³³ On *pacceka,sacca*, see SD 60.1e (13.14.21 (1.2)); SD 40a.8 (5.2); SD 48.1 (6.1.2.5-6.1.2.10); SD 50.7 (1.4.2.4).

⁷³⁴ Pār 1 (V 3:109,21-27). On *pārājika*, SD 52.12 (1.2.1.1); SD 58.4 (2.1.1.3).

To this we may add, the following, carefully watching the monks, including "Chief High Priests," and ask ourselves:

- (9) Does he teach the suttas, and teach them correctly?
- (10) Does he keep to the Vinaya? What rules does he keep breaking?
- (11) Does he or his agents warn us against reading or asking about the Vinaya? Why is this?
- (11) Does he hold or attend any fortnightly Patimokkha recitation?
- (12) Does he meditate (at all)? Does he only show his "calmness" (aloofness) to us but is chatty with others?
- (13) Do we think that just because he wears the robe or has a title, he is right? What's wrong with this belief?
- (14) Do we fear him? Why do we fear him? Is this right?

Some of us may rightly wonder, how can we (being unawakened) ever really know for ourselves that the Buddha himself is pure (undefiled) in his actions and speech (and thoughts), especially now that he has passed away? But the deeper significance of the Buddha's statement is this: "You should investigate even me. Do not follow me blindly." By this investigation, we are also affirming that we have right faith, not blind faith, in the Buddha.

6.2.6.3 When we are exhorted by the Buddha to investigate even himself, what more about other teachers who are not the Buddha, or not awakened: they too, should be constantly investigated thus. In doing so, we are also reminding the teacher of his role and task of practising and propagating the Dharma, not just by what he says, but also by how he acts and thinks. In this way, he becomes a living example of the Buddha's teaching.

In the **Puggala-p, pasāda Sutta** (A 5.250), the Buddha warns of 5 disadvantages or dangers in being devoted to a person, that is, a teacher, instead of the teaching:

Our mindfulness, Dharma practice, even faith, would be negatively affected by any of these:

- (1) when that monk or nun is disciplined for an offence and is suspended;
- (2) when that monk or nun, disciplined for an offence, has to sit at the edge of the assembly;
- (3) when that monastic has to leave for a distant place;
- (4) when that monastic leaves the order;
- (5) when that monastic dies. (A 5.250/3:270), SD 3.14(9)

6.2.6.4 A key precaution we should take when practising meditation, especially from a new group, is to move around and meet its members to feel how friendly and "normal" they are. Watch out for signs of unusual behaviour, especially when it occurs in more than one or two people. We should then also observe the general feeling of the sitting in the session itself taught and led by the teacher or instructor. It takes only common sense to know when things are really wrong or abnormal.

Then again, we may be so blinded by greed, hate or delusion that we are unable to notice any aberration in the practice or the group itself. Or, worse, the teacher is actually affirming our wrong views and unwholesome conduct, and we feel gratified with this! Then, the blind indeed lead the blind! This blindness may not seem to hurt us now, but it builds up, suddenly we have fallen into the rushing floods, drowning in negative emotions, affecting our mind and body. It may then be too late.

Hence, the Buddha warns us that **"Heedlessness is the path of death"** (*pamādo maccuno padam*) (Dh (21)).⁷³⁵ [6.1.3.4]

⁷³⁵ See SD 42.22 (2.1).

6.3 WHOSE BUDDHISM?

6.3.1 Make my Buddhism

6.3.1.1 At some point in our life—perhaps right now—we are looking for a teacher. This is the moment when we should ask ourselves, not *who* we are looking for, but ***what are we looking for?*** Are we looking for **truths and ways** that will transform us into a better person, or at least a *good* person, or are we looking for a power-figure to affirm our views and ways? Consciously or unconsciously, most of us fall into the second category. The painful reality is that, like cattle lined up for the slaughter, we approach the presence of Gurus for some words that would answer everything, or at least a smile of approval.

On the other hand, we should not fear facing a teacher who is *truthful and courageous* in showing us the truth, showing us the reality of things, that will help us truly to see ourselves: how we act and speak, and above all, how we think. This is like meeting the Buddha: many of us would try to kill him in Zen fashion, but more are killed in spirit by false Gurus, maimed for life, left to fade away mindlessly.

The irony of this quest is that when we are ready for this quest—when we do not fear facing our true self and true reality—we then have found the best teacher: **we are our best teacher**, that is, we are ready to be our own best student. How else can self-understanding arise? Indeed, how else can we awaken, except by ourselves? Then, our task is to stay awake. How do we stay awake with this self-learning, so that we know that there is *no* self: **non-self** is the lightning-rod that stands any storm, directing the bolts of views and evil into the safe ground of wisdom.

6.3.1.2 One of the helpful texts that shows us how the Buddha himself responds to this self-understanding is found in **the Gāraṇa Sutta** (S 6.2). During the 5th week after his awakening, while sitting in meditation under the goatherd banyan (*aja, pāla nigrodha*),⁷³⁶ the Buddha reflected that if he lacked in any aspect of moral virtue, he would surely seek a teacher for its fulfilment. So too, if he lacked in any aspect of concentration, or of wisdom, or of freedom, or of the knowledge and vision of freedom, he would surely seek a teacher for the fulfilment of each of them. However, having attained supreme awakening, he found no one else with the 5 aggregates of the Dharma.⁷³⁷

As in **the Vīmaṇsaka Sutta** (M 47), here too, we see the Buddha, by personal example, asserting that when we accept that we are not yet awakened, we should always seek and honour teachers who practise and teach the Dharma so that we will fulfil the 3 trainings and gain awakening. The message here is not that teachers are vital in our Dharma training, but rather it is **the learning of the Dharma**. Teachers may fail us, but the Dharma never will. The fresh air neither stifles nor chokes us; not breathing does. A good teacher knows that teaching the Dharma is a joy in itself; a good student knows every chance to learn is a step closer to the path. Yet the effort must be made by us [3.1.1.1], and we must have the desire to learn (*sikkhā, kāmā*).⁷³⁸

6.3.2 My Buddhism, your Buddhism

6.3.2.1 When learning Buddhism, we usually start with a body of texts or some technical terms that define certain basic or key teachings. Those of us who are good in remembering Pali terms or key phrases and quotes from the suttas or related texts, may have a sense of gratification that we have mastered *some* “Buddhism.” This “some” may turn out to be wrongly grasping a venomous snake, which will only invite it to sting us [6.2.4.7]. We become delirious and bloated up with useless learning, airing ourselves like high-caste Chief High Priests.

⁷³⁶ See **The First 7 Weeks** (SD 63.1 (1.0)).

⁷³⁷ S 6.2/1:138-140 + SD 12.3 (3) on the 5 Dharma aggregates.

⁷³⁸ D 16,2.28/2:101 (SD 9); S 47.9/5:154, 47.13/5:163, 47.14/5:164.

As Robert Sharf insightfully notes in his paper, “Buddhist modernism and the rhetoric of meditative experience” (1995a), how meditation politics is played with Pali terms,

often used to disparage the teachings of rival teachers: meditation masters have been known to castigate their rivals by claiming that they ignorantly mistake jhānic absorptions for *sotāpatti* [streamwinning]. Of course, this is but a variant of the claim that one’s rival teaches *samatha* under the guise of *vipassanā*.

My comments here are based in part on my own observations and conversations with vipassanā teachers and students in South and Southeast Asia. Naturally, the teachers themselves, who are expected to be paragons of selflessness, compassion, and equanimity, are often hesitant to criticize their rivals in print. But the controversies that rage beneath the surface do occasionally break into the public sphere. (R Sharf 1995a:262)

6.3.2.2 Such an outbreak, observed by **Vimalo Bhikkhu**, a Western monk who spent many years training in SE Asia under a variety of teachers, is a good example of how the rhetoric of meditative states operates in practice:

There are some meditation schools which claim that certain experiences occurring during the course of practice are the attainment of stream-entry [*sotāpatti*]. These often are remarkable meditation experiences but are in no way related to the true experience of stream-entry which is nothing other than the seeing of Nibbāna. Some schools of *vipassanā* meditation say that a particular experience in which the meditator loses consciousness is the experience of stream-entry. This may have some significance but the genuine experience of stream-entry is something quite different.

Considering these various explanations of stream-entry it really does seem that the genuine experience has become rather rare. ... The Buddha said that a *Sotāpanna* could not be reborn in the lower realms of existence and would certainly within seven life-times [7.7.2] realize complete liberation. Because of this people, seeking security, imagine all sorts of insights and unusual experiences to be stream-entry and so delude themselves.

(Vimalo, “Awakening to the truth,” mimeographed, nd:64; paragraphed)⁷³⁹

Vimalo did not mention which teacher or teachers he was referring to. However, from available meditation literature, several teachers have been subject to criticism for being all too quick to confirm *sotāpatti* experiences, such as Sunlun Sayadaw, Mahasi Sayadaw, U Ba Khin, and their disciples. Just how quick *sotāpatti* might be attained by practitioners could be seen in a pamphlet published by U Ba Khin’s meditation centre, entitled “Personal Experiences of Candidates (Buddhists and non-Buddhists).”⁷⁴⁰ This pamphlet relates the case of a European businessman, “Mr A,” who attained *sotāpatti* after only two days of training under U Ba Khin. U Ba Khin tested him, requiring that he “go into the fruition state (*phala*) with a vow to rise up just after 5 minutes” (ib 130).

Mr A performed this task successfully, following which U Ba Khin tested him again, asking him to try it for 15 minutes. Only when Mr A demonstrated that he could enter “Nibbāna” at will was U Ba Khin satisfied, since according to U Ba Khin’s reading of the Visuddhimagga, “the real test as to whether one has become an Ariya lies in his ability to go into the fruition state (*phala*) as he may like” (ib 131). U Ba Khin was aware, of course, that such a state bore a strong resemblance to *jhāna*, but he assured us that “an experienced teacher alone will be able to differentiate between the two” (ib 132).⁷⁴¹ The authority of such a pronouncement—even when the teacher confused “unusual experi-

⁷³⁹ Quoted by Sharf, 1995a:262.

⁷⁴⁰ The pamphlet was partly reproduced in W L King, *Theravada Meditation: The Buddhist Transformation of Yoga*, Pennsylvania, 1980:126-132.

⁷⁴¹ Quoted in Sharf 1995a:263.

ence” with genuine attainment—was unassailable simply because there was no way of scientifically affirming it!

Furthermore, being unawakened ourselves, there is no way we can know whether a teacher is really awakened or not. Our very first real task is to reach the path of awakening in this life itself.

6.3.2.3 Other critics had not been as tactful. In Sri Lanka, the Mahasi method—especially that practised at its Centre in Kanduboḍa—had been the subject of rancorous attacks in various magazines and books ever since the late 1950s, that is, from the very time it first became popular.⁷⁴² Modernist monks such as Soma Thera, Kassapa Thera and Kheminda Thera of the Vajirarama Temple in Colombo—who had themselves studied traditional *vipassana* in Burma—“castigated [Mahasi’s Sri Lankan] centers for teaching unorthodox methods that threatened the true Dhamma and endangered both the institution of Buddhism and Buddhists themselves” (Bond 1988:163).

Kassapa published a series of critical essays in a book, *Protection of the Sambuddha Sasana* (1957),⁷⁴³ that attacked Mahasi’s use of the belly as a focal point for breath meditation (*ānāpāna-sati*) rather than the tip of the nose, and Kheminda objected to the method as an illegitimate “short-cut” that lacked canonical sanction. In particular, Kheminda argued from scripture that dhyana (*jhāna*) and concentration (*samādhi*) must be acquired prior to the practice of *vipassanā*.⁷⁴⁴

The defenders of Mahasi’s method argued from their own reading of the suttas and texts, which they insisted recognizes a category of practitioner who proceeded directly to *vipassanā*. They also cited as evidence the experience of yogis training under Mahasi, and suggested that their detractors “not rest content with the mere knowledge of the *samatha-yānika* method but instead practise it diligently until they attain *jhāna* together with *abhiññā*, as well as *ariya, bhūmi*.”⁷⁴⁵

6.3.2.4 The modernist Sinhala monks unsurprisingly even made personal attacks on the Burmese monks, categorically rejecting the latter’s claims to have realized stages on the path. Kassapa charged, for example, that practitioners of the Mahasi method “do not exhibit the calm, concentrated, happy look mentioned in the texts.”⁷⁴⁶ In fact, there were reports that some practitioners of the Mahasi method were believed to have suffered serious psychological problems as a result of its technique (Bond 1988:170). The modernists cited passages from Mahasi’s own writings that suggest his method could give rise to “strange physical sensations, swaying, trembling, and even loss of consciousness.”⁷⁴⁷

⁷⁴² See esp documents compiled in *Satipatthāna Vipassanā Meditation: Criticisms and Replies*. Rangoon: Buddha Sāsana Nuggaha Organization, 1979, and discussions in M Carrithers, *The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka*, Delhi: OUP, 1983b: 240-243; G D Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*, Columbia, 1988b:162-171; and Gombrich & Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed*, Princeton, 1988:454.

⁷⁴³ Kassapa Thera, *Protection of the Sambuddha Sāsana: A Collection of Articles on Meditation*. Colombo: Henry Prelis, 1957.

⁷⁴⁴ Kheminda labelled the technique as “heterodox” claiming that it did not follow the traditional 3 trainings (of moral virtue, concentration and wisdom). His views were first published in *World Buddhism*, and partly reproduced in Buddha Sāsana Nuggaha Organization 1979, along with rejoinders by prominent disciples of Mahasi Sayādaw. See also Kheminda, *The Way of Buddhist Meditation*. Colombo, 1980, and the discussion in Bond 1988b:164-171.

⁷⁴⁵ Buddha Sāsana Nuggaha Organization 1979:35. Note also that: “The Ven Mahāsi Sayādaw, on the strength not only of Ceylon commentaries, etc, but also of the practical experiences of the yogis, has, with the best of intentions, written the above-mentioned treatise on Buddhist meditation” (ib 29 f).

⁷⁴⁶ Kassapa 1957:12, cited in Bond 1988b:170.

⁷⁴⁷ Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988:454. Objections to the Mahasi method did not emerge only from the modernist alone. Sharf stated he was informed by 2 teachers associated with U Ba Khin’s centre in Rangoon that experiences certified as *sotāpatti* by Mahāsi and his disciples were not the real thing. This is noteworthy, as many of U Ba Khin’s own disciples were believed to have attained the stage of *sotāpatti*, and thus their objections did not stem from the traditional belief that the attainment of *sotāpatti* was rare. Note also the personal account by Eric Lerner, an American who trained at U Ba Khin’s center under his successor Sayama. Lerner recounts how, after a period of training in Burma, he retreated to a forest monastery in Sri Lanka where

Gombrich and Obeyesekere, at the end of their book, *Buddhism Transformed* (1988), mentioned the Vajirarama monks' criticisms of the Mahasi method, in the formers' discussion on ecstasy-based religious phenomena in Sri Lankan folk religion (such as in spirit possession trance). Gombrich and Obeyesekere suggested that the technique taught by Mahasi and the curious states that occasionally resulted from it were similar, if not identical, to "those used for entering trance states."⁷⁴⁸

They went on to suggest that many of the monks, nuns, and laypersons who used the Mahasi method "have been learning a technique that, however in fact applied, could if followed to the letter take them into trance states very like possession" (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988:454). In Sri Lanka folk religion, where Hindu gods are worshipped alongside Buddhist gods, spirit possessions (trance seances) were common. Perhaps, this was some kind of ancient collective consciousness that believed in such gods and spirits. In other words, any kind of internalizing of one's consciousness (as in a meditation) might trigger such trances.

6.3.2.5 At least one Western teacher joined in the foray to criticize the Mahasi method. In the preface to his 5th edition of *A Survey of Buddhism*, the controversial Sangharakshita, a renowned Theravāda-basher,⁷⁴⁹ denounced the Mahasi method, charging that it could lead to "extreme nervous tension and to a schizoid state for which I coined the term 'alienated awareness.'⁷⁵⁰ On my return to England in 1964 I met twelve or fourteen people who were suffering from severe mental disturbance as a direct result of practising the so-called 'Vipassana Meditation.' Four or five others had to be confined to mental hospitals."⁷⁵¹

Sangharakshita's well-known anti-Theravāda attitude and cavalier layman religiosity makes it difficult for us to take seriously any comments he made about Theravada, especially his criticisms of them. The point remains that no well-informed psychologist has ever stated that "meditation (itself) causes alienated awareness," or "Vipassana (itself) causes dissociative disorder." Having said that, we do hear of cases of "mental breakdowns" in Buddhist meditation, especially in Vipassana meditation.

6.3.2.6 The first reason for such incidents is simply because it is globally popular, attracting a growing number of practitioners even today. If psychological issues were common or bad enough in Vipassana, especially in the traditions of Mahasi and of Goenka, they would not be growing in popularity. This remark may, of course, be circumstantial: people may simply be blindsided to such issues, perhaps rationalizing, "Oh, it would not happen to me." In a sense, this may well be true: it's only when we do have underlying symptoms of psychological problems, meditation is likely to trigger them. But then, do we always know that?

Even then, we would say that meditation is merely the occasion for such issues, not *the cause* of them. In fact, meditation groups are today well aware of this difficulty that they would often interview new participants to vet them. Those who show signs of underlying psychological issues would be

he experienced what he took to be *sotāpatti*. Upon returning to Burma he was told, much to his chagrin, that it was only a "taste" of dhyana and that it was more of a hindrance than a help (E Lerner, *Journey of Insight Meditation: A Personal Experience of the Buddha's Way*. NY: Schocken Books, 1977). (Sharf 1995a:276 n61, adapted)

⁷⁴⁸ "Trance" here did not refer to *jhāna*, but to a semi-conscious dissociative state (absence of response to external stimuli), typically as induced by hypnosis or entered by a medium.

⁷⁴⁹ On Sangharakshita, see SD 60.1c (5.2).

⁷⁵⁰ When "alienated awareness" is characterized by a mental disconnection in memory, identity, or perception, it is synonymous with (as serious as) "dissociation": see APA *Dictionary of Psychology* 2015: dissociative disorders, dissociative fugue, etc. "Alienated awareness" is used in the descriptions of multiple personality disorder (eg *Blackwell Companion to Consciousness*, 2nd ed, 2017:487-490). "Dissociated awareness," however, is characterized by trauma, and should not be confounded with alienation.

⁷⁵¹ Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism*, Boulder, 1980: v. On the other hand, there are useful studies on such issues, which we will examine more closely in SD 60.1e.

excluded from long retreats. They are also, as a rule, vigilant of such possibilities during the retreats themselves, and are often well prepared to deal with them. These teachers and their assistants are now better informed and prepared for such difficult situations.⁷⁵²

We should ourselves notice if or when we have recurrent psychological problems, and get proper or professional help as soon as possible before taking up unguided or unmonitored meditation practice. As the Buddha warns us in **the (Dve) Roga Sutta** (A 4.157): we may claim to be physically healthy for long periods, but it is rare to find one who is mentally healthy for even a moment;⁷⁵³ hence, it is said that “a worldling is like one mad” (*ummattako viya hi puthujjano*).⁷⁵⁴

6.3.2.7 Coming back to Buddhist meditation terminology: It should now be clear then that there is no public consensus as to the usage of meditation terms that supposedly refer to discrete experiential states within the meditation movement. Not surprisingly, Robert Sharf informs us, the same is found to be true in Japan, where Rinzai and Soto priests tended to reject altogether the veracity of claims by Sanbokyodan⁷⁵⁵ practitioners to have experienced *satori* (enlightenment). (Even teachers in the Sanbokyodan line conceded that there were differences in the “clarity and depth” of their *satori* experiences, an admission that again begged the issue as to the “referent” of the term *satori*.)⁷⁵⁶

Sharf makes these instructive observations:

The lack of consensus among prominent Buddhist teachers as to the designation not only of particular states of consciousness, but also of the psychotropic techniques used to produce them (eg, *samatha* versus *vipassanā*) belies the notion that the rhetoric of Buddhist meditative experience functions ostensibly.⁷⁵⁷ It is apparent that even within the living Buddhist tradition a particular experiential claim must be judged on the basis of the course of training that engendered the experience and the behavior that ensued.⁷⁵⁸

Such judgments are based in turn on prior ideological commitments shaped by one’s vocation (monk or lay person), one’s socioeconomic background (urban middle-class or rural poor), one’s political agenda (traditionalist or reformer), one’s sectarian affiliation, one’s

⁷⁵² This is, of course, *not* the rule. We should diligently investigate how retreat leaders and their assistants properly deal with such cases (or not). Again, see SD 60e.

⁷⁵³ A 4.157/2:142 f (SD 42.16); SD 19.2a (6.1).

⁷⁵⁴ MA 1:25; PmA 2:451; VbhA 186. With *bāla, puthujjano*, SA 2:41.

⁷⁵⁵ Sanbokyodan or Sanbo Kyodan (The 3 treasures religious organization) is a lay Zen sect derived from both the Soto (Caodong) and the Rinzai (Linji) traditions; founded by Hakuun Yasutani in 1954; renamed Sanbo-Zen International in 2014.

⁷⁵⁶ Sharf 1995a:265. For the parenthesis, Sharf quotes Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen*, Boston, 1967:191.

⁷⁵⁷ Sharf 1995a:276 + n61: See also W L King, *Theravāda Meditation* (1980:143 f), where he discusses the problems in characterizing Sunlun’s technique as either *vipassana* or *samatha*. Buswell has similar problems in situating Son *hwadul* (Chin *huàtóu*) practice within the “classical” Buddhist schema of *vipassana-samatha*: “Hwadu is not intended to generate a state of *samādhi* but a state in which *both* the calmness of *samādhi* and the perspicuity of *prajñā* are maintained ... If one were to try to place the state of mind engendered through *kanhwa* [Chin *kànhuà*] practice in the stages in Buddhist meditation outlined in the Theravada school, believe it would be rather more akin to ‘access concentration’ (*upacāra-samādhi*), which accompanies ten specific types of discursive contemplations” (Buswell, *The Zen Monastic Experience*, 1992:159).

⁷⁵⁸ Sharf 1995a:265 + n63: In U Ba Khin’s analysis of Mr A’s *phala* experience, eg, U Ba Khin included a detailed description of the sequence of Mr A’s training, despite the fact that the course of training lasted a mere 3 days (King 1980: 130-132). The argument was explicit: if the training that led to the experience conformed to canonical descriptions of the path to *nibbāna*, then the resultant experience must indeed have been *nibbāna*. Another contemporary scholar, Saddhātissa, warned that even if a meditator finds his sessions improving dramatically, such that “he is attaining trance-like states of concentration,” if there is “no change in his daily life ... it may well be that what he has been calling tranquillity and concentration is, in fact, a state of self-induced hypnotism” (cited in Cousins, “Buddhist *jhāna*,” *Religion* 3 1973:126).

education, and so on. In the end, the Buddhist rhetoric of meditative experience would appear to be both informed by, and wielded in, the interests of legitimation, authority, and power. (Sharf 1995a:265)

6.3.2.8 It is traditionally said in Myanmar: “To be Burmese is to be Buddhist.”⁷⁵⁹ On account of the popularity of meditation teachers in the country, many Burmese follow them, and meditate in different ways according to which teacher or group they follow. The most popular method—or, more correctly, methods—are given the generic name **Vipassana** (*vipassanā*). However, as we well know from the Pali canon, **vipassana** is not a “method” but rather the result of proper meditation done with moral conduct (*sīla*); hence, it is called “insight,” which also means wisdom (*paññā*).

The next vital point we learn from the Pali canon is that insight (*vipassanā*) should be balanced or harmonized with calmness (*samatha*) or concentration (*samādhi*). **Samatha** too, has been misunderstood and misused to refer to a meditation “method,” the goal of which, it seems, is deep concentration or dhyana (*jhāna*). Again, *samatha*, like *vipassana*, is the result of meditation (sometimes called “concentration”). Hence, *samādhi* is a broad term that may encompass both the method and its fruit, that is, meditation and its resulting concentration.

The rule is that we need both *samatha* and *vipassana*, and how we apply them depends very much on our personality, mentality and needs. There are times when we need to cultivate sufficient calmness before we can gain insight. There are times when we should cultivate insight to clear the mind of views or distractions. In fact, the suttas—like **the (Yuganaddha) Paṭipada Sutta** (A 4.170) tell us that we may need to cultivate *vipassanā* before, after, or with *samatha*.⁷⁶⁰ *Vipassanā* alone may, however, be cultivated when we already have sufficient *samatha*.⁷⁶¹

6.3.2.9 For various reasons (often historical: the teacher or teaching that we first encountered) we may name **our method** as “samatha,” like that of the Samatha Trust in the UK, or “vipassana,” like Mahasi and Ledi Sayadaw and his lineage (U Ba Khin, Goenka, etc). Modern teachers, like Sume-dho and Thanissaro teach the integrative approach, beginning with either (according to our ability) and going from there.

The so called “**Burmese method**” is often criticized by informed Buddhists (who give priority to the suttas) for over-reliance on Abhidhamma dogmas and commentarial scholasticism, which tends to separate vipassana from samatha, as if they were discrete methods, each sufficient or complete in itself. It is clear from the limbs of the noble eightfold path that “**right mindfulness**” (*sammā, sati*) refers to *satipaṭṭhāna*, the “establishment of mindfulness” in terms of meditations that are body-based, feeling-based, mind-based or reality-based: these may lead to either *samatha* or *vipassana*.⁷⁶²

Then, there is “**right concentration**” (*sammā samādhi*), which are the 4 form dhyanas. To gain a dhyana, we need to be free of the gravity of sense-desires, that is, our body. With the attainment of dhyana, this is just what happens: the mind is fully free from the body and can more easily see into true reality. In other words, we can attain non-returning. Even arhathood.

As unawakened beings, we clearly need to cultivate any mental or meditative aspect that is weak, whether it is calmness or wisdom (insight). Just as a bird flies on its two wings,⁷⁶³ we need to harmonize both aspects of mental cultivation in order to progress on the path:⁷⁶⁴

⁷⁵⁹ SD 60.1b (2.3.2.2).

⁷⁶⁰ A 4.170/2:157,4-6 (SD 41.5); also **(Mūla) Samatha Vipassanā S** (S 43.2/4:360), (SD 41.1(3.4); SD 41.1 (2.2.1.2).

⁷⁶¹ For cultivating *vipassana* on its own, see SD 41.1 (6.2.2).

⁷⁶² Such cultivations, in themselves, without dhyana, may lead to streamwinning or to once-returning.

⁷⁶³ This famous imagery actually describes the life of a true renunciant: D 2,66/1:71 = M 51,15/1:346 = 112,14-/3:35 = A 4.198,10/2:209 f.

⁷⁶⁴ SD 41.1 (1.4.2, 3, 4.2.4, 6.2.3.5, 7.4).

<i>N'atthi jhānaṃ apaññassa paññā n'atthi ajhāyato Yamhi jhānaṃ ca paññā ca sa ve nibbāna,santike</i>	There is no (true) meditation ⁷⁶⁵ without wisdom; there is no (true) wisdom without meditation. In whom there are both meditation and wisdom, he is indeed in nirvana's presence.	(Dh 372)
---	---	----------

6.3.3 Creative teachers, creative misreadings

6.3.3.1 The “meditation teachers” of our time (the 1st quarter of the 21st century) are either Buddhist teachers (monastic and lay) or secularized teachers selling meditation as a product. The secularized teachers are, as a rule, certified by some institution or organization run by psychologists or meditation professionals. Since they only know what they are taught, they are likely to keep away from traditional teachers, who have spent many more years meditating and teaching than these “professional” teachers.

Many of the so called traditional “meditation teachers” in our own time too, are mostly good salesmen but bad teachers, hollow Gurus, desperately seeking funds and following, with an air of restraint and holiness. Much of such their religion (including Buddhism) is titles, looks and rituals: these Gurus are adept at ritual behaviour, masters of appearances, consummate Tartuffes.⁷⁶⁶ They are likely to be the absolute power at the apex of an organization or movement, the final authority that answers to no one. We are only wise in keeping a safe distance, or better, avoid such a plague altogether—before it is too late.

One litmus test for detecting a Guru or a Guru-like teacher is to introduce yourself as a poor, jobless Buddhist, or even as a “full-time Buddhist worker.” If you find the Guru excusing himself in a saccharin sweet way (more often, it would be a silent treatment) [4.5.2.2], then you find him simply out of your reach, you have probably just met a Cult Guru. Be thankful you have been ignored but are safe: simply move on with your Dharma quest.

6.3.3.2 A popular Tibetan saying goes: **Every teacher his teaching.** Every meditation teacher creates his own meditation system and has his own views. So long as the teacher stays within the “Buddhist training,” it is unlikely that there will be any problems. This is more likely to be so with the traditional forest monks than with the “modern” monastics (monks and nuns), or the urbanized coenobites (those who live in large communities and have constant interaction with the world).

During an interview with a popular US Buddhist magazine, **Robert Sharf** was asked: “The religious historian Elaine Pagels has spoken of how religious practitioners adopt certain practices and beliefs selectively and reinterpret texts in what she calls a process of “creative misreading.”⁷⁶⁷ Granted, this might be done unconsciously, even perniciously, but might it not also be a necessary strategy for adapting a tradition, in this case Buddhism, to the contingencies of time and place?” (*Tricycle* summer 2007:48 f) [6.3.3.3]

The term “creative misreading” is not always used in a disapproving way in literary circles. In fact, it is said to be creative for the very fact that we are able to see something different or new in some writing. This is, of course, a lively quality in creative writing. However, in the early Buddhist texts, we should be sufficiently delighted with “creative reading” of the sutta texts, that does not go against the “Dharma drift.” Our task is to work to understand the insight and instruction of the text so that we can reach the path, or at least better our lives for the moment, even in a literary way, but more so spiritually.

⁷⁶⁵ In the older texts, *jhāna* specifically means “dhyana, absorption,” and generically, “meditation,” esp for the cultivating of calmness or concentration.

⁷⁶⁶ On Tartuffism, see SD 19.2a (2.3.2).

⁷⁶⁷ E Pagels [I was unable to locate citations for any of Pagels works for this claim; it is thus taken on faith]; cf Jeffrey J Kripal, “Mysticism” (ch 18), in (ed) R A Segal, *Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*, 2006 ch 18:331 f.

In an important way, the “coding” of the early Buddhist texts (EBTs) by an oral tradition was to prevent any kind of misreading, creative or otherwise. For our purposes, we may take “creative” here to mean “for personal purposes” or “out of personal bias.” Why then, did post-Buddha teachers and writers “creatively misread” the EBTs that they had. One reason was probably they may have or know the *text* but misconstrued the context, that is, they either made no effort to consult reliable teachers or other EBTs, or simply assumed that they were right on account of their status (that theirs was a fiat).

Secondly, they probably had very strong personal views of their own, or were deeply influenced by outside teachings, and were moved to see Buddhist teachings in the light or half-light of such beliefs and biases. Even today, or in recent times, we have, for example, Hindus, Theosophists, Christians, and today, psychologists, who creatively misread the Buddha and his teachings for the glory of their own beliefs. Among the later Buddhists, such creative misreadings must surely be efforts to legitimize their own views as Buddhist, or to reinterpret their beliefs in terms of Buddhist teachings, such as with Buddhism in China, especially in the Tang and the Song dynasties.⁷⁶⁸ [7.6.7.3]

6.3.3.3 Sharf agreed that **creative misreading** is possible with the Buddhist texts, and that Buddhist history supports it. He explained how when Buddhism arrived in China in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, the early Chinese Buddhists translated the scriptures using terms that were familiar to them, often using Daoist language for Sanskrit terms that had no Chinese equivalent. One of Sharf’s favourite examples was the Sanskrit term *tathata*, or “suchness,” a word that refers to the natural “empty” state of things—the way things really are.

The Chinese translated *tathata* with the cosmological term 本無 *běnwú*, which means “original non-being,” and this gave the Buddhist concept a noticeably Daoist twist. The use of Daoist terminology made Indian Buddhist texts approachable and meaningful to members of the Chinese literati. It allowed them to make connections between Buddhism and their own indigenous ways of thinking. This was one reason Buddhism caught on so well. Sharf thought that there was a parallel in the way Buddhism is represented to a Western audience. Buddhist ideas are put into terms that are familiar and meaningful to our modern sensibility.

6.3.3.4 Today, Sharf adds [6.3.3.2], the language of choice for rendering Buddhist ideas is the language of **psychotherapy**. This ends up reinforcing, whether intentionally or not, the notion that Buddhism is basically a means of psychological transformation and that Buddhism is compatible with modern science. This is how we end up with the simplistic notion that Buddhism is a “science of happiness.” But as in China, this may be an unavoidable stage in the transmission of Buddhism.

In China, the translation process evolved over the course of centuries. The Chinese continued to refine their translations of Buddhist texts, and with more reliable translations and commentaries came a deeper engagement with Indian Buddhist thought and practice. It took several centuries before the Chinese could fully appreciate the breadth and subtleties of Buddhism. This is not to say that they didn’t continue to transform the Indian tradition and make it their own; they certainly did. But the work of transformation went hand in hand with gaining a sophisticated understanding of Buddhism’s Indian heritage.

Maybe, the lesson from history, notes Sharf, is that it will take a long time—perhaps centuries—for the West (and westernized Buddhists) to engage with the Buddhist tradition at a deeper level. Such an engagement will require that we see past the confines of our own historical and cultural situation and *gain a greater appreciation of the depth and complexity of the Buddhist heritage*. Certainly, one impediment to this is the idea that the only thing that matters is meditation and that everything else is just excess baggage. (Sharf, *Tricycle* summer 2007:48)

⁷⁶⁸ See esp **How Buddhism Became Chinese**, SD 40b.2 Chinese challenges to Buddhism.

6.3.4 Buddhism as a conversation

6.3.4.1 Sharf [6.3.3] concludes his interview with *Tricycle* magazine by inviting us to see Buddhism as a **conversation**, one that has been going on now for over 2,000 years—which is a long time. Participation in this conversation has always been predicated on having a foundation in various aspects of the tradition, such as its literature, philosophy, rituals, discipline and so on. It is a conversation about what it is to be a human being: why we suffer, how we can resolve our suffering, what works, what doesn't, and so forth. These are big issues, and whichever one we choose to look at, we are not going to find a single Buddhist position. There have always been different positions, and these would be debated and argued. But all parties to the debate are presumed to share a common religious culture—a more or less shared world of texts, ideas, practices—*without which there could be no real conversation*.

This is not to say that there can't be value in reducing Buddhism to a relatively simple set of ideas. It can help make Buddhism accessible to those who are not in a position to engage in the complexities of the tradition, especially the monastic tradition. This risk arises because, even if was the strategy of the "single practice" movements—Nichiren, Jodo Shinshu, and to some extent Soto Zen—in medieval Japan. But when we do this, we run the risk of ending up rather narrow and sectarian. because even if we have the essence, that essence is not the same which is held by other Buddhists, or even with Buddhists whom we know. If we don't share the same essence, we don't really have much to talk about, do we?

In time, Sharf thinks, North American Buddhists may see the value of entering more fully into a Buddhist conversation, but that means acquiring the necessary experience and skills. We don't just jump in, and give or get answers right away. Rather, we are confronted with many questions and many answers that generate new sets of questions and perspectives. Hence, we must keep conversing in a friendly way. It opens us up to dramatically different ways of understanding the world and our place in it. Through our participation, we help shape the conversation, and the conversation, in turn, shapes us. Not conversing is to lose something truly precious.⁷⁶⁹

6.3.4.2 German philosopher, **Hans-Georg Gadamer** (1900-2002), the founder of philosophical hermeneutics, gives us some insight into the nature of conversation in his book, *Truth and Method* (1975, 1989). Using Gadamer's key ideas, I will here try to briefly suggest how we can conduct a conversation from which we can learn (even as we teach), and to learn from it joyfully (with an inner smile), with the purpose of making us (along with others) better persons.

Instead of "conducting" a conversation, planning and thinking about it, we should rather "**fall into a conversation**." Instead of leading the conversation, we are "led" by it. We allow the person or persons we are conversing with to speak their heart, to feel comfortable in opening up to us so that we are able to hear more than just the words of the exchange.

In this kind of respectful exchange, we will often see our own views and vision in what the other person says; perhaps, it may have been put *differently* by others. What we are disagreeing with is this **difference**, which we investigate to discover what it is that we do not agree with and why. Then, we are able to better understand what the other person means by understanding that difference. This is called "interpretation."

6.3.4.3 Another important aspect of a good conversation is **the continuity of our memory**. We remember *what* has been said and *how* it was said, and see the relationship between the *what* and the *how*. We then try to see the connection between the *what* and the *how*, and let this add colour, space and depth into our growing vision of the speaker.

What we examine are mere words, which we should investigate further to penetrate into their meanings, so that we get an intended or implied feeling behind the words. We then get a bigger and

⁷⁶⁹ Sharf, Interview, *Tricycle* summer 2007:49.

clearer picture of the person's thoughts and feelings. In fact, we would notice that because we did not notice them *at first*, we often only begin to understand aspects of a conversation *later on*, and that it seems to occur *accidentally*.⁷⁷⁰

Our conversation, then, should be like a walk in beautiful nature in full bloom and good weather. We notice all the beautiful things and the not-so-beautiful things around us. As we converse, we bring to life those things, to see them just as they are, and discover what they mean for each of us. In this sense, everything is teaching us. Yet, each of us learns in a different way, and it is these differences that enrich our lives. What may seem to be a difference now will harmonize with what we *are* and what we *will be* through friendship and wisdom.

7 A moral psychology of self-deception

7.1 SELF-DECEPTION IN BUDDHISM

7.1.1 How we deceive ourselves

7.1.1.1 Before we close this study on “an evolutionary psychology of mindfulness,” let us remind ourselves how the suttas keep warning us against the fact that self-view tends to conjure for us a **virtual reality** of whatever we do, say or think, rooted in lust, hate or delusion. After I've written this, a Dharma friend intuited that this phrase points to the incompleteness of the reality that is conjured, and the way it implies that this has been conjured for a purpose—to serve particular interests.

At the same time though, he thinks that the word “virtual” feels too neutral—although impossible, the ambition of the virtual is a one-to-one representation, something faithful to reality but presented in another form. He suggests that “artificial” would carry more force, indicating the falseness of the reality along with that partialness and createdness. I fully agree: it invokes, interestingly, a kind of “**artificial intelligence**,” literally, in us!⁷⁷¹

7.1.1.2 I would be patently biased—deceiving myself—in saying that all religions are misreadings of reality, but then we all easily, gloriously, deceive ourselves in such matters. Right now, for example, my bias—I would say “my faith”—rightly or wrongly, is that the Buddha's teaching is the only right reading of true reality. The only difference is perhaps that I *know* I am deceiving myself. After all, I am still unawakened, and I could be wrong.

The “creative” misreading of reality happens to anyone who is unawakened regarding our own views, especially with religion and views relating to power (eg, politics) and reality (eg, superstitions). Naturally, we believe that we are right, but the reality is simply that we are at best being *creative* about it. Without understanding true reality, we have *created* our own virtual reality: it is real just as a desert mirage is real, viewed from a distance. This is **human creativity**: we are inclined to think we are right.

Then, there is what we may call the “**divine**” **creative process**: we *can* know that we could be wrong. **Spiritual growth** occurs when we *truly* know we are wrong; and we know *why* we are wrong. We then *right* our view, and move on from there. Thus, we progress from unchallenged belief, through doubt, to spiritual growth as wisdom. To that extent, we have **spiritual freedom**.

Far from being a “creative” process, the early texts tease us with the freedom of **the uncreated** or **non-created** highest good, nirvana (P *nibbāna*). Indeed, the whole of early Buddhism is a process of deconstructing the creative, the constructed, that which holds us in its gravity of eternal devotion. Against such creative readings of reality, the Buddha presents us with a disarming vision of the meaning of life, along with an unassailable purpose of life—these are found in **the 4 noble truths**. [2.1.2.2]

⁷⁷⁰ For a critical study of conversation as “hermeneutic experience,” see H-G Gadamer, *Truth and Method* [1975], tr Weinsheimer & Marshall, 2nd ed, Continuum, 2nd ed 1989:385-493.

⁷⁷¹ I warmly thank Matt Jenkins of the UK for sharing this intuition.

7.1.1.3 Unlike science, where facts are empirically verified truths, religion tends to present unverified facts as unimpeachable truths, often on the authority of sacred or charismatic individuals. Often enough, as in any religion, this also happens in Buddhism—especially in the post-Buddha shadows of the Teacher’s light—both in traditions rooted in early Buddhism (especially in ethnic Buddhisms) and in later Buddhisms.

Like modern science, the Buddha teaches what is verifiable, that all formations (*sabbe saṅkhārā*)—namely, matter in all its existential and imaginable forms—all around us and within us (including what we are made of) are **impermanent** (changing, becoming otherwise). Failing to see or “mind” this for what they are, we are likely to feel for them (to see them as beautiful, hence desirable, or as ugly, hence undesirable). We *suffer* both from the perception of beauty and of ugliness—this attitude brings on **suffering**.

Most profound of all—*profound* because few of us can really understand this, and even fewer dare to accept it as reality—is the fact that not just formations—but all things (*sabbe dhammā*) are **nonself**. “Things” (*dhamma*) refers not only to the formations, but the principle underlying the nature and activity of these formations. Here is an insightful way of seeing true reality: all things or everything in this universe have neither inherent nature nor abiding essence.⁷⁷² Everything exists in relation to other things, a kind of “universe,” if you like. Only nirvana does not fit this conditioned equation; hence, let us be silent of that which we cannot speak. Here, Buddhism goes beyond science, and, in this, Buddhism has never been proven wrong.⁷⁷³

7.1.1.4 We have all, at some point, struggled with a temptation to do what goes against our own better judgement; yet, we work to justify giving in to temptation. We have all personally experienced this, and many of us know this to be **self-deception**—unless we are really good at it! Ironically, we would not know self-deception unless we are good at reflecting on impermanence, suffering and nonself, or any of the triad reflecting universal reality.

There is a special kind of person who really knows what self-deception is, since he has fully overcome it: this is **the arhat**, the first of whom is the Buddha. Unlike the arhats, we are unlikely to know when we are in the stifling grasp of self-delusion (like right at this moment).

Like you, I don’t want to be wrong, I don’t think I’m wrong; in fact, I’m sure that I’m right concerning what I have stated above [7.1.1.1 f]. For our purposes, let us assume that I have spoken the truth—as far as I know it—as I think, so I say it. I have no intention of lying. I am quite sure that I lack both lust and hate in stating all this. Now here’s the rub: since I’m not awakened, I don’t know whether I am deluded or not. Hence, I *may* be wrong; yes, you probably *wish* that I’m wrong; no, you *know* that I’m wrong! One thing we all can agree on here is that *we are all deluding ourselves*! Now, we are getting closer to the subject of this subsection: **self-deception**.

In significant ways, early Buddhism teaches us to know what self-deception is; how it arises; how it ceases (for us at least); and to make the right effort to end it. Although self-deception starts with individuals—with each of us—it often affects others too, as in the case of the crash of **Air Florida Flight 90** (13 January 1982), when a self-deceived pilot failed to heed the warnings of his co-pilot about lack of de-icing of the plane: it crashed shortly after take-off.⁷⁷⁴

In fact, self-deception can also affect a group of people, such as a corporate board, or even a community of workers. For example, Robert Trivers [7.3.3] suggests that “organizational self-deception” led to NASA’s failure to represent accurately the risks posed by the space shuttle’s O-ring

⁷⁷² On the 3 characteristics, see **Dhamma Niyāma S** (A 3.134) SD 26.8.

⁷⁷³ On how we know early Buddhism is true, see SD 60.1e (1.2).

⁷⁷⁴ See R L Trivers, “Self-deception in service of deceit,” in *Natural Selection and Social Theory*, Oxford, 2002:261-271.

design, a failure that led to **the Space Shuttle Challenger** disaster (28 January 1986), when the space shuttle exploded 73 seconds into its flight, killing all 7 crew members aboard.⁷⁷⁵

7.1.1.5 The topic of self-deception, especially **religious self-deception**, is highly significant to Buddhism. The Buddha teaches us not to accept anything through *tradition* (including faith and scripture), *reasoning* (logic, inference, philosophizing) or *charisma* (authority, ability, respect). We should only accept it when it prevents us from falling into actions rooted in greed, hate or delusion, and strengthens us with the wholesome roots of non-greed, non-hate and non-delusion (or charity, kindness and wisdom).⁷⁷⁶

Considering all the vital guiding qualities listed in **the Kesa,puttiya Sutta** (A 3.65), it is clear that the aim is to prevent us from taking up Buddhism for a wrong reason, especially from being self-deceived into misconstruing that this is a *carte blanche* for believing or doing what we like with Buddhism itself. This would then be as good as, or rather, as bad as, not following Buddhism at all! In fact, the deepest root of self-deception is that of a self-centred attitude. In short, we can easily be self-deceived, even with Buddhism, even as Buddhists, particularly when we mistakenly think “we are the world,” amidst this vast interplay of changing, disappearing, reappearing conditions that make up our human existence. Hence, it is vitally significant that we understand what self-deception is and how to avoid, even overcome, it.

7.1.2 Religious belief formation

7.1.2.1 Neil Van Leeuwen, Associate Professor of Neuroscience and Philosophy, Georgia State University (USA), is an empirically-oriented philosopher of the mind whose research focuses on the question of what belief is, and he writes about it in the most beautiful human-centred language. His approach involves contrasting belief with imagining and other cognitive attitudes. Accordingly, he also focuses on several topics having to do with imagination, like pretend play, mental imagery, and the role of imagination in guiding action generally. Neil’s interest in belief and other cognitive attitudes also manifests itself in research on related topics like self-deception and religious credence (and how religious credence differs from factual belief).

We will here examine his paper, “**Self-deception and the problem with religious belief formation**” (2006),⁷⁷⁷ which opens with a quote from the communion liturgy of the Church in which Van Leeuwen grew up: “*He who eats the bread and drinks the cup with an unbelieving heart eats and drinks judgment upon himself.*”⁷⁷⁸ The word “judgment” in the quote is a way of saying “damnation to Hell.” The word “unbelieving” refers to disbelief in the core metaphysical doctrines of the Church.

The effect of regular repetition of lines like this in the service is to strike *fear* in the person who may be questioning such doctrines. Fear in turn squelches inquiry and creative thought. He was only 8 years old when he first heard that line and understood what it meant. The point of this paper, Van Leeuwen states, is not to criticize religious beliefs, but rather to criticize the character of the “belief formation process” inherent in much of religious practice.

7.1.2.2 The phrase “**belief formation process**” refers broadly to the way that beliefs in our mind come about, are maintained, or are extinguished (or not). We all have beliefs, which have arisen somehow. Van Leeuwen became interested in self-deception probably because of his terrifying religious experiences during his childhood in the Grand Rapids Christian Reformed Church, which is

⁷⁷⁵ Trivers, “The elements of a scientific theory of self-deception,” in *Evolutionary Perspectives on Human Reproductive Behavior*, in (edd) D LeCroy & P Moller, *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 907 Apr 2000:114-131. Also 2002:286-290.

⁷⁷⁶ See **Kesa,puttiya S** (or *Kālāma S*), A 3.65/1:188-193 + SD 35.4A (1.1.4).

⁷⁷⁷ Leeuwen, in *Philosophy Talk*, 7 Jan 2006: <https://www.philosophytalk.org/blog/self-deception-and-problem-religious-belief-formation>.

⁷⁷⁸ The Christian Reformed Church (CRC) of Grand Rapids, Michigan.

representative of what goes on in a much broader spectrum of religions. Van Leeuwen's view is that the "a-rational" nature of the religious belief formation process is pernicious and ultimately more destructive than any individual religious belief, or system of beliefs, taken by itself. That process critically involves self-deception.

As a start, says Van Leeuwen, a beautiful thing about being human is that we're equipped with the senses, the capacities for reasoning and logical comparison, and an imaginative faculty for generating new ideas. The beauty is that just by our getting up in the morning and walking around, our capacities compel us to generate knowledge and make our beliefs more subtle. The data that come to our senses through our daily actions spark our reasoning capacities to call out for explanations; our imagination answers with the generation of ideas that, if all goes well, provide those explanations.

This is how a detailed knowledge of nature—including individual plants and animals, and systems of them—has come about in so many diverse human societies. The specific answers and beliefs will come and go—if one belief doesn't work, another takes its place—but the beauty is the process and nature we have that allow us to participate in it. Van Leeuwen calls this **the healthy belief formation process**, one that is driven by curiosity.

7.1.2.3 The process of **religious belief formation** stands in stark contrast. Returning to the Church quote above [7.1.2.1], there's no doubt that the repetition of such threatening lines has played a role in the formation of many religious beliefs. But how? Those lines provide no *evidence* of their claims. Why should they bring about belief?

The first thing to note, says Van Leeuwen, is the vilification of unbelievers. Those with an unbelieving heart will be judged, presumably, for having done something wrong in the minds of believers. The vilification of unbelievers threatens exclusion from the group for anyone on the fence. This may also engender the fear of Hell. The net effect of the vilification and fear is that a desire to believe comes about in the mind, that mind which "... eats and drinks judgment upon oneself." He certainly had such a fearful desire in his youth.

7.1.2.4 Once we have a desire to believe the metaphysical doctrines of a religion, our mind is ripe for **self-deception**, which has essentially 2 components. First, we form a belief that philosophers call epistemic norms—our usual standards of evidence and better judgment. Second, we feel compelled to obey the Church's fiats, as a result of which we deviate from *the healthy belief formation process*.

Because vilification, fear, and desire bring forth **the religious credence**⁷⁷⁹—even though that credence is at odds with our personal understanding of things and normal standards of judgment—the process by which our religious beliefs come about is thus one of self-deception.⁷⁸⁰

A religious believer may, however, charge that I have gotten it all wrong, since it is his direct encounter with the spirit of God that brings about religious belief. Why then, asks Van Leeuwen, is religious practice so full of methods that have the precise effect of establishing credence by a-rational means? *The singing, the chanting, the repetition of lines that vilify unbelief, the stress on believing only on faith?* Surely, the existence of such methods is no coincidence. And even if some have been touched by something divine, surely there are many who formed their religious beliefs in response to the constant pressures of liturgy and conditioning. And *that* is **the religious belief formation process** that we are talking about.

⁷⁷⁹ "Credence" refers to a quality that an idea or a story has that makes us believe that it is true. "Belief" is a quality or content that we project onto an idea or story. Usually, in the former, the quality is already defined, and we merely accept it; in the latter, we project our own view or expectation onto an object of faith.

⁷⁸⁰ For a similar view, see Georges Rey, "Does anyone really believe in God?" in (edd) R Martin & D Kolak, *Experience of Philosophy*, 6th ed, NY: OUP, 2006:335-354. Abr ed "Meta-atheism: Religious avowal as self-deception," in L M Antony (ed), *Philosophers Without Gods: Meditations on atheism and the secular life*, Oxford, 2007: 243-265 (ch 19).

7.2 UNWHOLESOME RELIGIOUS BELIEF FORMATION PROCESS

7.2.1 Unwholesome religious beliefs

7.2.1.1 What exactly is *unwholesome* with this process? I have here used the word “unwholesome” (*akusala*) as a broad term that covers “evil,” “bad,” “unskillful,” “unhealthy,” and so on, that is, how it seems to work against others, but, in the end, it actually works against us too. It is “**religious spiritual deception**” because we *do not really know* that this is so, or we know it to be so, but we *blindly stick to the deception anyway*. We will examine the nature and significance of these two difficulties below [7.3].

But first, we need to understand why this is *an unwholesome belief formation process*.

It is unwholesome because it is at odds with the healthy belief formation process, because it stagnates and undermines both our common sense and the healthy process of beneficially reflecting on our core beliefs and values. It is unhealthy because **fear**, not curiosity, is the driving force. By painting as “evil” any disbelief or divergence from any of a long and specific list of doctrines and dogmas, the factors involved in the religious belief formation process cause us to disengage with *the normal and healthy creative process of belief generation and revision*. The negative religious belief formation process is a conditioning (brainwashing) mechanism by which we “believe so that we will understand,” that is, “to believe is to understand”;⁷⁸¹ in other words, we are asked to create a virtual reality for ourselves.

7.2.1.2 In the negative religious belief formation process, people attending a religious ceremony are made to fear the prospect that something *else* might strike them as true. The mind loses its flexibility. Consider some historical and scientific examples mentioned by Van Leeuwen, below:

- How else could the belief that the Earth is at the centre of the universe persist for so long in the face of Galileo’s new evidence?
- How else could members of a Church that canonized a woman, Joan of Arc, for her leadership hold the belief that women are categorically unfit to lead congregations?⁷⁸²
- Why do evangelicals who have seen *pictures* of the changed colour of the peppered moth still believe natural selection has never occurred?
- How else should we explain the belief at high levels in the Catholic Church that it’s wrong to teach about and distribute sexual protection in a South Africa crippled by AIDS?

Clearly, responsiveness to reality is needed here. But that’s precisely what the religious belief formation process lacks. What is beautiful about the human mind is thus undermined.

7.2.2 Religious belief and faith

7.2.2.1 Van Leeuwen further asks rhetorically, “Why else do I think the religious belief formation process itself is *worse* than any particular belief?” He goes on to respond:

⁷⁸¹ See 49.2 (3.5.2); SD 56.18 (1.2.1.2).

⁷⁸² Joan of Arc was actually canonized on the basis of her visions and miracles attributed to her intercession post-death, not her leadership. Quite the opposite: she was burnt at the stake as a heretic mainly because of her role as a leader—for refusing to accede to the Church’s authority rather than the authority of the saints and angels she was in communion with; for wearing soldiers’ clothing; for setting herself up as an object of worship through setting herself up as a leader. See E P Sanguinetti (tr), *Joan of Arc: Her Trial Transcripts* (2016) for the full details of the complaints made against Joan and their defence. Also the 1928 silent film “The Passion of Joan of Arc” is worth seeing just for the cinematography. The question here is simply answered: the actions of Joan were themselves evidence that women were unfit to lead congregations; she was a heretic whose leadership was evidence of that heresy. (My thanks to Matt Jenkins of the UK for these instructive comments.)

As I've been stressing, I think the healthy belief formation process is central to our humanity; it's a tragedy for that to be undermined. But as importantly, human *actions* take on a vicious and inflexible character when they are driven by beliefs that are unresponsive to reality.

The problem with Crusaders and Jihadists is not primarily that they think their enemies are evil; it's that their beliefs are unresponsive to being moved by the simple humanity of their victims. One belief can explain a skirmish, but it takes a degenerate, self-deceptive belief formation process to explain the systematic maintenance of a set of beliefs underlying a Crusade.

Other examples are abundant: the Inquisition, the longtime inability of the Catholic Church to respond appropriately to child molestation by its clergy (how could we fire someone ordained by God?), and the malicious condemnations of Jerry Falwell (and those who listen to and act on them), to name a few.

All these cases involve false beliefs that would have been changed by a simple bit of responsiveness to reality if they hadn't been insulated by the religious belief formation process. Dogmatically held beliefs give rise to destructive behaviors. The further danger is that acceptance of such a degenerate belief formation process can spread and lead to wider corruption of our cognitive economy.⁷⁸³

A God-centered religion puts God above everything else: no one and nothing is higher than God, neither me nor my relatives, certainly not others, especially unbelievers, and not even the world (or Nature), since it is, after all, God-created. On the other hand, we have **(hu)man-centered religions** that put humans above all else by calling it "dignity of humanity," and so on; but what about animals and other beings? Finally, there is **a life-centered path**, where life is most precious; hence, it should be happy and free. This truth is precious, and only a calm and clear mind can see and enjoy all this. Which one should we choose?

7.2.2.2 What then, finally, of **faith**? Van Leeuwen speaks of 2 ways in which the word "faith" is used, one of which is pernicious, the other laudable. At its worst, "faith" is used rhetorically to bring about an a-rational, unreflective credence in what the "wise" men of the Church would have you believe. Enough has been said already above to show what's wrong with this kind of "faith."⁷⁸⁴

But "faith" is also used in another sense, a laudable one. Faith, in this sense, is the action-guiding confidence that good will come about if we pursue goodness uncompromisingly. Having this kind of faith is consistent with "**uncertainty**" about what the good, in terms of outcome, will ultimately be. Note that Leeuwen uses uncertainty, when "certainty" could have read just as well.

To him, faith is neither about the certainty of things nor about its form (the contents of faith): we don't really know how the good we have faith in will turn out. However, we have faith (we are certain) that it is the right thing to do. We know that the good we do will bring good, at least in the spirit, and that it will uplift us surprisingly to know and see ourselves, others and life itself in a new and empowering light.

Hence, despite what religious leaders and teachers may suggest, having this faith is also consistent with active questioning of religious dogmas. **The positive belief formation process** is a learning strategy by which we work to "understand so that we will believe," that is, "to understand is to believe": joyful wise faith arises through experience and wisdom.⁷⁸⁵ In short, faith in this sense is not opposed to intellectual curiosity, that is, the desire to learn. **True faith**, then, is the light that shines so that we may truly see: it is not the light that blinds. [1.2.2.2 (1)]

⁷⁸³ N Van Leeuwen, "Self-deception and the problem with religious belief formation," *Philosophy Talk*, 2006.

⁷⁸⁴ N Van Leeuwen, op cit.

⁷⁸⁵ For examples of this, see the cases of Citta the householder, SD 40a.8 (5.6.3), and of the elder Sāriputta, SD 40a.8 (5.6.2).

7.2.3 Defence mechanisms and self-deception

7.2.3.1 Self-deception is a process of denying or rationalizing away the relevance, significance or importance of opposing evidence and logical reasoning. Self-deception basically involves convincing ourselves of a truth (or lack of truth) so that we do not have any real self-knowledge of the deception. Self-deceived people apparently believe something that they must know is false. This belief is genuinely held; it is not a matter of joking, exaggeration, faking, or lying.

A common example is a modern monastic using money. He knows there are clear rules in the Vinaya forbidding its usage, but he has a bank account, and uses it. He rationalizes that he has to travel, pay for his studies (as a university student), that “everyone is doing it,” that he is a “modern monk” and has to keep up with the times, and so on. It is clear then that one of the serious implications of self-deception is that it is only a symptom of other wrongs in views and in practice, even in the mind and heart of the self-deceiver. More of this later.

7.2.3.2 Academically, research into self-deception started with the psychoanalysis of the conscious and the unconscious mind. Hence, it is often discussed by psychologists in the context of Freud’s **psychoanalytic theory**. However, rather than being one of the traditional defense mechanisms,⁷⁸⁶ self-deception is thought to be a necessary component of *all* defense mechanisms. There must be at least a moment of self-deception for a defense mechanism—such as repression, denial, projection, intellectualization—to work. In each case, a person has to be both unaware and hyper-aware of the troubling reality.

Psychoanalytic theory is generally pessimistic about our ability to ever recognize our self-deception. In practical terms, however, we are often told that, before we can correct our negative ego-defence, we need to bring it into the light of mindfulness, and deal with it through proper meditation or therapy. However, even without any such effort, we should be able to recognize our own self-deception at some point, such as when we have cooled down and have a more objective perspective of the situation. The question then is: what do we do about it?

7.2.4 All that we know is provisional

7.2.4.1 The problem with self-deception is that, as a rule, we do not know that we are deceiving ourselves. Although a deception technically occurs mentally (how we think, that is, perceive and conceive things), it often occurs physically too. This is a good place to start to work with understanding our own self-deception, and correcting it (or at least not allowing it to fool us).

Right now, even as we are reading this, the reality is that everything we see is actually *upside down* in our retina. This model of vision as we now know it was first proposed in 1583 by Swiss physician Felix Platter (1536-1614) when he explained that **the eye** functions as an optic and the retina as a receptor. Light from an external source enters through the cornea and is refracted by the lens, forming an image on the retina—the light-sensitive membrane located in the back of the eye. The retina detects photons of light and responds by firing neural impulses along the optic nerve to the brain.

Mechanically speaking, our eyes see everything upside down. That’s because the process of refraction through a convex lens causes the image to be flipped, so when the image hits our retina, it’s completely inverted. German astronomer Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) knew about the nature of the human eye from the works of Greek surgeon and physician Galen (129-216). As an astronomer,

⁷⁸⁶ On the ego defence mechanisms, see SD 7.9 (3).

Kepler understood the optics of the eye,⁷⁸⁷ but left this “study of the wonderful” to other scientists.⁷⁸⁸

Descartes [1.1.1.1] knew of Kepler’s work and used it without caring to acknowledge it. He first wrote about the eye’s optics in *Traité de L’homme* (1632) and in *La Dioptrique* (1637). He demonstrated the eye’s inverted image by setting up a screen in place of the retina in a bull’s excised eyeball. The image that appeared on the screen was a smaller, inverted copy of the scene in front of the bull’s eye.⁷⁸⁹

7.2.4.2 Even though the lens of our eye projects an upside down 2D image on our retina, we see everything right-side up and in 3D which gives us proper visual orientation and the depth perception we need to catch a ball or safely use a flight of stairs. A good illustration of how our eyes take in light and flip the image upside down is a pinhole camera, which is just a box with a small hole on one side and photographic film lying on the other.⁷⁹⁰ Light enters the pinhole camera through the very tiny hole (aperture) and because light moves in a straight line, the rays of light coming from the top and the bottom of the scene intersect at the pinhole and that intersection or convergence is what flips the image upside down.⁷⁹¹

7.2.4.3 Another physical self-deception is that of light falling rain, which I myself noticed while sitting in a stationary train once. It was raining lightly with the raindrops falling *vertically* down outside the train window. Then, as the train slowly moved, I noticed that the raindrops seemed to be gradually moving in a more horizontal way. When the train was moving at its normal speed, the raindrops seemed to be flying *horizontally* all the way.

As the train slowed down again (upon reaching the next station), I noticed an amazing phenomenon: the raindrops slowly began to fall *vertically* again in keeping with the train speed, until it was rightly vertical when the train stopped. It was then that I realized the rain had been falling vertically down all the time. It was my own visual perception that saw it as changing its angle in keeping with the moving train. I had deceived myself into seeing that the rain was swinging from a vertical angle to a horizontal plane, and back again to falling vertically!

7.2.4.4 Now let us apply these two lessons in seeing—the upside-down image in our eye and the falling rain seen from inside the train—to how we think and form views. Just as our mind adjusts the upside-down image in our eye and makes us see the falling rain as changing its angle, so too the mind filters and colours how we think and view things. This mental process of knowing and view-forming is more complicated, but can be learned and understood.

At this stage, let us remind ourselves **to keep an open mind**, and habitually and closely observe how we think, and why we think in a certain way. This is something that only *we* can (and must) train ourself to do, so that we will learn from our perceptual and conceptual processes: *how we sense*

⁷⁸⁷ Kepler wrote on the eye’s optics in *Ad Vitellionem ... Astronomiae pars optica* (Supplements to Witello, in connection with the optical parts of astronomy) (1604) & *Dioptrice* (Dioptrics, or demonstration of the effects which the newly invented telescope has on vision and the visible) (1611).

⁷⁸⁸ Fishman 2008:1768 (see foll); H H Mark, “Johannes Kepler on the eye and vision,” *Am J Ophthalmol* 72,5 1971:869-878.

⁷⁸⁹ R S Fishman, “The study of the wonderful: The first topographical mapping of vision in the brain,” *Archives of Ophthalmology* 126,12 2008:1767-1773

<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamaophthalmology/fullarticle/420950>.

⁷⁹⁰ A box with a pinhole that works in this way is called a **camera obscura** (Latin for “dark chamber”) which refers to a darkened room with a small hole or lens on one wall through which an image is projected onto the opposite wall.

⁷⁹¹ Katie Oliver, “How our eyes see everything upside down,” Mental Floss, Minute Media, 2017 <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/91177/how-our-eyes-see-everything-upside-down>. See also SD 60.1b (8.4.1.10); SD 60.1e (12.3.2).

things and form opinions and deal with views. In short, all these experiences are **provisional** (*pariyā-ya*), that is, learning processes. We need to keep asking: What do I learn here? What am I learning from all this? Meditation—having a calm and clear mind —helps us in this process.

7.3 DEVELOPMENTS IN SELF-DECEPTION STUDIES

7.3.1 Divided minds: Psychological definitions, philosophical difficulties

7.3.1.1 From the start, **philosophers** have struggled with the notion of self-deception. When **Sigmund Freud** (1866-1939) first wrote about self-deception, he was attacked by a French existentialist philosopher, **Jean-Paul Sartre** (1905-80). Like many philosophers, Sartre dismissed the idea of self-deception as impossible. How can you know something and not know it at the same time?

This criticism is a significant one. How can we avoid a negative thought without knowing it is there? An analogy would be an act of avoiding someone we hate: We have to be continuously vigilant to flee or hide from him. Such an act of avoidance requires sustained self-knowledge to turn our mind away from an undesirable situation. This task, however, would be impossible if we don't know that the threatening thought is even there.⁷⁹²

7.3.1.2 For Freud, self-deception is only contingently related to motivation—it is because we disapprove of our motivation that we conceal it from ourself. For Sartre, on the other hand, “it is in the very nature of the motivation itself that it must conceal itself if its goal is to be achieved. One will not succeed in persuading oneself of one's inferiority if one is clearly aware that this is one's goal.”⁷⁹³

Freud, of course, rejected Sartre's critique. Their ideas were simply irreconcilable. For Freud, the mind was divided between the conscious and the unconscious: self-deception occurred unconsciously. For Sartre, the mind could only be one and undivided. “Sartre's single-minded Cartesian insistence on an essentially indivisible mind is indefensible.”⁷⁹⁴ Like Sartre, philosophers to this day are unable to resolve this paradox and unable to accept the idea of self-deception, as such.

7.3.1.3 US philosopher **Alfred R Mele** (1951-), in his works, provided insight into some of the prominent paradoxes regarding self-deception. Two of these paradoxes are those of the self-deceiver's state of mind and the dynamics of self-deception, called the “static” paradox and the “dynamic/-strategic” paradox, respectively. Mele formulates an example of the “static” paradox as follows: If ever a person *A* deceives a person *B* into believing that something, *p*, is true, *A* knows or truly believes that *p* is false while causing *B* to believe that *p* is true. So, when *A* deceives *A* (ie, himself) into believing that *p* is true, he knows or truly believes that *p* is false while causing himself to believe that *p* is true. Thus, *A* must simultaneously believe that *p* is false and believe that *p* is true. But how is this possible?⁷⁹⁵

Mele then describes the “dynamic/strategy” paradox: In general, *A* cannot successfully employ a deceptive strategy against *B* if *B* knows *A*'s intention and plan. This seems plausible as well when *A* and *B* are the same person. A potential self-deceiver's knowledge of his intention and strategy would seem typically to render them ineffective. On the other hand, the suggestion that self-deceivers typi-

⁷⁹² See Guy de Plessis, “A philosophical analysis of Sartre's critique of Freud's depth-psychological account of self-deception,” *Qeios* 3 July 2022: <https://www.qeios.com/read/DV7GYF/pdf>. Jerome Neu, “Divided minds: Sartre's ‘Bad faith’ critique of Freud,” *Review of Metaphysics* 42,1 Sep 1988:79-101.

⁷⁹³ Jonathan Webber, “Bad faith and the unconscious,” in (edd) La Folette, Diegh & Stroud, *The International Encyclopedia of Ethics*, 2nd ed, 2020:11.

⁷⁹⁴ Jerome Neu, “Divided minds: Sartre's ‘Bad faith’ critique of Freud,” *Review of Metaphysics* 42,1 Sep 1988: 871.

⁷⁹⁵ Mele, “Two paradoxes of self-deception,” in (ed) Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *Self-deception and Paradoxes of Rationality*, Stanford: CSLI Publications, 1988.

cally successfully execute their self-deceptive strategies without knowing what they are up to may seem absurd. For an agent's effective execution of his plans seems generally to depend on his cognizance of them and their goals. So how, in general, can an agent deceive himself by employing a self-deceptive strategy? (id)

7.3.1.4 These models call into question how we can simultaneously hold contradictory beliefs ("static" paradox) and deceive ourselves without rendering our intentions ineffective ("dynamic/-strategic" paradox). Attempts at a resolution to these have created 2 schools of thought: one that maintains that paradigmatic cases of self-deception are intentional and one that denies the notion—the *intentionalists* and the *non-intentionalists*, respectively.⁷⁹⁶

Intentionalists tend to agree that self-deception is *intentional* (we deliberately direct our mind to an action), but are divided over whether it requires the holding of contradictory beliefs (id). This school of thought incorporates elements of temporal partitioning (extended over time to benefit the self-deceiver, increasing the chance of forgetting the deception altogether) and psychological partitioning (incorporating various aspects of the "self," conscious and unconscious aspects of the mind).

Non-intentionalists, on the other hand, tend to believe that cases of self-deception are not necessarily accidental, but motivated by desire, anxiety, or some other emotion regarding *p* or related to *p* (id). This means that self-deception differs from *misunderstanding*.

Self-deception also differs from *wishful thinking* in that the self-deceivers recognize evidence for their self-deceptive belief, but simply do not recognize any counter-evidence, unlike wishful thinkers (id). Understandably, there is still no consensus amongst philosophers even on this. On the other hand, psychologists, who rely less on reasoning and theories, but more on empirical observation and hands-on experiments, fare better in helping us understand what self-deception is.

7.3.1.5 Following Freud, some **psychologists** argue that the idea of an unconscious—that part of the mind of which we are not conscious, that is, repressed⁷⁹⁷—would support the occurrence of self-deception. Its feasibility has indeed been confirmed by recent developments in cognitive psychology. For example, we now know that many processes are *unconscious*. Moreover, we know that the human cognitive apparatus allows for multiple versions of the same information: Contradictory information can, in fact, be stored in two different parts of the brain.⁷⁹⁸

Finally, we also know that the emotional part of a stimulus is processed more quickly than is its content. For example, it has been shown that, in a polygraph test, the emotional impact of a word can be detected *before* the word is understood. In other words, we often tend to react *emotionally*—or karmically (with desire, or hate, or delusion)—even before we think about it! This is not difficult to understand or accept from an early Buddhist viewpoint, on account of the teaching of the "latent tendencies" (*anusaya*).⁷⁹⁹

⁷⁹⁶ Ian Deweese-Boyd, "Self-deception." [2006]. *Stanford Ency of Philosophy*. Rev 2016, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/self-deception/>.

⁷⁹⁷ **Repression**, in classical psychoanalytic theory and other forms of depth psychology, it is the basic defense mechanism that excludes painful experiences and unacceptable impulses from consciousness. Repression operates on an unconscious level as a protection against anxiety produced by objectionable sexual wishes, feelings of hostility, and ego-threatening experiences and memories of all kinds. It also comes into play in many other forms of defense, as in denial, in which individuals avoid unpleasant realities by first trying to repress them and then negating them when repression fails (APA *Dict of Psychology* 2nd ed 2015). See (ed) A de Mijolla, *Macmillan International Dict of Psychoanalysis*, 2005:1478-1487.

⁷⁹⁸ See Jeff Mitchell, "Living a lie: Self-deception, habit, and social roles." *Human Studies* 23, 2000:145-156. On split-brain experiments demonstrating the capacity of the conscious self to convince itself that it's calling the shots when it's not, see Robert Wright, *Why Buddhism is True*, NY: Simon & Shuster, 2017:84 f.

⁷⁹⁹ See **Anusaya** (SD 31.3). See also Benjamin Libet's experiments in this connection: SD 7.7 (1.1.2;12).

Given the solid evidence for these mental processes, the possibility of self-deception becomes quite feasible psychologically. Incoming information gets processed by 2 different brain systems. One is the cognitive system that deals with the informational value of the stimulus; the other is the emotional system.⁸⁰⁰ Furthermore, the emotional system operates first, thereby allowing the mind to set up pre-emptive roadblocks for the informational system.⁸⁰¹

7.3.1.6 Beginning in the 1970s, mind scientists—including social psychologists⁸⁰²—became curious about how the two seemingly opposing aspects of self-deception [7.3.2.3] could work together. The paradigm of self-deception was modeled after *interpersonal* deception, where *A* intentionally gets *B* to believe some proposition *p*, all the while knowing or believing truly $\sim p$ (not *p*).⁸⁰³ Such deception is intentional and requires the deceiver to know or believe $\sim p$ and the deceived to believe *p*. On this traditional mode, self-deceivers must (1) hold contradictory beliefs and (2) intentionally get themselves to hold a belief they know or believe truly to be false.⁸⁰⁴ The process of rationalization, however, can obscure the intent of self-deception.

Brian McLaughlin illustrates that such rationalizations in certain circumstances permit the phenomenon. When a person, who disbelieves *p*, intentionally tries to make himself believe or continue believing *p* by engaging in such activities, and, as a result unintentionally misleads himself into believing or continuing to believe *p* via biased thinking, he deceives himself in a way appropriate for self-deception. No deceitful intention is required for this.⁸⁰⁵

Self-deception calls into question the nature of the individual, specifically in a psychological context and the nature of the “self.” Irrationality is the foundation upon which the argued paradoxes of self-deception stem, and it is argued that not everyone has the “special talents” and capacities for self-deception.⁸⁰⁶ However, rationalization is influenced by a myriad of factors, including socialization, personal biases, fear, and cognitive repression.

Such rationalization can be manipulated in both positive and negative fashions; convincing us to perceive a negative situation optimistically, and vice versa. In contrast, rationalization alone cannot effectively clarify the dynamics of self-deception, as *reason* is just one adaptive form mental processes can take.⁸⁰⁷

7.3.2 Robert Trivers’ theory

7.3.2.1 It has been theorized that humans are susceptible to self-deception because most people have emotional attachments to beliefs, which in some cases may be irrational. Some scientists, such

⁸⁰⁰ In simple terms, our “cognitive” function is how our senses work (how we know things), while the “emotional” function is how we feel (how we “think” about or imagine them). In early Buddhist psychology, “feelings” (the affective process) is a separate one, that arises from either of the preceding two.

⁸⁰¹ See Mele, *Self-Deception Unmasked*, Princeton, 2001:79, 98-118.

⁸⁰² Ruben C **Gur** & Harold A **Sackeim**, “Self-deception: A concept in search of a phenomenon,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37,2 1979:147-169. Emily **Balcetis**, “Where the motivation resides and self-deception hides: How motivated cognition accomplishes self-deception,” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 2,1 2008:361-381.

⁸⁰³ Deweese-Boyd 2006. In logic, the negation of a statement *p* is not-*p*. The symbol \sim or \neg is used to denote negation. If *p* is true, then $\sim p$ is false, and vice versa.

⁸⁰⁴ Deweese-Boyd 2006.

⁸⁰⁵ McLaughlin, “Exploring the possibility of self-deception in belief,” in Brian (edd) P McLaughlin & A Oksenberg-Rorty, *Perspectives on Self-Deception*. Berkeley: Univ of California Press, 1988:36.

⁸⁰⁶ A Oksenberg-Rorty, “The deceptive self: Liars, layers, and lairs,” in (edd) P McLaughlin & A Oksenberg-Rorty, *Perspectives on Self-Deception*. Berkeley, 1988:11-28.

⁸⁰⁷ Mark Johnston, Self-deception and the nature of mind,” *Philosophy of Psychology: Debates on Psychological Explanation*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995:63-91.

as evolutionary biologist **Robert L Trivers** (1943-),⁸⁰⁸ have studied self-deception occurring in animal behaviour.

From the perspective of early Buddhist psychology, such an observation is significant since it shows that self-deception is more characteristic of animal or subhuman behaviour than of spiritually evolved humans. Clearly, self-deception is motivated by *greed, hate or delusion* (the 3 unwholesome roots of action), especially the last. We are deluded into thinking or believing a situation that is contrary to reality [7.4]. We deceive ourselves to trust something that is not true, especially by believing what we have trumped up for ourselves. When we believe in this virtual reality (a self-projected but untrue and unreal situation), all the signs of deception are masked up.⁸⁰⁹

Trivers, along with two colleagues (Daniel Kriegman and Malcolm Slavin), applied his theory of “self-deception in the service of deception” in order to explain how, in his view, Donald Trump (who managed to become the 45th US President, 2017-21) was able to employ the “big lie” with such great success.⁸¹⁰ His self-deception won over others in a consummate way, following this logic: [7.3.2.2].

7.3.2.2 Deception is a fundamental aspect of communication in nature, both between and within species. It has evolved so that one can have an advantage over others. From alarm calls to mimicry, animals use deception to further their survival. Those who are better able to perceive deception are more likely to survive. As a result, self-deceptive behaviour evolved to better mask deception from those who perceive it well or, as Trivers puts it “*hiding the truth from yourself to hide it more deeply from others.*”

In terms of early Buddhist psychology, self-deception—when we pretentiously conduct ourselves with qualities that we do not have, especially those rooted in greed, hate or delusion—we have “devolved” ourselves to a subhuman level, that is, of the asura (exploitative), the animal (the domesticated), the preta (*addictive*), or the hell-being (violent).

Trump, for example, exhibits asura instincts in the way he commands and holds others in his power; his followers have been domesticated herd-like, insect-like, flowing with his command; both Trump and his followers are addicted preta-like to hearing only “great” rhetoric; and they resorted to hell-like violence in attacking the US Capitol on 6 January 2021, including killing and hurting the innocent.⁸¹¹

7.3.2.3 In humans, awareness of the fact that one is acting deceptively often leads to tell-tale signs of deception, such as flaring nostrils, clammy skin, voice quality and tone, eye movement, or excessive blinking. Therefore, if self-deception enables an individual to believe its own distortions, it will not present such signs of deception, and will therefore appear to be telling the truth.

Self-deception can make us act either greater or lesser than we actually are. For example, we may act overconfident to attract a mate or act unconfident to avoid a threat from a predator. If we are capable of concealing our true feelings and intentions well, then we are more likely to successfully deceive others. It may also be argued that the ability to deceive or self-deceive is not a selected trait but rather a by-product of a more primary trait called **abstract thinking**. Abstract thinking allows many evolutionary advantages such as having more flexible, adaptive behaviours, leading to innovations. Since a lie is an abstraction, the mental process of creating it can only occur in animals with enough brain complexity to permit abstract thinking.

Moreover, self-deception lowers cognitive cost; that is to say, if we have convinced ourselves that something is indeed true (for us), it is less difficult for us to think or behave so, unlike when it was

⁸⁰⁸ R Trivers, *Natural Selection and Social Theory: Selected papers of Robert Trivers*. Oxford, 2002, esp “The elements of a scientific theory of self-deception (271-293).”

⁸⁰⁹ R Trivers, “Foreword,” in Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford, 1976:
<https://books.google.com/books?id=WZ9HDAAQBAJ&pg=PR26>.

⁸¹⁰ D Kriegman, R Trivers & M Slavin, “Leading psychologists explain how Trump’s self-delusions make him stunningly effective at predatory deception,” *The Raw Story*, 6 Apr 2020.

⁸¹¹ <https://www.britannica.com/event/United-States-Capitol-attack-of-2021>.

seen to be untrue. We need not wonder or worry back and forth about the true thing and then the false thing, including when we have convinced ourselves that the false thing is true!⁸¹²

7.3.3 Evolutionary aspect of self-deception

7.3.3.1 According to evolutionary scientists, on account of our desire or habit to deceive, we are compelled—there exists a strong selection—to recognize self-deception when it occurs. As a result, self-deception behaviour evolves so as to better hide the signs of deception from others. The presence of deception explains the existence of an “innate” ability to commit self-deception to hide the indications of deceptions. We deceive ourselves *in order to better deceive others* and thus have an advantage over them: this is the essence of self-deception.⁸¹³

After 3 decades since Trivers introduced his adaptive theory of self-deception, there has been an ongoing debate over the genetic basis of such a behaviour. The explanation of deception and self-deception as innate characteristics may be correct, but there are many other explanations for this pattern of behavior. It is possible, for example, that our ability to self-deceive is not innate, but a learned trait, acquired through experience. More likely, the two ideas work together: we have that “innate” tendency (past karma) to deceive, and we do deceive when the situation is right (present conditions).

7.3.3.2 For example, a person could have been caught being deceitful by revealing their knowledge of information they were trying to hide. Their nostrils flared, indicating that they were lying and thus did not get what they wanted. Next time, to better achieve success, that person will more actively deceive himself of not having knowledge to better hide the signs of deception.

Hence, we may have the capacity to learn self-deception. However, simply because something is *learned* does not mean that it is not innate; what is learned and what is innate work together. This is often outlined in many introductory textbooks in evolutionary psychology.⁸¹⁴ Our capacity for choosing and learning explain why some of our behaviours are more easily learned than others. After all, while most species evolve by *natural selection*, humans evolve further by their capacity for learning, that is, noticing conditions and adapting to them, even using those conditions to their advantage. Evolutionary psychologists argue that these learning mechanisms are innate in us.⁸¹⁵

7.4 DECEPTION AND DELUSION

7.4.1 Delusion or self-deception?

7.4.1.1 According to the American Psychological Association’s (APA) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition (DSM-5-TR 2022), and to the dominant theory of delusion formation in cognitive psychology,⁸¹⁶

delusions are fixed beliefs that are not amenable to change in light of conflicting evidence. Their content may include a variety of themes (eg, persecutory, referential, somatic, religious, grandiose). ...

⁸¹² Abe, Nobuhito et al, “Neural correlates of true memory, false memory, and deception.” *Cerebral Cortex* 18,12 1 Dec 2008:2811-2819.

⁸¹³ Barkow, Cosmides & Tooby (edd), *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary psychology and the generation of culture*. NY & Oxford, 1992:26, 37, 43, 59, 81, 452, 472, 517, 525, 590.

⁸¹⁴ Barkow et al 1992:29-31, 36, 41, 74-76, 86 f, 90-93, 96-97, 106-118, 121-123, 142, 156, 180.

⁸¹⁵ Barkow et al 1992:26, 32, 43, 81, 452 f, 466 f, 479 f, 517 f, 522 f, 558 f.

⁸¹⁶ M Coltheart, “Delusional belief,” *Australian Journal of Psychology* 57,2 2005:72-76; L Bortolotti, “Delusion,” *Stanford Ency of Philosophy*, fall 2010 <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/delusion/>.

The distinction between a delusion and a strongly held idea is sometimes difficult to determine and depends in part on the degree of conviction with which the belief is held despite clear or reasonable contradictory evidence regarding its veracity. Assessing delusions in individuals from a variety of cultural backgrounds can be difficult.

Some religious and supernatural beliefs (eg, evil eye, causing illness through curses, influence of spirits) may be viewed as bizarre and possibly delusional in some cultural contexts but be generally accepted in others. However, elevated religiosity can be a feature of many presentations of psychosis.

Individuals who have experienced torture, political violence, or discrimination can report fears that may be misjudged as persecutory delusions; these may represent instead intense fears of recurrence or posttraumatic symptoms. A careful evaluation of whether the person's fears are justified given the nature of the trauma can help to differentiate appropriate fears from persecutory delusions. (DSM-5-TR 2022: 101 f)

As clinical delusions are symptoms of schizophrenia, dementia, and other psychiatric disorders, it is also important to add that they tend to disrupt day-to-day functioning.⁸¹⁷

The content of some delusions (such as delusions of jealousy and of persecution) can be mundane and not different from that of false beliefs that we routinely find in the non-clinical population. Other delusions have more bizarre content. The Cotard delusion, for instance, is the belief that one is dead or disembodied. A delusion of infestation is the belief that insects are crawling under one's skin.

Psychologically, all delusions are currently thought to have an organic cause and are explained in neuropsychological terms, by reference to brain damage, perception failures, reasoning biases and cognitive deficits. But the formation of some delusions is also likely to include motivational factors. In a variety of anosognosia,⁸¹⁸ people may, for example, fail to acknowledge the paralysis of a limb. This denial can be seen as a defence mechanism: one comes to believe that one's arm is not paralysed because it is too hard to acknowledge that one has permanently lost the use of one's arm.

7.4.1.2 In early Buddhism,⁸¹⁹ **delusion** (*moha*) is the most insidious of the 3 unwholesome roots, the other two being greed and hate. Delusion is an unconscious tendency (*anusaya*) where we take what we think we know or are sure that we know it, to be other than what it really is. Hence, even by itself, delusion has a detrimental effect on us by way of bringing us suffering and impeding our personal growth.

Unlike psychology (to date), Buddhism sees delusion is itself as being a root (*mūla*) motivational factor, like greed and hate. They are themselves all rooted in **ignorance** or aspects of it, not knowing the true nature of things (what really happened, or the significance of it), and of true reality as a whole (that things are impermanent, unsatisfactory and essenceless). Due to ignorance, we are conditioned and moved by memories, by the past.

As a rule, reactively, in terms of our memory of a person or someone *like* that person, we **perceive** a present event or situation—like meeting someone new—reactively. If that memory was a **pleasant** one, we would react *pleasantly* to this new person. We may not show our approval, liking, even desire, for that person at once. It simply means that we will be well-disposed to that person (or experience). We usually want more of such an experience.

On the other hand, if the memory of that person or someone like that person was an **unpleasant** one, we would react *unpleasantly* to that person (or situation). However, we may not show how we

⁸¹⁷ McKay, Langdon & Coltheart, "'Sleights of mind': Delusions, defences and self-deception," *Cognitive Neuropsychiatry* 10,4 2005:305-326.

⁸¹⁸ Anosognosia, or "lack of insight," is a symptom of severe mental illness that impairs a person's ability to understand and perceive their illness. It is the single largest reason why people with schizophrenia or bipolar disorder refuse medications or do not seek treatment.

⁸¹⁹ Or simply "Buddhism, Buddhist," etc, when the context is clear.

feel, but our feelings of or reactions to this person will be unfavourable, basically disliking and rejecting that person (or experience). We would want to avoid such future encounters.

While liking (rooted in greed, *lobha*) and disliking (rooted in hate, *dosa*) are mutually exclusive feelings, delusion (*moha*) also pervades both reactions. Deluded by a bad memory, we react in a bad way to a situation; deluded by a good memory, we react in a good way. In this sense, we do not have free will, since we have been experientially reactive.⁸²⁰

We should also note that our **memories** tend to be constructed and influenced by what we *know* (or don't know) and how we *feel* at that time. Often enough, our memories are neither clear nor accurate. In this way, delusion acts in us as **self-deception**, which is when *we delude ourself into accepting the false and unreal as true and real*. At the root of self-deception is delusion. Essentially, this is an early Buddhist theory of perception.⁸²¹

7.4.1.3 Psychologically, there are similarities in the surface features of self-deception and delusions—both phenomena typically involve beliefs that are against true reality and that conflict with our other beliefs or attitudes. Moreover, in both cases, the beliefs are stubbornly resistant to counter-evidence. Further similarities can be found in the function of the beliefs themselves: they serve to either preserve positive emotions, deny unpleasant or disturbing facts, or satisfy some other pressing psychological need.

From what we know about self-deception and delusion, then, there are at least 3 features that differentiate the two:

- (1) According to Buddhism, self-deception is always motivated, that is, by *delusion*. Psychology says that not all delusional beliefs, including self-deception, are motivated; they *may* occur just like that.
- (2) According to Buddhism, delusion is a motivator, but it may also *be* motivated. When delusion is motivated, it is, either by *greed*, by *hatred*, or by *delusion* itself—in the last case, it is a matter of delusion snowballing. Similarly, both greed and hatred can each be motivators too. In fact, greed, hatred and delusion are called **the 3 roots** (*mūla*) of karma. As karmic roots, each may work as cause or as effect, as the motivator or the motivated in our actions.⁸²²
- (3) Psychologically, while delusion, along with other symptoms, suggests a psychiatric disorder, which typically impairs normal functioning, cases of self-deception are widespread even in the non-clinical population.⁸²³

Although delusion, according to Buddhism, is not always *motivated*—as stated in (1) above—it is always itself a motivator. As we have noted in (2) above, delusion can be fed by greed or hate, or by itself: this is the uroboros—the snake devouring its own tail—known as **latent tendencies** (*anusaya*) [7.4.1.5]. When we are greedy, it means that we will be greedy *again*; when we are angry, it means we will get angry *again*; when we are deluded, we will be deluded *again*. This cyclic habit, on a cosmic scale is called samsara (*saṃsāra*)—this is life, rooted in ignorance, that is, *greed, hatred, delusion* working together, keeping us going.

7.4.1.4 Although there may be an overlap between self-deception and delusion, there is no expert consensus on how significantly they overlap.⁸²⁴ McKay and colleagues propose the following approach to this issue:

⁸²⁰ See **Free will and Buddhism**, SD 7.7.

⁸²¹ Further on the Buddhist theory of perception, see **Saññā**, SD 17.4.

⁸²² On the 3 roots (*mūla of karma*), see **(Kamma) Nidāna S** (A 3.33) @ SD 4.14 (1); SD 35.6 (5.1.1).

⁸²³ Further see L Bortolotti & M Mameli, “Self-deception, delusion and the boundaries of folk psychology,” *Humanamente* 2012:205 f.

Thus some (perhaps all?) delusional states may arise without self-deception, via processes that are not remotely motivated. ... Conversely, self-deception may occur in a benign manner such that the resulting doxastic⁸²⁵ states do not sufficiently disrupt functioning to warrant the label delusion. (McKay et al, 2005:315)

Psychologically, it is possible that self-deception may seem more “benign” than delusion in terms of **motivation** (a conscious effort in choosing or being driven to act). Some **delusions** may be described as extreme cases of self-deception. They are considered cases of self-deception because they seem to have an ego-defensive function.⁸²⁶ They are considered extreme because they tend to disrupt functioning to a greater extent than standard cases of self-deception, and to result in the enforcement of more implausible and more tenacious beliefs.⁸²⁷

Thus, the overlap between self-deception and delusion can only be a partial one.⁸²⁸ Motivational factors contribute to the formation of some but not all delusions, and only some delusions can be plausibly seen as the product of a psychological defensive mechanism. That said, there are still some interesting questions to answer [7.4.2]. Before we move on, just a note on the Buddhist view of self-deception and intention.

7.4.1.5 In early Buddhist psychology, self-deception is rooted in (motivated by) greed or hate, often with delusion present too: it is then said to be “double-rooted.” Whenever there is a presence of any of the 3 roots (*greed, hate or delusion*), that action or state is said to be **intentional**: it is karmically potent. An important sense of intention (*cetanā*) is that it is *habit-forming*: when we are greedy after something, we feed the latent tendency of lust (*rāgānusaya*); when we hate, we feed the latent tendency of ill will (*paṭighānusaya*); when we are deluded (note the passiveness), we feed the latent tendency of ignorance (*avijjā’nusaya*).⁸²⁹

Karma is intention, says the Buddha.⁸³⁰ An intentional act may be conscious or unconscious, and may be mindful or unmindful. We may thus act consciously (*sampajāna*), unconsciously (*acittaka*), mindfully (*sampajāna*) or unmindfully (*asampajāna*). However, in these contexts, our action is still karmically potent: when greed, hate or delusion is present, it is an unwholesome karmic act.⁸³¹

⁸²⁴ See A **Mele**, “Self-deception and delusion,” in (edd) Bayne & Fernandez, *Delusions and Self-deception*, Hove, 2009: 55-70; N **Levy**, “Self-deception without thought-experiments,” in Bayne & Fernandez, 2009:227-242; M **Davies**, “Delusion and motivationally biased belief,” in Bayne & Fernandez, 2009:71-86.

⁸²⁵ “Doxastic,” relating to an individual’s beliefs.

⁸²⁶ See V S Ramachandran & S Blakeslee, *Phantoms in the Brain*, London: Fourth Estate, 1998; W Hirstein, *Brain Fiction*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005.

⁸²⁷ One such delusion is the “reverse Othello syndrome,” ie, the opposite of a delusion of jealousy, esp as a defence mechanism of a husband refusing to acknowledge his wife’s infidelity: see P V **Butler**, “Reverse Othello syndrome subsequent to traumatic brain injury,” *Psychiatry: Interpersonal And Biological Processes* 63,1 2000:85-92; and discussion in R McKay et al, *Perspectives on Self-deception*, Berkeley, 2005:313. Another case of delusion is that of anosognosia (the denial of real illness) [7.4.1.1 n]: V S **Ramachandran**, “The evolutionary biology of self-deception, laughter, dreaming and depression: Some clues from anosognosia,” *Medical Hypotheses* 47,5 1996:347-362.

⁸²⁸ See R McKay et al, “‘Sleights of mind’: Delusions, defences and self-deception,” *Cognitive Neuropsychiatry* 10,4 2005: 305-326; M Davies, “Delusion and motivationally biased belief: Self-deception in the two-factor framework,” in (edd) T Bayne & J Fernandez, *Delusions and Self-deception: Affective and Motivational Influences on Belief Formation*, NY & Hove: Psychology Press, 2009:71-86.

⁸²⁹ On the latent tendencies, see **Anusaya**, SD 31.3.

⁸³⁰ **Nibbedhika (Pariyāya) S** (A 6.63/3:415), SD 6.11; SD 48.1 (9.1.3).

⁸³¹ See SD 17.8b (1.2); SD 51.20 (2.2.2); SD 57.10 (1.3.2.1).

7.4.2 Belief, delusion and beyond

7.4.2.1 When delusions are motivated, are they extreme cases of self-deception? Are delusions in general more puzzling, less fathomable, than standard cases of self-deception? In the early 21st century, a different psychological understanding of the relationship between delusion and self-deception emerged.

According to **Keith Frankish** (2011), both delusion and self-deception can be described by using the folk-psychological⁸³² notion of **belief** (roughly, mental dispositions and social attitudes), as long as the existence of different types of beliefs is acknowledged⁸³³ [7.4.1.3 (3) n]. Delusions and self-deception are habitual (persistent) motivational factors that contribute significantly to the formation of more, even bigger, delusions. “Perhaps,” Frankish concludes, “patients adopt delusions because they answer some emotional or other psychological need, rather than because they are probable.” (2011: 27)

7.4.2.2 Andy Egan (2009) also maintains that delusion and self-deception are alike, but holds a contrary view: neither can be accounted for satisfactorily by using the folk-psychological notion of belief. He argues that both delusion and self-deception should be regarded as in-between states. They represent how the agent sees things, and in this respect, they are similar to beliefs. But they also convey how the agent wants things to be, and, in this respect, they are similar to desires. Egan suggests that they may be “**besires**,” mental states that display together at once features typical of *beliefs* and features typical of *desires*.⁸³⁴

In interesting ways, Egan’s description of besire comes close to the early Buddhist idea of **craving** (*taṇhā*). The early Buddhist texts speak of 3 kinds of craving, that is:⁸³⁵

- (1) **Sensual craving** (*kāma, taṇhā*), the craving for sensual pleasures; basically, this is the lust (*rāga*) for sensual pleasure, attachment to physical existence that binds us to the sense-world. On a simple daily level, this is the craving to have, a material wanting; technically, this is the lust for the 5 cords of sense-pleasures (the desire of the 5 senses);⁸³⁶ psychologically, it is the craving for sensual pleasures (*kāma-c, chanda*),⁸³⁷ the 1st of the 5 hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*),⁸³⁸ that prevents the attainment of dhyana.⁸³⁹
- (2) **Craving for existence** (*bhava, taṇhā*), the craving to be, ranging from seeking praise and approval to the drive for titles, status, power. In religious terms, it is the desire for heavenly rebirth, or rebirth in the higher worlds: the form world and the formless world. As an extreme, it is the desire for eternal life, which is at best empty religious chatter and casuistry. This is connected with the eternalist view (*sassata, diṭṭhi*).⁸⁴⁰

⁸³² In philosophy of mind and cognitive science, **folk psychology** or common sense psychology, is a human capacity to explain and predict the behaviour and mental state of other people: D Hutto & I Ravenscroft, “Folk psychology as a theory,” SEP fall 2021 <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/folkpsych-theory/>. Processes and states in daily life such as pain, pleasure, and anxiety are stated in common language as opposed to technical or scientific jargon: H M Wellman, *The Child's Theory of Mind*. MIT Press, 1990.

⁸³³ K Frankish, “Delusions, levels of belief, and non-doxastic acceptances,” *Neuroethics* 5 2012:23-27.

⁸³⁴ Maura Tumulty, “Delusions and not-quite beliefs,” *Neuroethics* 5 2011:29-37, and Eric Schwitzgebel, “Mad belief?” *Neuroethics* 5 2011:13-17, also developed an account of delusions as in-between states.

⁸³⁵ See **Dhamma.cakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11,6), SD 1.1; SD 53.38 (1.2.3); A 3:445; Vbh 365

⁸³⁶ The 5 cords of sensual pleasures (*pañca kāma, guṇa*) are those based on sight, sound, smell, taste and touch: M 13,7(1) n (SD 6.9); A 6.63,3.2 + SD 6.11 (2.2.2.6).

⁸³⁷ See *Kāma-c, chanda*, SD 32.2.

⁸³⁸ On the 5 hindrances, see *Nīvaraṇa*, SD 32.1.

⁸³⁹ On dhyana (*jhāna*), see *Dhyana* (SD 8.4).

⁸⁴⁰ On the eternalist view, see **Dhamma,cakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11,9.12), SD 1.1; SD 19.3 (2.2).

- (3) **Craving for non-existence** (*vibhava, tanhā*), the craving not to be, for self-annihilation, a death-wish, related to the annihilationist view (*uccheda, diṭṭhi*).⁸⁴¹ Psychologically, this is the attitude of a materialist whose view is that the self or soul is this very body; when the body dies, life totally ends. Early Buddhism however teaches rebirth; the cycle of life and death, of rebirth and redeath only ends with nirvana.

7.4.2.3 According to psychology, most people would see **delusions** as beliefs: this is the *doxastic conception*. Technically, a delusion is a belief that is held despite obvious contradictory evidence and that is not explained or accepted by the person's social, cultural, or religious background. Beyond that, it is difficult to define delusion. Experts and scholars have, of course, proposed some definitions, but none of them is free from problems.

Delusions are typically seen in people with schizophrenia, but they can also be seen in association with a variety of conditions, including dementia, brain injury, drug abuse, religious experience (including meditation), and so on. Hence, the clinical sense of "delusion" significantly differs from the early Buddhist definition.⁸⁴² [7.4.1.2]

The term "delusion" is also used in a non-clinical sense, typically referring to false or unfounded ideas, including self-deceptions, daydreams, religious beliefs,⁸⁴³ superstitions, and outdated scientific theories (such as in Aristotelian physics). The non-clinical sense and Buddhist usage of "delusion" do, however, sometimes overlap with the psychological view of delusion.

According to *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition* (DSM-5), for example, a **delusion** is a "false belief based on incorrect inference about external reality that is firmly held despite what almost everyone else believes and despite what constitutes incontrovertible and obvious proof or evidence to the contrary. The belief is not ordinarily accepted by other members of the person's culture or subculture (ie, it is not an article of religious faith). When a false belief involves a value judgment, it is regarded as a delusion only when the judgment is so extreme as to defy credibility." (American Psychiatric Association, 2013:819). However, this definition (or, more precisely, the definition in DSM-IV, which is not very different from this definition) is highly controversial.⁸⁴⁴

7.4.2.4 In significant ways, this **SD 60** series is a study on the nature of delusion, its aetiology, its solution, and the method(s) for its solution—this is, of course, based on the problem-solving format of **the 4 noble truths**.⁸⁴⁵ We have above briefly discussed definitions of delusion, noting the difficulties that they entail. We will not go into the academic controversies and debates on delusion, interesting as they may be, but we should have some working understanding of their key issues so that we can present a helpful analysis of the early Buddhist teaching on delusion in terms of the 4 noble truths.

The early Buddhist **aetiology** of delusion—the cause of delusion—briefly stated, lies in craving (*tanhā*), a broad term for what drives us in life, and the root of our evolutionary development as humans. It is basically, in the early Buddhist view, the driving force in the evolution of species:

- (1) the gratifying of the physical senses (*kāma*);
- (2) the drive to procreate and survive (*bhava*);

⁸⁴¹ On the annihilationist view, see (**Vaccha,gotta**) **Ānanda S** (S 44.10,6), SD 2.16(5); SD 40a.1 (7.2.2.2).

⁸⁴² On the Buddhist definition and explanation of delusion, see SD 60.1e (2).

⁸⁴³ See eg Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 2006.

⁸⁴⁴ See, eg, M Davies, M Coltheart, R Langdon & N Breen, "Monothematic delusions: Towards a two-factor account," *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology* 8,2 2001:133-158; K Frankish, and M Coltheart, R Langdon & R McKay, "Delusional belief," *Annual Review of Psychology* 62 2011:271-298.

⁸⁴⁵ K Miyazono, *Delusions and Beliefs* (London & NY: Routledge, 2018:3 f) structures his book as answering these 3 questions about delusions: the nature question (what is delusion?), the pathology question, and the aetiology question.

- (3) the propensity for ideas and views, that is, the desire to know, and use or control what we know (*diṭṭhi*); and
- (4) our self-awareness that only affirms our being but seems to limit our vision beyond that (*avijjā*).

These, according to the Buddha, are **the 4 “inflows”** (*āsava*) of affective, conative, cognitive and epistemic data through our senses and mind that basically *delude* us to create our own virtual world and inhabit it.⁸⁴⁶

7.4.2.5 The solution to our human predicament is to understand delusion: what it really is and how it arises. These (understanding delusion and how it arises) constitute the meaning of our life. When we understand how delusion arises, we will also be able to understand how it can end. We then work for the ending of delusion. These (the ending and the way to ending delusion) constitute the purpose of life.

The way to correct our delusions comprises various methods, essentially those of mindfulness and of meditation. Mindfulness (*satī*) is basically the careful and focused learning of what *our body* really is, how it generates *feelings*, how *thoughts* feed or free these feelings so that we are able to see and grow beyond the limits of our frail body by understanding and mastering *our mind*: these are, respectively, the contemplation of the body (*kāyānupassanā*), of feelings (*vedanā’nupassanā*), of the mind (*cittānupassanā*), and of mental states (*dhammānupassanā*). All this constitutes the famous “setting up of mindfulness” (*satipaṭṭhāna*).⁸⁴⁷

Just as our bodies are collectively, as a herd, the vehicle for biological evolution, our individual body is the basis for refining our action and speech to become moral beings, not merely *humans* but truly *human*, so that our body serves the greater good of the community of bodies. More importantly, our *body* is the base for our mental development, especially through meditation, that is, the calming and clearing up of the mind, freeing it from the body to envision, even attain, states of bliss and freedom beyond our bodily limits, to attain divine states and beyond, to nirvana.

7.4.2.6 From what we have just mentioned [7.4.2.4], delusion is our natural reaction to our own being. Our **senses** have evolved through our drive to interact with the physical world, a world of sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches, that we have learned the science of measuring them, thus deluding ourselves that we have known the world, that we can tame it, use it, control it.

This same **drive** that keeps us in constant intercourse with the world works on the drives of pleasure and pain. Our human evolution is basically that of avoiding, or at least minimizing, pain, and of maximizing pleasure. As we notice this pleasure enhancing our physical being, we learn to reproduce it, and to create and recreate ourselves; we learn to procreate ourselves.⁸⁴⁸

Our philosophies, sciences and arts conjure up theories and **views** on the nature of these worldly knowledge and experiences. Our education system started growing when we freed ourselves from the religious production and control of such worldly knowledge and experiences. We are now at the threshold of understanding that these knowledge and experiences of the world *out there* reflects a deeper and broader reality of our own *inner world*, that of the mind.

We are now better prepared to understand what we do not know, our **ignorance**. We are beginning to notice—especially with the help of early Buddhist teachings—to see delusion for what it really is. We are learning to see beyond the delusion of what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch and think. But this is only the beginning of a great inward journey of self-discovery: We have yet to understand that there is only the journey but no self. In this sense, it is a journey of deconstructing the perceived self ending in self-liberation.

⁸⁴⁶ For further discussion on the 4 influxes, see SD 60.1e (2.2).

⁸⁴⁷ For details, see **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10), SD 13.3.

⁸⁴⁸ For a mythical and humorous depiction of this evolutionary process, see **Aggañña S** (D 27,10-16), SD 2.19.

7.5 SELF-DECEPTION IN MODERN BUDDHISM

7.5.1 Notions of Self and Soul

7.5.1.1 In terms of early Buddhist teaching, the key view at the root of the self-deception is **the self-identity view** (*sakkāya, diṭṭhi*), that is, the view that “we” (the body as a whole or in part) *is* the self; hence, some kind of abiding entity, that is, the psycho-religious “soul.”⁸⁴⁹ The Brahmanical religion of the Buddha’s day, in fact, identify this as the *Ātman*, the Soul or universal essence that is the self-existence essence of individuals as distinct from the ego (*ahamkāra*), the mind (*citta*), the empirical self (*jīva*), and embodied existence (*prakṛti*). *Ātman*, however, also refers to the breath, which, after all, gives us life.⁸⁵⁰

The Buddha unequivocally rejected all these Vedic (and later) notions of the soul or self, but used these terms (recorded in their Pali forms). Thus, *ahaṇ, kāra* (“I making”) is adapted as part of the compound, *ahaṇ. kāra, mamaṇ. kāra, mānānusaya* (the latent tendencies of “I-making,” “mine-making” and conceit [7.5.2.1]. *Jīva*⁸⁵¹ is simply another Pali word for *attā* (Skt *ātman*), which is rejected, and affirmed by the Pali term, *anatta*, “nonself”⁸⁵² [7.7.2]. *Prakṛti* is used in the early texts in its normal abstract sense of “nature,” especially in the adverb, “by nature.”⁸⁵³

Only *citta* (ts) is used by the Buddha in the same sense of “mind,” but again in the context of the 5 aggregates (in a mind-body module of the conscious body, *sa, viññāṇaka, kāya*),⁸⁵⁴ and dependent arising (*paṭicca, samuppāda*),⁸⁵⁵ the cycle of conditionality governing our life and sentient process. Hence, the early Buddhist view of the self, as we shall see, is a modular one [7.5.1.2].

7.5.1.2 In this connection, **Richard Hayes** (1945–)⁸⁵⁶ has written a very insightful and instructive paper—offering, with typical Quaker humility, “some speculations”—on “Ritual, self-deception and make-believe: A classical Buddhist perspective” (1992), on which this section is based. He writes: “[N]o Buddhist philosopher that I am aware of made any explicit comment about self-deception” (1992:352).⁸⁵⁷ What’s especially interesting is that Hayes frames his paper around the 3 fetters (*saṃ-yojana*)—self-identity view, doubts and attachment to rituals and vows⁸⁵⁸—the first 3 of the 10 fetters [3.3.4.1], that hinder the attaining of streamwinning, the very first step on the path of awakening.

Hayes first examines how the Buddhist teaching of personal identity can account for the arising of self-deception. Then, he examines how ritual acts as a mechanism of self-deception. Finally, he discusses when and how rituals may serve as wholesome habits. You are encouraged to read the whole paper yourself. We will discuss his ideas related to the nature of self-deception, and how we

⁸⁴⁹ Many Western Buddhists find it difficult to totally give up the word “soul,” esp in the artistic or aesthetic sense. I have no problem with this usage, since it is about beauty and truth. Hence, when we do use “soul” in this way, we should be clear about its context and usage. Words are how we use them, with expedience and wisdom.

⁸⁵⁰ On *ātman*, see: M & J Stutley, *A Dictionary of Hinduism*, Routledge, 1977; J Grimes, *A Concise Dictionary of Indian Philosophy*, SUNY Press, 1996; J Bowker, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, 2000; W J Johnson, *A Dictionary of Hinduism*, Oxford, 2009.

⁸⁵¹ On *jīva*, see SD 40a.7 (2.1.2).

⁸⁵² See **Is there a soul?** SD 2.16; **Self and selves** SD 26.9.

⁸⁵³ On *pakati* (Skt *prakṛti*), see SD 17.8b (4.3.4).

⁸⁵⁴ On *sa, viññāṇaka, kāya*: SD 17.8a (12.3); SD 56.1 (4.3.2.2) n.

⁸⁵⁵ On dependent arising (and ending), see **Dependent arising**, SD 5.16.

⁸⁵⁶ Aka Dharmachari Dayāmati (of the Triratna Buddhist Community, but no fan of its founder, Sangharakshita) is an Emeritus Professor of Buddhist philosophy at the University of New Mexico, US, and one of the most witty living intellectuals I know.

⁸⁵⁷ R Hayes, “Ritual, self-deception and make-believe: A classical Buddhist perspective,” in (edd) R T Ames & V Dissanayake, *Self and Deception: A cross-cultural philosophical enquiry*, NY: SUNY Press, 1992:349-363. <https://www.unm.edu/~rhayes/ritual.pdf>.

⁸⁵⁸ Respectively, *sakkāya, diṭṭhi*, *vicikicchā* and *sīla-b, bata, parāmāsa*: **Emotional independence**, SD 40a.8.

may be able to resolve it. Since Hayes quotes only Sanskrit sources, we will complement our discussion with references to the early Buddhist texts and teachings. After all, our purpose is that of the study and practice of early Buddhism.

7.5.1.3 As a scholar of classical Buddhist philosophy,⁸⁵⁹ Hayes begins by explaining that, in contrast to most other philosophical systems in classical India, the Buddhists held **a modular view of personal identity**. According to this view, there is no characteristic or set of characteristics that remains constant throughout the life of a sentient being. This being the case, such a being does not really have an identity, at least in the sense of the word *identitas*, literally meaning “sameness”; a sentient being, at the end of its existence, does not need to have any parts that were present at the beginning of its existence, or, for that matter, any in between.

Buddhist theory also does not regard a sentient being as an individual, one that is indivisible in a psychological or existential sense. Rather, a being is an aggregation of distinct parts and processes that exists, mutually cooperating with and conditioning one another, but which are, nevertheless, in principle at least, quite separable from one another, that is, as body (form), feelings, perception, formations and consciousness. The body itself comprises the 5 physical senses [1.1.1.2] or the 4 elements [1.1.2.5 (1)].

It may be more helpful, suggests Hayes, to call a person “**a party**,” a legal term for “a group of individuals” —in this case, individual basic properties—assembled with a particular purpose. The term “party” refers to what we intuitively take to be “a single person.” Using this temporary convention will help remind us that, according to Buddhist teaching, no person is really an individual (in the existential sense).

According to Buddhism, not only is the physical body modular but so is **the mind**. Rather than speaking of a single principle of integrated awareness, Buddhism describes separate streams of awareness, a series of acts, such as being aware of the colour blue or yellow or red, or of differences in shade and shape of visible objects. [1.2.8.5]

Each of the 5 physical senses provides an entirely discrete channel of sense-data, such that no two sense-faculties are capable of experiencing the same type of sense-experience: the eye senses only colours and shapes, the ear only sounds, the nose only smells, the tongue tastes and the body touches. Not only is all consciousness modular, according to Buddhism, but so is a party’s character or personality. A party’s character is the product of a great diversity of types of learning and coaching, all of which leave at least some impression on us.

7.5.1.4 Since these external influences come from a number of sources, it is to be expected that they should often be incompatible with one another. As a result, the character or personality of a being, such as **a human**, is naturally full of contradictory views, incongruous desires and incompatible aspirations. Even the human **memory** is constructed and fragmented, for memories are usually triggered and influenced by sensations (the results of sense-experience), so that our sense of the past is constantly shifting. Not only do we have varying perceptions of who or what we are, but we also have continually changing perceptions of what we have been and shifting conceptions of what we hope to become. [1.1.1]

In all this external instability and internal inconsistency,⁸⁶⁰ the human being mirrors the world as a whole. The totality of events is not, in Buddhism, a cosmos; for κόσμος (Gk “cosmos”) means “order.” Nor is it a universe; for it does not move as a “single” whole. Rather, the totality of events is an unsupervised chaos and endless flow that has neither beginning nor single purpose. It is a noisy and

⁸⁵⁹ By “classical Indian Buddhism,” Hayes means the period of about a millennium, roughly 100 BCE until around 1000 CE, during which time Buddhist thought became increasingly systematized in India. Suggested reading is (ed) W Edelglass & J L Garfield, *Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings*, Oxford, 2009 [chapters]: early Buddhism [1, 15, 23], Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośa* [25, 26], Dharmakīrti’s *Pramāṇa, vārttika* [17], and Śāntarakṣita’s *Tattvasaṅgraha* [28].

⁸⁶⁰ “External” refers to the physical sense-experiences; “internal” to the mental states.

random jumble of events arising from countless different, often irreconcilable, volitions, over which there never has been and never could be a single-minded, intelligent superintendent.⁸⁶¹

This being the nature of the world (physical and mental) as a whole, the only workable strategy for attaining contentment and happiness, according to Buddhism, is to relinquish all hope for the impossible and to learn to accept true reality as it is and as it always must be. Among the impossible dreams to be abandoned by the wise are those for such things as personal and collective security, predictability, uniformity and harmony; for reality is characterized by internal inconstancy and external chaotic change.

7.5.2 Self-view: The root of self-deception

7.5.2.1 Although the classical Buddhist philosophers did not seem to use the modern term “self-deception” [7.5.1.2], a key early Buddhist explanation of suffering’s root is that of **our constructing the self-view**. It’s important to understand what this means. To begin with, there is neither self nor no-self:

- (1) the abiding self does not exist (there is no problem here, except our understanding and accepting of this truth);
- (2) there is the **conventional idea**, that is, a “grammatical self” (I, me, mine, myself) which we use to expedite our daily communication.

This idea of the 2 kinds of selves is based on the Buddha’s reminder that when reading the suttas, or when communicating with others, we should properly understand that we often use language **implicitly**—by way words, metaphors, stories, and “intentional language”⁸⁶² (eg, to kill anger)—to explain or simplify what is sometimes taught **explicitly** (often apply Dharma or technical terms, such as impermanence, mindfulness, nirvana) especially for those who are quick learners.⁸⁶³

7.5.2.2 Even right now, our character, *whether human or subhuman* (fluctuating and oscillating between the human, the violent hell-being, the addictive preta, the mundane animal, and the joyful gods), is understood in Buddhist psychology as the product of innumerable impressions that have been experienced and habituated virtually at random. A number of attitudes and habits that we form early in life are the result of the conditioning that we receive as a child from parents, carers and others. As we grow older, we interact with a growing and greater circle of influential friends and mentors—we are even more likely to acquire conflicting patterns of thinking and behaviour.

By the time we are young adults, we would probably have cultivated some at least mildly conflicting sets of desires, attitudes, beliefs and aspirations. At this stage, two further suppositions of Buddhist psychology come into play. The first is that basic attitudes can be classified into 2 categories: those that are wholesome (*kusala*, also “skillful, competent”) and those that are unwholesome (*akusala*): the former producing a feeling of wellbeing, the latter the basis for suffering and unhappiness.

In our daily lives, for example, hostility and mental rigidity are among the basic emotional and mental traits that impede happiness in the world, whereas **kindness and mental openness** are among the traits that generate feelings of happiness or enhance joy. The second point we should know is that at any given moment (even right now), our basic attitudes are either wholesome or unwholesome; hostility and mental openness cannot occur in the same thought at the same time.

⁸⁶¹ An account of the arguments that Indian Buddhist adduced in favour of atheism appears in Hayes, “Principled atheism in the Buddhist scholastic tradition,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 16 1988:5-28.

⁸⁶² “Intentional language” refers to wordplay, incl irony and humour, to stress important teachings, such as in **Dh 97**, SD 10.6 esp (5); also SD 26.11 (6.5).

⁸⁶³ On the 4 kinds of learners (in terms of spiritual training)—the quick, the diffuse, the tractable and the word learners —see **Ugghaṭṭitaññū S** (A 4.143), SD 3.13(3.3). While the first is the quickest learner, the last is the slowest.

Even now, our “party” mind [7.5.1.3] is supposed to be driven by attitudes that are propelling it either towards or away from satisfaction, but never towards both at the same time. More likely, however, we will swing between these two polarities, and the mental continuum in which this swing occurs normally regards itself, and is regarded by society at large, as *a single being*, even though it is, in fact, not.

7.5.2.3 Even as we act in our waking moments, sometimes wholesomely, sometimes unwholesomely, we do so with various kinds of beliefs and views. While it is true that we are accountable for our own deeds, that “no one may purify another” (Dh 165), that we must ourselves make the effort for our growth and freedom [2.1.2.4], this is speaking in terms of mental training: we are our mind, so to speak. For a fuller and healthy mental development, we need to a stable and equitable reciprocal relationship with others, and vice versa. This is **the golden rule** [4.2.3.2].

Hence, believing that only in our “self” and in our needs and desires, that they are more vital or urgent than those of other sentient beings, are two clear examples of unwholesome mental states. Given the modular nature of our character, and that our beliefs are acquired from a variety of sources, it is possible for us to hold different beliefs, even contradicting ones, at different times.

It is possible, for example, to believe in some situations when our wishes or desires conflict with those of others, that it is preferable to satisfy others even though this may entail making ourselves unhappy. In some other special situations, we may believe just the opposite, namely, that satisfying our own needs and wants at the expense of causing unhappiness or suffering in others is less likely to make us truly happy than it is to modify, even forego, our desires. For example, when a group of our college friends who were Christians encouraged us to convert to their faith, but we simply refused.

7.5.2.4 More often, our “party” mind oscillates quickly between these two beliefs or desires, until one of them finally becomes strong enough to overpower the other. If it should turn out that the unwholesome set of beliefs had overpowered the wholesome one; then, we would say that the party had become a victim of **self-deception**. It would be a deception in the sense that the party had become convinced to act in a way that did not conduce to its optimum well-being, and it would be *self-deception* in the sense that the dominant set of false beliefs and the defeated set of true beliefs both belonged to the same party, that is, to what is *conventionally* considered to be the same person.

From our discussion thus far, it should be clear enough to see a Buddhist account of self-deception, put philosophically by Hayes, is “a species of a genus of accounts in which the principal strategy is to see the deceiving agent and the deceived patient as two different and relatively independent subsystems of a single system. Presumably, the Buddhist account is liable to all the criticisms of the whole genus.”⁸⁶⁴ Let the philosophers debate on this while we will now move on to a study of the mechanisms for self-deception from what has been taught by the Buddha.

7.6 THE 3 FETTERS OF SELF-DECEPTION

7.6.1 Why 3 fetters?

7.6.1.1 Why are **the 3 fetters** (*saṃyojana*)—self-identity view (*sakkāya, diṭṭhi*), rituals and vows (*sīla-b, bata*), and doubts (*vicikicchā*)—always presented together as a triad?⁸⁶⁵ In simple terms, we may posit that our self-identity view is reinforced by our ritual behaviour; however, since both these unwholesome qualities only fetter closer to discontent and suffering, we constantly have doubts,

⁸⁶⁴ R Hayes, “Ritual, self-deception and make-believe,” 1992:353. A Oksenberg-Rorty, “The deceptive self: Liars, layers, and lairs” (1988), presents a well-argued defence of another species of this genus of account of self-deception.

⁸⁶⁵ I depart from Hayes’ approach in his essay, where he only discusses 2 of the 3 fetters: self-identity view and rituals (1996:355).

which we are unable to resolve. In the end, we accept them by identifying with them by way of the defence mechanism of **identification**, also known as the “Stockholm syndrome.”⁸⁶⁶

First, it has already been established that the Buddhist tradition regards as an error the belief in individuality. A party cannot be an “individual” in the sense of being an undivided whole, since such an entity would be incapable of action or change. However, since a party does act and change, it cannot be an undivided whole. Yet, a party is not an individual in the sense of having an identity that makes it distinct from other beings in the way that would warrant a preferential treatment of itself over others. Hence, this notion of “party” is merely a conventional one, for purposes of convenient communication and execution of social action.

When an individualist or narcissist identifies with himself (that is, with a part or the whole of his body-mind continuum), he views this self-constructed, self-centred virtual reality of himself actually in terms of “I, me, mine” [7.6.1.2]. When this is taken to be more than mere convention—that is, as truly real (which it is not)—believing oneself as the object of special treatment, then, this is self-identity view, that fetters the mind to the world, preventing it from ever reaching the path of awakening.

7.6.1.2 A key Buddhist psychological term is *ahaṇ,kāra*, “I-making,”⁸⁶⁷ that is, our futile attempts at imagining some kind of unchanging, desirable “self” or entity out there (“I”) that we identify with and must have (“me”), or that we have caught a glimpse of and want to cling on to it (“mine”). So, the hand takes the shape of what it grasps: we end up seeing only in terms of “I, me, mine.” In fact, *ahaṇ,kāra* (“I making”) is part of our latent tendencies, *ahaṇ.kāra,mamaṇ.kāra,mānānusaya* (the latent tendencies of “I-making,” “mine-making” and conceit).

These are **the 3 graspings** (*gaha*), that is, respectively those of craving, views and conceit.⁸⁶⁸ Self-deception consists of craving for what is unreal and impossible, nose-led by our views of “this is mine, this is the way I want it,” based on the false view of some abiding self with which we measure our self against others. **Conceit** leads to the self-identity view [7.6.2]; **views** lead to doubts [7.6.7]; and **craving** leads to ritualism or superstition [7.6.4]. These are the 3 toxic roots of self-deception.

7.6.1.3 How do the 3 toxic roots of self-deception work? How do the 3 fetters and the 3 graspings work to fetter us to self-identity view, rituals and vows, and doubts?

Hayes quotes the obvious example of **theft** (1992:355 f), which I will develop and relate to those teachings. Theft is a conduct that is warranted only by **identifying with “our” self**, the assumption that our own want or need for a piece of property is more important than the want or need of the being who is currently its rightful owner. We keep thinking about this, and when we see something desirable we seem to see or think about that desired object (**a ritual behaviour**); we can hear ourself saying, “By God, I must have that! I want that!” and so on. Then, we wonder if this were right: we have **doubts**. We swing back and forth between wanting and not sure of it. This too, becomes ritualistic behaviour which only reminds us of what we desire. Fettered to this cyclic habit and constant reinforcement, we steal it in the end. [7.6.7.1]

By committing the theft, we alienate the owner from his property, or deprive those whose life depends on it of what they rightfully deserve. Moreover, taking what is not rightfully ours, without the free consent of the rightful owner, we would, at best, lose their cooperation; at worst, we would provoke them into some form of unpleasant retaliation. Hence, *abuse always has two victims: the abusive party and the party abused*. Therefore, theft is an unwholesome method of taking care of our

⁸⁶⁶ SD 24.10b (2.3.3).

⁸⁶⁷ **M 112**/3:32,34, 36,30 (SD 59.7); **S 18.21**/2:252,16+30 (SD 19.2a), **18.22**/253,9+29, **22.71**/3:80,6 (SD 80.11), **22.82**/3:103,11, **22.91**/3:136,3 (SD 19.2a), **22.124**/3:169,13+17+27; **A 3.32**/1:132,25 (SD 31.8a), **3.33**/133,25 (SD 31.8b), **6.106**/3:444,8 (SD 19.13), **7.49**/4:53,9+13 (SD 2.3).

⁸⁶⁸ The 3 graspings are those of craving (*taṇhā,gaha*), of views (*diṭṭhi,gaha*), and of conceit (*māna,gaha*), SD 6.1 (5); see **Anatta Lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59,17+12 nn), SD 1.2, applied to the 5 aggregates (§17-21). These are at the very root of suffering.

own interests. And since theft is motivated by a wrong belief in an individual identity, it is also an unwholesome act with bad karma.⁸⁶⁹

Now as we also saw earlier, in a Buddhist context, when an unwholesome set of beliefs and attitudes prevails over a wholesome set within the same party, that party can be said to be a victim of self-deception. Therefore, the attachment to personal identity is the key factor underlying self-deception.

7.6.2 Self-identity view: The status is not the state

7.6.2.1 Let us recap on the 3 fetters, beginning with the 1st fetter:

Self-identity view refers to the wrong belief that our body, mind, a part thereof, or both of them together, or something outside of them—*form* (the body), *feeling*, *perception*, *formations*, *consciousness*—is real and permanent, that it is the Self or Soul, that “I am, that’s me, that’s mine” [7.5.2.1]. Generally speaking, this is the belief that there is any such reality in any or all **the 5 aggregates** (*pañca-khandha*), or beyond them.

More particularly, the term refers to the belief that a “party” [7.5.1.3], that is really a complex of dissociable physical and psychological characteristics, in part or as a whole (holistic), has an existence of its own. The notion of “a self” (abiding entity) in the separate existence of the components of the complex whole should thus be discarded; so too, we should discard that the parts as a whole, or anything else, constitute our “self.” In this sense, early Buddhism is anti-individualistic as well as anti-holistic.

Those who believe in some kind of abiding Soul depend on a **Creator-God belief** for its existence. Since Buddhism rejects the abiding Soul idea, there is no need of a God-idea too: it is thus atheistic. Since Buddhism rejects the idea that the 5 aggregates form a unity, singularity or universe, it is acosmic. Hence, to hold any view that is individualistic, holistic, theistic or cosmic stands in the way of true reality and real happiness.

7.6.2.2 Self-identity view often exists in ethnic Buddhism. **Ethnic Buddhists** generally do not search or study the suttas, but depend on their leaders and teachers who tend to feed and lead them with Buddhist teachings and traditions: they tend to be a herd of “followers.” They are also mostly nominal Buddhists—“Buddhist” only in name but have neither feeling nor respect for it—who tend to worship or fear local deities, Hindu devas, and tutelary spirits. They even worship or fear people to whom they attribute some kind of status or power (with which “holiness” is equated).

Local Buddhists, especially the Chinese, are often industrious, but they also tend to be materialistic with simple needs and wishes centering around the family. They tend to see their children as investments than free individuals; hence, these children often never mature emotionally, or tend to replay this commodification of family members.

The material things they value in life tend to be seen as “blessings” rather than the wholesome fruit of honest labour. Hence, they usually have little understanding or inclination for keeping the precepts, but uphold Confucian values and social ethics of deferring to family, seniority and authority. Hence, they have no fear of lying, even proudly declaring they have to break a precept “for a good cause”! When faced with life’s challenges, such as disease or death, they would betray beliefs in some kind of abiding Soul; their term for it is often related to the Pali *viññāṇa*, such as Sinhala අත්මය *ātmaya*, Burmese ဝိညာဉ် *winyarin*; Thai วิญญาณ *winyaan*. This is also true of local Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhists, who use the word 靈魂 *línghún* for Soul.⁸⁷⁰

⁸⁶⁹ Hayes: “Incidentally, this line of argument about theft can also be made *mutatis mutandis* about ownership of property, but it is considered rude to make this argument outside monastic circles.” (1992:356). For sexual self-deception, see W Doniger, ““Sex, lies and tall tales,” *Social Research* 63.3 fall 1996:663-699.

⁸⁷⁰ See SD 40b.4 The Soul of Chinese Buddhism.

7.6.2.3 Self-identity view is when we identify with anything that gives us a (false) sense of permanence, certainty and plenty (that is, a self, craving and clinging)—in a word, *power*. For this reason, the Buddha warns us of the dangers in any desire for power by way of “**gain, honour, praise**” (*lābha, sakkāra, siloka*), as recorded in **the Bhindi Sutta** (S 17.33): “Bhikshus, dreadful are gain, honour and praise, bitter, vile, an obstruction to attaining the unsurpassed security from the yoke.”⁸⁷¹

The self-identity view often manifests itself disguised as harmless, even desirable, qualities; but are really the symptoms of deeper, underlying problems that prevent us from seeing the true teaching and practising it. This view is an almighty “**meme**” (that is, “me, me,” a self-promoting replicator)⁸⁷² that draws everything else to itself; for example:

- (1) In Prosperity Buddhism, the leaders identify with **wealth**, and so need to dress impressively and go around in chauffeured vehicles and hobnob with renowned scholars and world leaders. Secularized monks often keep their hair long and dress to look like laymen. Psychologically, this is to identify with a high social status they hope people will attribute them—which ironically means that they lack the state that inspires joyful renunciants to look and live simple Vinaya-based lives.
- (2) Most Buddhists (including Temple leaders) have the impression that any person of high status, even with a “Dr” title (in any discipline) is qualified to speak on Buddhism. This is one of the reasons that mislead monks and priests into believing that having an academic title gives them more respect and better support from others, especially the laity. In other words, they are identifying with status and taking the monastic life as **a career** instead of as a path of renunciation.
- (3) When monks and priests become titled and wealthy, they often feel **entitled** to set aside Vinaya, or simply identify with the world and indulge in worldliness (especially in having money): they claim to “touch money only with the hands, not the heart”! Sometimes, they teach Buddhism as if it were some scientific subject, but missing the spirit of the Buddha’s teaching. They probably identify more with science and modernism than with Buddhism.
- (4) In traditional and ethnic Buddhism, the ability to **chant Buddhist texts well** or know some Pali words may give others the impression that they know Dharma very well, or that they are “holy.” But the chanters do not follow the Vinaya or keep the precepts, and keep promoting superstitious beliefs and practices. This is where we identify with **the sound**,⁸⁷³ rather than looking up to Dharma training.
- (5) **Meditation** is not about how long we are able to sit, but how well we have become better as a practitioner inspired by the Dharma. We should not identify with the “power” of meditation, but rather with the right mindfulness (*sammā sati*).
- (6) Pious but gullible devotees often think that when monks or priests, especially with **titles** like “Chief High Priest,” etc, remain stoic and silent before them, they appear to be very calm and restrained, even may have “powers.” Yet, as a rule, these titled clerics do not hold any fortnightly Pātimokkha recital, nor keep to the Vinaya, nor meditate, nor promote the suttas. Moreover, their “silent treatment” is a means of social control to keep **social distance** or assert “power distance” [4.5.1.5, 7.6.2.1] from those whom they see *nothing* worthwhile to identify with. Yet, they will be chatty and chummy with the “right” people. [4.5.2.2]

7.6.3 Historical and social bases for self-identity view

7.6.3.1 Our history shapes and influences our social group, which in turn shapes us. It is helpful to have an essential idea of our history, or learn about others’ history so that we will not repeat their mistakes. Although Buddhism seems strong in Malaysia, for example, specialists who have studied how Buddhists in Malaysia think and live notice that they are dominated by foreign ethnic Buddhism

⁸⁷¹ **Bhindi S** (S 17.33), SD 46.24. This whole para is stock, recurring in all the 43 suttas of **Lābha, sakkāra Saṃyutta** (S 17/2:225-243).

⁸⁷² See **Memes**, SD 26.3.

⁸⁷³ On not identifying with externalities, see **Lakuṇṭaka Bhaddiya** (SD 3.14 (6)).

with foreign teachers playing the role of the colonial masters. Local Buddhists do not seem to be able to work together and lead themselves effectively: They have become dependent on some kind of authority, even if it were Buddhist authority or those with heraldic titles. Even Buddhism is seen as structured classes defined by wealth, social status and power distance.⁸⁷⁴ [4.5.1.5]

Malaysia, comprising peninsular Malaya (connected to South Thailand), Sarawak (ruled by the White Rajahs of the Brooke family), Sabah (British North Borneo), and Singapore were British colonies that all merged as independent Malaysia in 1963.⁸⁷⁵ According to the 2010 census, Malaysia had 67.4% Malays (self-titled *Bumiputera*, “sons of the soil,” meaning that politically they were the foremost privileged race), Chinese 24.6%, Indians 7.3% and others 0.7%.

The racially charged politics dominated by the Malays (with their privileges) often reminds, sometimes overtly, the non-Malays that they are descended from migrants.⁸⁷⁶ Psychologically suppressed as minorities, the non-Malays understandably identify better with the British (or any white-skinned authority). Non-Malays who can afford it would often migrate to Australia; those who do well academically often resort to working, even living, in Singapore. The sad truth is that even in the 16th century, when the Portuguese attacked Malacca, the non-Malays (mostly merchants) sided with the foreigners.⁸⁷⁷ Perhaps this was understandable when they had themselves been regarded as foreigners or migrants.

7.6.3.2 To better understand the nature of mainstream Buddhism in Singapore, it helps to have some proper idea of her history to begin with. Singapore is situated at the southern tip of peninsular Malaya (1° N latitude, 137 km or 85 mi north of the equator). In 1819, by **the Treaty of Singapore**, Singapore island (then called Singapura in Malay) was leased to the British as trading post for a yearly sum⁸⁷⁸ paid to Sultan Hussein Mohamed Shah of Johor (5,000 Spanish dollars yearly) and Temenggong Abdul Rahman (3,000 Spanish dollars yearly).⁸⁷⁹

In 1824, the Treaty of Singapore was replaced by **the Treaty of Friendship and Alliance**, by which the East India Company fully owned Singapore.⁸⁸⁰ The Sultan was paid 32,000 Spanish dollars with a

⁸⁷⁴ On Malaysia having the highest power distance index (PDI) in the world, see SD 60.1c (1.2.2.5).

⁸⁷⁵ On Malaysia and Singapore, see SD 60.1c (7.1.3).

⁸⁷⁶ In 2007, the indigenous peoples (or indigenes) of **Malaysia** totalled 13.7% of the 31,660,700 people. They are collectively called Orang Asal (“original people”); the Orang Asli (“natives”) are the indigenous peoples of Peninsular Malaysia, comprising 18 Orang Asli subgroups with the Negrito (Semang), Senoi and Aboriginal-Malay (or Proto-Malay) groups totally 198,000 (3.7%). The indigenes of Sarawak total about 1,932,600 (70.5%) of its population of 2,707,600 people, incl the Iban, Bidayuh, Kenyah, Kayan, Kedayan, Lunbawang, Punan, Bisayah, Kelabit, Berawan, Kejaman, Ukit, Sekapan, Melanau and Penan. In Sabah, the 39 different indigenous ethnic groups are known as Anak Negeri (natives), totalling 2,233,100 (58.6%) of Sabah’s population of 3,813,200. The main groups are the Dusun, Murut, Paitan and Bajau. See <https://www.iwgia.org/en/malaysia/3605-iw-2020-malaysia.html>. Around 300 BCE, the Deutero-Malays, descended partly from Cham people of the Mekong Delta, arrived and pushed the Proto-Malays northwards, and became the direct descendants of today’s ethnic Malays, the country’s dominant race. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2013/5/1/timeline-malaysias-history>.

⁸⁷⁷ It was the Chinese merchants and pirates in 16th-cent Malacca who influenced viceroy Afonso d’Albuquerque to resort to an armed attack of Malacca rather than to diplomacy, and also aided in his success in conquering Malacca (1511): Brás de **Albuquerque**, *Comentários do Grande Afonso de Albuquerque*. Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda 2,3 ch 21 1993:108-113; Paulo Jorge de **Sousa** Pinto, “Chincheus and Sangleys,” *Review of Culture* 43, 2013:59.

⁸⁷⁸ On measuring how much this is worth today, see <https://measuringworth.com/calculators/spaincompare/>. On the Spanish dollar: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_dollar.

⁸⁷⁹ Charles Burton Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore* [vol 1 1902, vol 2 1903], Singapore: Oxford Univ Press, 1984:33. C M Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore, 1819-2005*, NUS Press, 2009: 29. Singapore Infopedia: 2022 https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2014-05-16_133354.html/Treaty_of_Singapore. Library of Congress <http://countrystudies.us/singapore/4.htm>.

⁸⁸⁰ https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2015-07-23_153326.html.

monthly pension of 1,300 Spanish dollars for life. The Temenggong received 26,800 Spanish dollars and a monthly pension of 700 Spanish dollars.⁸⁸¹

After the Napoleonic wars in Europe, Singapore was officially made a British possession by **the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824**, which divided the Malay archipelago between the two colonial powers. The area north of the Straits of Malacca, including Penang, Malacca and Singapore, was designated as the British sphere of influence, while the area south of the Straits (Indonesia) was assigned to the Dutch.⁸⁸² In 1826, Singapore was grouped together with Penang and Malacca into a single administrative unit, **the Straits Settlements**, under the British East India Company.

From 1830 until 1867, the Straits Settlements became a residency or subdivision of the Presidency of Bengal in British India.⁸⁸³ In 1867, Singapore became a **Crown Colony**, with her own British Governor. By then, Singapore was predominantly populated by the Chinese. In the 1942, the Battle of Singapore marked **the Fall of Singapore** to the Empire of Japan during the Pacific War (World War II in Asia).⁸⁸⁴ The Japanese occupied Singapore until 1945, when the War ended with their defeat and surrender.⁸⁸⁵

With the decline of the British empire, Malaya gained independence in 1957, and became **the Federation of Malaysia** on 16 September 1963. The merger of the former Federation of Malaya with the former British colonies of North Borneo, Sarawak and Singapore marked the end of the 114-year British rule in Singapore. However, due to differences in political style, Singapore was expelled from Malaysia in 1965.

The Independence of Singapore Agreement 1965 was signed between the governments of Malaysia and of Singapore.⁸⁸⁶ **The Singapore Act 1966** followed, with Singapore fully independent from Malaysia, but remaining within the Commonwealth of Nations from 8 August 1965.⁸⁸⁷ Since then, Singapore has evolved from a 3rd world into a 1st-world modern country.

7.6.3.3 Like Malaysia, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, Singapore was colonized by the British. However, while the ethnic Malays dominate Malaysian politics, Singapore has a majority population of Chinese. **Buddhism** (mostly Mahāyāna) is the most-followed religion in Singapore.⁸⁸⁸ In 2015, out of 3,276,190 Singaporeans, 1,087,995 (33.21%) of them identified themselves as Buddhists (id).⁸⁸⁹ In 2020, the percentage of Buddhists dropped to about 31.1%,⁸⁹⁰ with Christianity recording the fastest growth rate (18.3 % in 2018; 18.9 % in 2020).

It is likely that **Christianity** will continue to grow in size in Singapore attracting more of those who see it as a marker for prosperity and social status. Christian groups have also set up HQs and opera-

⁸⁸¹ Kwa, Heng & Tan, *Singapore, a 700-year History*, National Archives of Singapore, 2009:95, 98. Turnbull, A *History of Modern Singapore*, NUS, 2009:275.

⁸⁸² The Anglo-Dutch Treaty (1824): <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/5005d886-9c27-421e-a22d-44fb5965350c>.

⁸⁸³ "Singapore—A flourishing free port": <http://countrystudies.us/singapore/5.htm>.

⁸⁸⁴ The Fall of Singapore: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fall_of_Singapore.

⁸⁸⁵ The Japanese surrender: https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_123_2005-02-03.html.

⁸⁸⁶ Singapore 1945-65: <https://www.roots.gov.sg/stories-landing/stories/liberation-unrest-a-new-nation/story>.

⁸⁸⁷ 1965 in Singapore: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1965_in_Singapore.

⁸⁸⁸ <https://web.archive.org/web/20180212081901/http://www.singstat.gov.sg/publications/publications-and-papers/GHS/ghs2015content>.

⁸⁸⁹ For religious demographics of Singapore, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Singapore#Buddhism. For visual data on the comparative growth of religions in Singapore: https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/visualising_data/infographics/c2020/c2020-religion.pdf.

⁸⁹⁰ One reason for the drop in the Buddhist population may be due to the wealth and worldliness of Mahāyāna clergy and the well-publicized scandals of Mahāyāna priests going to or being taken to court over financial improprieties. See SD 31.12 (3.4.4) the Ming Yi scandal; (3.5) the Guo Jun case. Also: [Buddhism in Singapore – Wikipedia](#).

tions in Singapore⁸⁹¹ to send missions to evangelize SE Asia (Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Khmer, Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia) and China, where Christianity is also growing as the country modernizes.

Interestingly, urbanized Singapore and modernizing China seem to be mirroring American religious patterns in the social dominance of Christianity, a generation or two ago (that is, around the mid-20th century). Apparently, Christianity will be seen less as a status marker with the education becoming more broad-based and open, with better educated and more independent free-thinking individuals.

Singapore's history is deeply rooted in British colonialism, where, unlike Malaysia (her official language is Malay), Singapore has 3 official languages (English, Malay and Tamil), with English as the dominant language in the city and Chinese (especially Mandarin) in the heartland. There are 2 kinds of Singapore English: Singaporean Standard English (indistinguishable grammatically from Standard British English) and Singapore Colloquial English (better known as Singlish).⁸⁹²

7.6.3.4 Tiny Singapore (733.1 sq km = 283.1 sq mi), a highly urbanized island city-state with a population of 5.64 M (2022),⁸⁹³ has been nicknamed “the little red dot” by 3rd Indonesian President B J Habibie, but it quickly became a popular moniker for both Singaporean politicians and citizens, who take it to reflect the nation's success despite its physical limitations.⁸⁹⁴

Singapore's colonial history, her cosmopolitan population, and status as an international centre for business and education, also mean that she has special social problems, the best-known of which is perhaps **the Pinkerton syndrome**.⁸⁹⁵ A group of Asian scholars studying the syndrome and racism in Singapore (Chew et al 2019) redefined the Pinkerton syndrome broadly as the tendency for Asians to be prejudiced and to discriminate in favour of Whites; it is an unusual form of racism perpetuated by the majority against themselves to the advantage of a specific minority.

Its currency is affirmed by the fact that the Hokkien-dialect term *angmor tuakee*, literally translated as “big-shot westerners,”⁸⁹⁶ is often used when there is a perception that Whites receive preferential treatment in a wide variety of situations. The Pinkerton syndrome is probably caused by 2 factors: colonial mentality and colourism, and is an important social problem that needs to be resolved.⁸⁹⁷

7.6.3.5 The scholars studying the Pinkerton syndrome in Singapore did not mention a vital *natural* factor favouring a special treatment of foreigners, that is, the traditional virtue of treating bona fide guests with respect and hospitality. This is a well-known early Buddhist teaching regarding the wholesome quality of **respect** (*gāravatā*) for others.

⁸⁹¹ Among these are the Christian Nationals' Evangelism Commission (CNEC) <https://cneintl.org/about-us/>, and China Inland Mission (CIM, 1865) Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF International, 1964) China Overseas Christian Mission <https://omf.org/about-us/our-story>.

⁸⁹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singapore_English. Edgar W **Schneider**, *English Around the World: An introduction*, Cambridge, 2011:157-164 Case study: Singapore. Joseph **Foley** (ed), *The New Englishes: The case of Singapore*, NUS Press, 1988. Jock O **Wong**, *The Culture of Singapore English*, Cambridge, 2014.

⁸⁹³ 2020 census: 74.3% Chinese, 13.5% Malays, 9.0% Indian, 3.2% others: <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/publications/cop2020/sr1/cop2020sr1.pdf>.

⁸⁹⁴ Singapore as the “little red dot”: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_red_dot#.

⁸⁹⁵ See SD 19.2a (2.3.2); SD 7.9 (3.5.3.4).

⁸⁹⁶ 紅毛头家 *hōng mào tóu jiā*. On the term “angmo” for white westerners: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ang_mo.

⁸⁹⁷ Peter K H Chew, Jessica L Young & Gerald P K Tan, “Racism and the Pinkerton syndrome in Singapore: effects of race on hiring decisions,” *Journal of the Pacific Rim Psychology* 13 2019, Cambridge Univ Press online 11 Apr 2019: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-pacific-rim-psychology/article/racism-and-the-pinkerton-syndrome-in-singapore-effects-of-race-on-hiring-decisions/5924D22CCF6F71558B5DE9002CDBA12F>.

Understandably, local Buddhists are famously hospitable to anyone, regardless of race or culture, who show an interest in Buddhism. The general idea seems to be that “the guest is to be honoured,” a reflection of the early Buddhist teaching of “**respect for hospitality**” (*paṭisanthāra, gāravatā*).⁸⁹⁸ Local Buddhists are especially enthusiastic over White monks who teach Dharma and meditation mainly due to the convenience of the English language.

Naturally, local English-speaking Buddhists would be hospitable to English-speaking Western Buddhists, whether monastic or lay. This is due to the convenience of common language. For this reason too, we see the local Siamese monks are seen as openly hospitable to even non-Siamese devotees and guests.

7.6.3.6 Historically, the Siamese monks⁸⁹⁹ are predominantly numerous and influential in the northern Peninsular Malaysian states of Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu, mainly due to these areas being a part of Siam until Anglo-Siamese Treaty (1909), when these states became part of British Malaya.⁹⁰⁰ Most locals who follow Siamese Buddhism come from the working middle and lower classes, who normally communicate with the monks in Thai, Malay or Hokkien.

Sinhalese Buddhism was transplanted into Malaysia and Singapore to cater for the cultural needs of the local Sinhalese. They were encouraged by the British in Malaya to migrate there to work for them. On account of their colonial connections, their command of English and their temple’s location in the urban areas (Taiping, in Perak, the capital Kuala Lumpur, and Singapore), Sinhalese Buddhism tend to attract the English-speaking locals, especially those from the wealthier classes. In either case, on account of their origins, these Sinhalese Buddhist temples are controlled by Sinhalese members, but are financially well supported mainly by the Chinese.⁹⁰¹

One of the serious setbacks of the Sinhalese missions is that, not only are they race-based and caste-based, but they have done little to promote a local Buddhist tradition and vocation, the way Buddhism had taken root in Sri Lanka. Hence, they tend to favour those local Buddhists who look up to Sinhalese Buddhism, and sideline those who are not Sinhalese or perceived as not promoting their agenda. Their popularity and success amongst nominal Buddhists and affluent Buddhists was mainly due to these 2 worldly strategies:

- (1) their marketing of secular and prosperity Buddhism in the spirit of Dale Carnegie (*How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*, 1948) and Napoleon Hill (*Think and Grow Rich*, 1937); [4.5]
- (2) projecting themselves as the prime movers of the growth of Buddhism in Malaysia (and Singapore) by appropriating local talents and works, and putting their name to them, and not acknowledging them in any way.⁹⁰²

⁸⁹⁸ The 6 kinds of respect, in terms of Buddhist training, are respect for: the teacher (the Buddha) (*satthu, gāravatā*), the Dharma (*dhamma, gāravatā*), the sangha (*saṅgha, gāravatā*), the training (*sikkhā, gāravatā*), heedfulness (*appamāda, gāravatā*) and hospitality (*paṭisanthāra, gāravatā*): SD 55.11 (3.4.3.2). They are said to be the “conditions for non-decline” (*aparihāniya dhamma*): **Aparihāna S 1+2** (A 6.32-33) SD 72.9; SD 32.11 (1.1); SD 37.11 (1-7); SD 47.14 (1.4).

⁸⁹⁹ I have retained the old term “Siamese” for local “Thais” since they have been Malaysian citizens well before Siam’s name was changed to Thailand in 1938. Their language however may be called “Thai” since the local Siamese dialect is a southern version of Bangkok Thai, but are on the whole mutually intelligible.

⁹⁰⁰ Duncan Steam, May 2004, “[A slice of Thai history: Dr John Crawford and the mission to Thailand, 1822](http://images.library.wisc.edu/FRUS/EFacs/1909/reference/frus.frus1909.i0040.pdf)” (column), *Pattaya Mail* XII (20). W A R Wood, *A History of Siam*, London, 1924:274-278. The Anglo-Siamese Treaty: <http://images.library.wisc.edu/FRUS/EFacs/1909/reference/frus.frus1909.i0040.pdf>. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Siamese_Treaty_of_1909.

⁹⁰¹ See Jeffrey Samuels, “Contemporary Buddhism in Malaysia,” in (ed) M Jerryson, *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Buddhism*, 2017:261 f; “A tale of two colonialisms,” in (ed) T Borchert, *Theravada Buddhism in Colonial Contexts*, Routledge, ch 4, 2018:61.

⁹⁰² The Chief High Priest appropriated our works, such as Puja tapes, video recordings, study notes and the Integrated Syllabus (which I prepared for SKE Dhamma School, Malacca, Malaysia), and used them in his Viha-
ra’s Dhamma School, minus the author’s names, labelling them instead with their own name on it. Considering

The darker problem here is that the Sinhalese ethnic domination of the English-speaking Buddhists in Malaysia and Singapore has effectively divided them, and making them dependent on **priest-centred Buddhism**, *without any local community integration*. This opens local Buddhists to Christian conversion once they go into tertiary education or enter professional life. The Christian missions here focus on “effective conversion,” that is, harvesting the better-educated, better-employed, and affluent Buddhists.

7.6.4 Attachment to rituals and vows: Seeking answers outside of us

7.6.4.1 The second of the 3 fetters preventing our reaching the path is called ***sīla-b,bata parā-māsa***. This term literally means addiction to rituals and vows, especially devotional, or what we today call “religious” rituals. As Buddhism grew into an institutionalized religion, this term naturally came to be understood as the addiction to customs and rituals of any religion *other* than Buddhism, but from the “Dharma drift” in the suttas, it is clear that, in early Buddhism at least, it refers to the addiction to rituals of any kind.

Etymologically, we should note the Pali term, *sīla-b,bata parāmsāsa*, as comprising 2 main components: *sīla-b,bata* (*sīla* + *vata*), “rituals and vows” + *parāmāsa*, “attachment.” ***Sīla*** usually means “precepts, moral virtue,” but here it is used in the sense of *a habitual act or routine*, “a ritual.” ***Vata*** is used in its Sanskrit sense of *vrata*, “vow, observance, religious duties.” The operative term here is ***parāmāsa***, “(misguided) grasping, holding on to, adherence (to), conviction”; hence, it is translated as “attachment.”

The “attachment” here refers to an **identification** with the act itself, both in form and content, as actions and words; that the “power” arises from the rituals’ right performance, from the *appearance* of acting and speaking (or not speaking) rightly. So long as we *identify* with this “right acting,” we are *it*, like the tiny speck of “soul” being absorbed into the cosmic Soul (Brahman), as it were. We are pure by this ritual action, *ex opera operato* (“from the work performed”),⁹⁰³ meaning that this has nothing to do with our moral goodness or keeping the precepts.

Even then, only a certain class of people, the brahmins or priests, are accepted as acting in this manner, or allowed to perform such rituals; and they, thus purified, may, in turn, purify others (who are perceived as being lower in status than the priests). In fact, this is what we have done with the Buddhist monks: we have turned them into priests, seeking their blessings, and seeing them as the “media,” the bank, for remitting “merits” for the dead! [4.5.1.4, 7.4.2.9].

7.6.4.2 For our discussion here, we will use the term “**individualism**” to mean the belief that we (a party of aggregates) in “our” own uniqueness when we look deep into the suttas and the Dharma, seeing ourself through them, and learning ways of bettering ourself. Since we must each see this for ourself, we are, in that sense, unique: we develop in our own way, at our own pace. In this sense, we are, as it were, making a distinction in the degrees of our individualism.

Individualism can also work both ways: we can grow with it, or we can be frozen in it like an ancient bug in amber. The limitation of individualism would be our *self-deception* that we are radically isolated from all other parties in such a way that our own personal needs and desires are justifiably taken into account in preference over the needs and desires of all other parties. More of this later.

Here, Richard Hayes [7.5.1.2] introduces us, with his characteristic literary humour, to take advantage of the fact that the Greek word for “private or separate” is ἴδιος (*idios*), and to call this view of ourself as radically separate from all others **idiotic individualism** (1992:7 f). Let us distinguish this from what we could call semi-idiotic individualism or partisanship, namely, the conviction that we belong to a group of other individuals, and that this group or cult, as a whole, is uniquely privileged

that plagiarism is theft (*pārājika* 2, V 3:46,16-20), this has serious Vinaya and karmic repercussions. See SD 7.9 (4.4.3.6).

⁹⁰³ In Catholicism, this is based on the belief that it is “God” acting through the ritual performer.

over and above all other living beings in such a way that the needs of *our* group justifiably take precedence over the needs of all other groups.

Common expressions of **partisanship** would be *communalism*, *racism*, *nationalism*, *sexism*, and what British psychologist Richard D Ryder calls “speciesism” (1970)⁹⁰⁴ (the conviction that human needs and wants count for more than the needs of all other forms of life in the biosphere; that all other animals are inferior, less “valuable,”⁹⁰⁵ than we are).

7.6.4.3 We have mentioned [7.6.4.2.] that we may be misguided in our individualism, seeing it as a self-centred superiority above everyone else. This “idiotic” individualism is, then, a form of self-deception, even when we accept that there are a few others who are like us (like in an elitist religious community); this partisanship too, is a form of self-deception (rooted in the self-identity view). [7.5.1]

Very few people, aside perhaps from psychopaths, sociopaths and egopaths, are likely to see themselves as “idiotic individuals” or uniquely superior persons. These highly toxic few are the religious Gurus of exclusive self-defined, self-serving cults. We are drawn to such power-figures like insects are drawn to a naked flame. We see it as the fire of fondest or wildest that we desire, consumed by it.

In bland terms, when people form themselves into a group, or are rallied together in a group, in this way, they then come to regard themselves as somehow distinct from the rest of society (or from the rest of life itself). It must first find a way of maintaining a sense of group solidarity—such as seeing itself as the “New Society.”⁹⁰⁶ Many people, at least occasionally, feel fondly for partisanship of one kind or another. We need to become partisan in a herd of partisans, **a cult**, just once, *just once is enough*—we only need to be consumed by the fire just once.

7.6.4.4 As it stands, we may thus surmise the monastic sangha to be an idiotic partisanship—this is neither true nor is this my view! The bona fide sangha of Vinaya-spirited renunciants may be guided by self-reliant Dharma living, but they are also dependent on the laity for their basic needs, especially of almsfood (and other life-supports: robes, shelter and medicines). This kind of idiotic individualism is harmonized with the group’s need for the material support of the laity, which in turn sees the sangha as peopled by those devoted to personal integrity, mental development and insight wisdom.

The Vinaya-spirited sangha, then, consists of members who have come to regard their common needs on par with or more important than their own private needs, and yet also serve the spiritual needs of the laity by keeping to the Vinaya, practising the Dharma and sharing their wisdom with others. They neither mock nor sham the Dharma-path, but silently strive to move on to the true goal.

The sangha helps its members feel that the group itself is distinguishable from those outside the group which they have renounced. One of the most effective ways that the sangha has found to maintain cohesion within itself and staying apart from the outside is through wholesome **ritual action**, such as initiation rites and the fortnightly Pātimokkha conclave. This is the kind of behaviour that is followed closely and exactly by all sangha members, which serves to galvanize them into a unified whole with the same goal. The principle is that however different the members may be from one another, they have in common at least this set of actions that they all do in the same way: they are like a well-gearred boat braving the storm heading for safe harbour.

⁹⁰⁴ Ryder coined this term against animal experimentation in a pamphlet in 1970: “The Oxford Group,” in (ed) M Bekoff, *Encyclopedia of Animal Rights and Animal Welfare* [2009] 2nd ed, Greenwood, 2009:261 f, 2010:403, 420. Ryder, *Animal Revolution: Changing attitudes towards speciesism*, Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2000. For refs: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speciesism>.

⁹⁰⁵ In terms of the value of life, or the value that *is* life. On the 5 basic values of Buddhist morality [4.1.4.0].

⁹⁰⁶ Sangharakshita’s Western Buddhist Order (WBO), in its heydays (the 1980s), speaks of itself as being the New Society: SD 60.1c (5.2.1).

7.6.4.5 These group rituals have only one purpose: to remind us and to keep up within the same group by identifying with the group, that is, the “Big Self.” They are:

- like religious rituals such as reciting creeds, going on pilgrimages, and venerating consecrated objects; like patriotic rituals such as singing national anthems and saluting flags;
- like political rituals such as staging rallies, chanting slogans and attaching aphorisms to one’s vehicles; like military rituals such as saluting, wearing uniforms and insignia, and marching in unison;
- like sports rituals such as keeping mascots, displaying trophies and cheerleading;
- like academic rituals such as giving students examinations, and then giving them a single page to replace the thousands of pages they had pored over; and
- like family rituals such as the celebration of birthdays and wedding anniversaries.

When we begin to think about all the group rituals in our lives, the list is seemingly endless.

When monastics forgo or forget their *renunciation*, they are almost no different from the laity. The monastic rituals become mere partisan rituals like these. Buddhists are not against any such mostly harmless rituals (if they are that) but they neither bring us closer to the path of awakening nor even make us better Buddhists. [7.6.5]

Given that Buddhism regards **individualism** (by way of self-identity view) as a form of self-deception, and that partisanship is a species of individualism, and given that ritual behavior is one of the most effective mechanisms of **partisanship**, *we can see why individualism and ritualism are put together*—ritualism is a way of reinforcing our individualism.

7.6.5 Rituals and “make believe”

7.6.5.1 On the positive side, **rituals** keep the Buddhist community together by the removal of doubts and clarifying the truth of the teaching. This is, of course, wholesome since it is the Buddha’s teaching, not the private truths of Cult Guru. For the laity, such rituals can take the form of meaningful *pūja*, *reflections*, *sutta study*, *Dharma discussion* and *mindfulness practice*. They are “rituals” in the good sense of being regularly done, properly attended and mindfully followed; also, a calendar of Dharma days for precept-keeping and celebrating significant days to remember and reflect on the Buddha and his teachings.

We have already noted that the unwholesome part in rituals is our “attachment” (*parāmāsa*) to them, seeing them as efficacious in themselves rather than as the total act of our body, speech and mind in the wholesome gesture of renouncing negative states (especially greed, hate and delusion) and cultivating the wholesome states [7.6.4.1]. When a ritual is performed in this spirit as a community or a group, it helps us in cultivating moral virtue by accepting others with lovingkindness. The ritual is wholesome in pervading the positive emotions (love, ruth, joy and peace) in our daily lives, living with others.

7.6.5.2 Another important aspect of rituals that we need to understand rightly is that they often involve some kind of **make-believe**. Here, the word has two senses: first, in a literal sense, it can have the effect of making us *believe* in something that we had momentarily doubted and *remember* vital qualities that we may have forgotten. It is an act of wise faith rather than an act of knowledge: the affective faith that brings the clarity of experience and joy of understanding, rather than a cognitive belief of believing in something in a fiat.⁹⁰⁷

Second, there is an idiomatic sense of the ritual as “make-believe,” that is, as a temporary suspension of reality—the virtual reality that we have been projecting as “our” world. Instead of projecting our consciousness out there and around us, we take rituals as launching-pads for turning our mind back, as it were, to where it comes from, to see within ourself those inner realities to which they

⁹⁰⁷ On the 2 kinds of faith, the cognitive and the affective, see SD 10.4 (2.2).

point. This is good training in knowing, taming and freeing the mind and heart from negative emotions.

7.6.5.3 Within all Buddhist communities, there is a common act of bowing respectfully to the Buddha image or a representation of his qualities. This is often accompanied by making an offering of incense, flowers, fruit or some other food. This ritual is obviously an act of pretending, that we are acting *as if* we were in the presence of the living Buddha, even though he has passed away long ago. The image (*buddha,rūpa*) reminds us of the Buddha's body or form; his robes or cloth we cover him with is feelings; the colours of the flowers, his perception, the food-offering that nourishes him, his formations; and the glowing fragrant incense, his consciousness.

These are the 5 aggregates that were the Buddha; we too, have these 5 aggregates. Understanding these aggregates, letting them go, we attain the path, and nirvana, in due course, just as the Buddha did. We are now **imitating** the acts of the Buddha himself, his compassion and wisdom, in a manner we understand his teachings. Thus, we are reminded, "What would the Buddha do?" and we endeavour to act accordingly to the best of our present ability. Even when we do not measure up to the Buddha-acts, we take these as lessons reminding us that we are still journeying *towards* the path, or, for some of us, *on* the path itself: we must always look ahead a bit and move on. Hence, we are not only portraying those Buddha-acts, but we are also living witnesses to the one and only Buddha of our time.

7.6.5.4 Another well-known make-believe ritual is that of **meditation**. For many of us, sitting in meditation was not always an experience of calm and clarity, when we were free from desires or aversions. Maybe, for brief moments, we felt some peace, even joy; but for the rest of the sitting it was a struggle to maintain an outward appearance of the calm bliss we famously see in images of the meditating Buddha. This is our ritual in which we make believe that we are either a buddha or an arhat, or one who is on the way of becoming one. Like the ritual of making offerings to an image representing the Buddha, this ritual of sitting in meditation is also where we must be willing to suspend reality and assume a make-believe posture, as it were, in preparation for our awakening.

7.6.5.5 In addition to the element of **play-acting** or **pretence** we have described, both of the rituals mentioned—making or receiving offerings and meditating—have a higher purpose, that of reinforcing our sense of belonging to a group, that is, the sangha or the Buddhist community. Such rituals are common to all Buddhists, even those who may not use any image to represent the Buddha in any way. In fact, there are many different ways of performing such devotional rituals in the Buddhist communities all over the world. Hence, the manner in which we bow, make offerings or recite liturgy serves to connect us closely with our community. The way the ritual is done, then, has the effect of deepening our feelings of being a part of our community.

For **monastics**, on the other hand, there are rituals—ordination, puja, the Pātimokkha recital, communal meals, reciting suttas for the laity—that affirm or reaffirm them as renunciants, those who have renounced the world to work for the path of awakening. Hence, they are seen with great respect, even admiration, as being nobler than the laity and others.

The monastics' ritual play-acting (as described above) puts them in a privileged group with a special status—setting them *apart* and *above* other non-monastics [7.6.4.2]. However, when monastics merely *pretend* to be renunciants—rejecting the Vinaya, not observing the Pārimokkha, and living a worldly life—they lose that state of renunciation. They hide behind it as a false status, accepting the respect and support of the laity and others. This kind of partisanship is rooted in **self-deception**.

7.6.5.6 Buddhism has evolved over 2,500 years, and various teachers and thinkers have introduced many imaginative new approaches to their visions of the Buddha and his teachings. They too, are playing "make-believe" and play-acting with ideas of the Buddha [7.6.5.2], imagining him to be

what they want him to be. In this case, then, these are not Buddha-images but rather **self-images**: glorious displays of self-deception through their impressive Temples, life-like images and massive structures,⁹⁰⁸ their pretence of calmness in how they walk and sit, the musical sounds of chants and hymns reinforcing this make-believe. A far cry from the simple and peaceful lives of the early monks and the Buddha himself.

Many of them were not even familiar with Sakyamuni Buddha, our present historical teacher, until recent times when the Buddhist canon and texts of various schools, especially early Buddhism, were made available, and in translations. We now have an ever better understanding of Buddhist history and the evolution of Buddhism itself into what it is today. While many continue with what they have been trained and conditioned to practise since young, others have spoken out, declaring what really is the Buddha's teaching and what is not.⁹⁰⁹

When we look at all the Buddhist texts, canonical in their respective schools, we will see a lot of variations, even contradictions amongst them. Yet, when taken together, they appear to provide us with an interesting way of resolving all the differences and confusions. For example, some modern Buddhists worship Amitābha Buddha or Avalokitesvara (Guanyin to the Chinese). Yet, from the Heart Sutra of the Mahāyāna, we know that there is no form and so on, no "5 aggregates." We now apply this vision to understand that Amitābha is a reflection of the Buddha's awakening boundless light in the shadows of the ancient religions of Persia and the Kushan empire. Avalokitesvara is an embodiment of the Buddha's great compassion created through the various cultures that struggled with social discrimination.

7.6.5.7 There is really neither Amitābha nor Avalokitesvara, only Sakyamuni Buddha with his wisdom and compassion. Amitabha's Pure Land Paradise "in the west" may be beautiful, but then it is merely a construction of the pious mind, imagining Amitabha. Nirvana is even more unimaginably beautiful in its being non-constructed, beyond time and space. When we remove the *parāmāsa*, the attachment to form and so on, there's merely the emptiness (*suññatā*) of true reality that the Buddha has taught us.

Instead of reciting Amitābha's name, we may make a wise and humble choice of reciting our one true teacher's name: "**Buddho**." Our task is not demolishing of any or all these theological sectarian Buddhist structures, but to inspire and encourage only those who are truly sincere in practising Buddha Dhamma to turn to his middle way. As more true Buddhist monastics and lay practitioners move to the Buddha's path, we can leave the others to their own devices.

7.6.6 The benefits of wholesome rituals

7.6.6.1 Despite what has been said so far of the Buddhist attitude toward rituals—that they are a basis for self-delusion—we will find that, throughout Buddhist history, rituals always play some important role, such as in the admission of candidates into the sangha, and the rituals related to the annual monastic calendar, that is, entrance into the 3-month rains-retreat, and the "invitation" ritual at its close.

This seeming discrepancy between what the Buddha warns us regarding rituals and the prevalence of rituals in monastic Buddhism can be explained in several ways. It is true that the rituals define membership in the sangha, and, by this very fact, its monastic members are warned not to take them

⁹⁰⁸ It is surprising, even shocking, how many of the tallest statues in the world are of the Buddha, bodhisattva or similar: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_tallest_statues.

⁹⁰⁹ For dramatic example, see **SD 60.1c** (18) Pruning the Bodhi tree: Critical Buddhism; (19) When Zen is not Zen: <http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/60.1c-The-rhetoric-of-Buddhist-experience-piya.pdf>

merely as a “routine,” but as rehabilitating exercises to remind monastics of the purpose of renunciation, and also of the *esprit de corp* of the sangha and its status as a “legal person.”⁹¹⁰

7.6.6.2 The next point to consider on the wholesome significance of rituals in Buddhist monasticism is that of **group karma** [5.2.3]. Although karma is often understood as an individual’s intention, in Buddhist monasticism we see a very significant case of the “concurrence of intention,” often simply termed “consensus” (*eka,mati*),⁹¹¹ which actually validates the “sangha act” (*saṅgha,kamma*), as it is properly called.⁹¹²

Insofar as the rituals and customs of such a community help it to stay together as a community, they would not be seen as entirely negative. But this is still far from saying that rituals could be seen as playing a positive role in a person’s endeavour to become more virtuous. What remains to be seen then is whether a ritual and the self-deception that accompanies it can be seen as something wholesome, or that they are insidious after all. The rule of thumb is that if the ritual is done as a mere routine, it is likely to be unhelpful; but when it is done mindfully, that is, reflectively with purpose (understanding why we are doing it), it may be helpful.

7.6.6.3 There is also a **psychological benefit** of rituals. Let us begin by considering when we are resolved to practise a Buddhist life, cultivating *moral virtue, mindfulness and wisdom*. Even with such a resolve, we may still be vulnerable to influences that draw us away from that resolve. While we are caught in a state of indecision about whether or not to yield to such an unwholesome influence, it is likely we will have **doubts** (*vicikicchā*) whether it is possible or desirable for us to “be good.” It is at just such moments that rituals can be effectively used to restore our faith in the possibility of being wholesome and that it is worthwhile to be so.

By fingering a string of beads, for example, or by reciting a religious verse we have learned, or by recalling a resolve we have made, we may overcome the doubt about whether there is really any point in being judicious in our behaviour. In such a case, the ritual will be helpful in doing two things. First, it reminds us of our membership in the community of good and wise people.

This feeling of membership in a community, however, may itself become a form of self-deception [4.4.9.1]. This may be either because we see that membership as merely in terms of worldly profit, especially in terms of gains, status and a life of ease; or that the group itself is not a wholesome one for personal development. In either case, our efforts will be in vain: it is like dressing ourselves up in oil and spices, and then jumping from the frying *pain* into the fire!

Secondly, we are reminded to do proper self-reflection by way of reviewing (*paccacekkhana*) what we have done, what has happened, what we can learn from it, what we should do next. The Buddha’s advice here is a simple and good one, as recorded in **the Alabbhaniya Tḥāna Sutta** (A 5.48):

If he should know, “Not to be attained	is this goal by me nor through anyone else,”
then, ungrieving, he would bear it thus:	“What firm action shall I take now?”
	(A 5.48,72), SD 42.1; cf J 368

7.6.7 Doubt: Words as truth

7.6.7.1 In the case of theft as an example of self-deception [7.6.1.3], we notice how **self-identification view** is the “root” cause of self-deception, working through the other 2 fetters of **attachment to rituals and vows** and **doubt**. In identifying with another’s property, we start desiring it. Then, by **doubting** it, we wonder how beneficial or pleasurable that object would be, and that we would ever have it. We then feel the urgency, compelling us to make the effort to steal that desired object.

⁹¹⁰ On the sangha as a “legal person,” see SD 45.16 (2.2.2.1); SD 51.17 (3.1.2); SD 51.18 (2.4.1.2); SD 55.8 (1.2.2.3).

⁹¹¹ On *eka,mati*, see also SD 60.1c (1.9.6.2).

⁹¹² Also called “ecclesiastical act, formal act.” On *saṅgha,kamma*, see SD 45.16 (3.2).

We can see how, rooted in the defilement of “I-making” (*ahaṇ, kāra*), we habitually not only speak of “I, me, mine,” but identify with these notions and things so that, through conceit (*māna*) we measure ourself (as our *self*) and crave for them. This is how the 3 fetters function as **the 3 grasplings** (*gaha*) through self-deception. Here, we try to understand how we reinforce this self-deception through words and language.

Most of post-Buddha Buddhisms are sectarian schools, worshipping a dead unawakened Teacher, centering on a living Teacher. The teachings serve to promote the Teacher, to induce us to *identify* with the Teachers: this is a classic case of **self-identity view**. Such a view is then reinforced by worshipping the Teachers, such as in a sadhana (Skt *sadhana*), a ritual by which we submit ourselves totally to the teacher; in other words, Guru Worship.

Finally, to consolidate total faith and loyalty to the Teacher and tradition, **doubt** is cast into even the ancient teachings. The Buddha is not *one* but many; the arhat is not fully awakened; all the path saints (streamwinners, once-returners, non-returners and arhats, which includes the Buddha himself!) are *inferior* to the Bodhisattva(s), the sectarian ideal. The casuistry used here is the theology of “compassion”: unlike the arhats (including the Buddha) the Bodhisattva is the embodiment of compassion! And so on: Such ideas are repeated so often that we may begin to think of them as truths! If we truly love the Buddha Dharma, silence is not an option here: we must, simply and in a timely manner, speak out on the true nature of the Buddha’s wisdom and compassion by our own thoughts, words and actions.

7.6.7.2 A classic Buddhist case of **self-identification** is found in the Zen habit of making this enigmatic claim (read from left to right across):

教外別傳	<i>jiào wài bié chuán</i> ⁹¹³	A special [separate] transmission outside the teachings,
不立文字	<i>bú lì wén zì</i>	not dependent on the word [words and letters], ⁹¹⁴
直指人心	<i>zhí zhǐ rén xīn</i>	directly pointing to the human mind,
見性成佛	<i>jiàn xìng chéng fó</i>	seeing one’s nature and becoming Buddha.
(See T2008.360a24-360c12 & 2008.364c9-364c24) ⁹¹⁵		

Line a is the claim that Zen (Chinese 禪 *chán*) has nothing to do with early Buddhism, the suttas or any Buddhist texts. Line b is saying that Zen truths depends on neither the authority of the Pali canon nor of any scripture, but the teacher’s (sensei’s) teaching—his word or fiat as authority. Line c claims that Zen allows us direct access to our minds, freeing us from the limits of words and language.⁹¹⁶ Line d: This sudden, immediate enlightenment or satori [6.3.2.7] occurs in due course, when we see this for ourself and become Buddha!⁹¹⁷

7.6.7.3 By rejecting the suttas (and also the Mahāyāna sutras), the Zen masters suddenly found that they have killed their golden goose, killed the Buddha on the road: they now have nothing to authenticate themselves with! They then (around the 7th century CE in China) came up with the brilliant

⁹¹³ 傳 has 2 pronunciations: (1) (v) *chuán*, to pass on, spread, transmit, infect, transfer, circulate, conduct (heat, electricity); (2) (n) *zhuàn*, biography, historical narrative. The former (the verb) applies here.

⁹¹⁴ Most trs take 文字 *wénzì* as a dvandva (“words and letters”), but the more common usage is as karma-dharaya (descriptive cpd), which I follow here. On the problem of language, see SD 17.6(2).

⁹¹⁵ For background reading, see SD 40b.5 (5.1.2) The Chán root quatrain.

⁹¹⁶ Matt Jenkins tells me he wonders how Zen practitioners would respond to Wittgenstein’s private language argument: they probably would not agree with it. **The private language argument** states that a language understandable by only a single individual is incoherent. It was introduced by Wittgenstein in his later work, esp in the *Philosophical Investigations* (1993, 2009): he introduces the notion in §243, and argues for its impossibility in §§244-271. The argument was central to philosophical discussion in the second half of the 20th century. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/private-language/>

⁹¹⁷ For a related reading, see B Fauré, “To be Buddhist is to be Zen,” in his *Unmasking Buddhism*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009:76-82.

cultural notion of identifying with their lineage of teachers as “ancestors” (in the Chinese traditional sense).⁹¹⁸ This “Dharma lineage,” seen as a metaphor of *the traditional Chinese patriarchal family*, was (and is) everything in Zen.⁹¹⁹ However, scholars, even Zen teachers, agree that much about the lineage-structure are just made up, alongside some which have genuine histories. The point is that such a convention, mythical as it may be, gives Zen its mystique.⁹²⁰

As a result of claiming its own teachers as spiritual teachers, Zen suffers from the constant caprices and eccentricities of personal charisma. During the 1990s, the US Buddhist community was badly shaken by a number of sexual and financial scandals involving Zen masters Richard Baker, Eido Shimanō and others.⁹²¹ The self-deception of these persons was perhaps that they were above any authority, including moral virtue and karma.

Or perhaps their situation was almost no different from that of college or university lecturers, whose positions brought them opportunities, and they took advantage of them either because they saw nothing wrong with it or because their desires overcame their scruples. The situation is more complicated for these Zen masters because they had precepts about celibacy or had great self-restraint form their superior Zen meditation.⁹²²

Clearly these Zen masters had fallen deep into self-deception. While in traditional Buddhism, the teachers and students worked to tease out the Dharma meaning from the sutta words, the Zen masters treated words like darkness that they named as “doubt,” the Great Doubt. They stared so long into this darkness; the darkness glared back.

The Buddha often warns us against falling into spiritual doubt, thus losing our ground in Dharma; in fact, he reminds us to keep to the way of our true ancestors, as recorded in **the Cakka,vatti Sīha,-nāda Sutta** (D 26):

Keep to the pasture, bhikshus, the haunt of our ancestors [the range of our fathers].⁹²³
 Keeping to your pastures, the haunt of our ancestors,
 Māra will not find access to you [not descend upon you],
 Māra will not find you as an object of his consciousness.⁹²⁴
 Bhikshus, it is on account of undertaking wholesome mental states that this merit thus grows.⁹²⁵

⁹¹⁸ For a scholarly study, see eg E Morrison, *The Power of Patriarchs*, Brill, 2010.

⁹¹⁹ S Döll, “Identity in a diagram: Authenticity, transmission, and lineage in the Chan/Zen tradition,” in (ed) M Poceski, *Communities of Memories and Interpretation*, Bochum/Freiburg, 2018:145-178, see: <https://terebeck.hu/zen/mesterek/identity-diagram.pdf>. For refs, see “Lineage (Buddhism)”: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lineage_\(Buddhism\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lineage_(Buddhism)).

⁹²⁰ See E Storlie, “Lineage delusions: Eido Shimano Rōshi, Dharma transmission, and American Zen,” SweepZen.com, 8 Feb 2011. <https://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=70,9885,0,0,1,0#.Y4m-UHZBz84>.

⁹²¹ For details, see **Bad friendship**, SD 64.17.

⁹²² See **The teacher or the teaching**, SD 3.14.

⁹²³ *Gocare bhikkhave, caratha sake pettike visaye*. Here the Buddha is adapting brahminical language, referring back to the 4 focuses of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*), “Do not stray away from the focuses of mindfulness, the way of the Buddhas.” *Pettika* means “departed ones,” but here refers to the past Buddhas. Comy (DA 3:847) quotes **Sakuṇagghi S** (S 47.6), on the fable of how a quail who strays from her customary terrain can be caught by a hawk, but not so if she does not (S 47.6/5:146 f), SD 81.2; see also **Sakuṇagghi J** (J 168/2:58 f); cf Miln 367 f.

⁹²⁴ *Na lacchati māro otāraṃ, na lacchati māro ārammaṇaṃ*. *Otāra* = BHS *avatāra*, “descent.” Here, *ārammaṇa* (canonical sense) means “basis (of consciousness)”; in the later comy sense, it means “meditation object.” See **Makkaṭṭa S** (S 47.7,9-10/5:149) + SD 41.7 (1.3.2) for comy.

⁹²⁵ *Kusalānaṃ, bhikkhave, dhammānaṃ samādāna,hetu evam-idaṃ puññaṃ pavaḍḍhati*. See §28b which also refers to Māra. Comy on *evam-idaṃ puññaṃ pavaḍḍhati* as “here the wholesome is twofold: that which brings rebirth, and that which ends rebirth” (*tattha duvidhaṃ kusalaṃ vaṭṭa,gāmī ca vivaṭṭa,gāmī ca*). There is a word-play on *vatta/vatti* (turning/turner) and *vaṭṭa/vivaṭṭa* (cycle/no cycle), the former refers to the person and his task, while the latter to samsara (rebirth) and nirvana: see §4b n. While the former refers to wholesome familial and social relationships, the latter refers to the practice of satipaṭṭhana. The peak (*pariyosāna*) of rebirth in the human world is that of “the wheel-turner’s glory” (*cakka.vatti,sirīvi,bhava*), while what ends rebirth is “the

These are our true ancestors, the great arhats, not the patriarchs merely on account of status. These are our awakened ancestors who did not take the name (*nāma*) to be the form (*rūpa*); they did not take the name to be the thing named: the Zennists have understood **the word to be the thing!**⁹²⁶

7.7 RESOLVING SELF-DECEPTION

7.7.1 Healthy self-formation and streamwinning⁹²⁷

7.7.1.1 Since this section is about self-deception, let us recap the early Buddhist teaching on **the self** (*attā*); that is, the 2-level presentation of Dharma teaching (that there is no abiding entity in us or anything else) and conventional teachings (the uses of “self”-idea to facilitate self-learning and communicating with others).⁹²⁸ It is vital to understand this since a central task of being human is to understand ourself and our role in the world. We have the capacity to see, evaluate, and ultimately accept or reject the identity we attribute to ourself or the “selfhood” imposed on us by others. The primary sources of self-deception are a failure to notice the things that threaten our healthy identity, and a failure to realize that we are oblivious of the world around us. If we are not mindful of what is happening around us, or do not properly understand our experiences or wholesomely respond to them, we will then fall prey to **self-deception**. We will then blissfully relegate ourselves to delusion and servitude, leashed to our subhuman routines like hamsters—like Sisyphus⁹²⁹—lustily running in a wheel to the glee of our masters, the Guru or Power Figure we look up to.

According to **William James** [4.1.1.2], our consciousness—our sense of self, or of meaning and purpose in life—must be constructed out of our experiences. If we are or have been oppressors, but have not rightly seen it so, we may be distressed when we are accused of misusing our power. When we rationalize or deny these allegations, we will not be able to upgrade our sense of self, but allow our reactions to morph into self-deception. Thus, the first step to overcoming self-deception is to courageously see ourself for what we are or have been, to accept it, and to resolutely work from there.

7.7.1.2 Werner Greve (1959-), a German specialist in developmental psychology and self-rehabilitation, stresses the fact that as a person strives to have an accurate (that is, satisfying) self-concept, their self-image evolves as a “compromise between stability and change.” On the one hand, we have a self that seems *stable* over time and provides a continuity of beliefs, traits, and skills that define what we are. On the other hand, we have to constantly adapt our beliefs and ideas about what we are as circumstances change and life buffets them. Greve suggests that self-deception occurs when the cognitive dissonance between our core (inner) self and our public self that is responding to life-changes becomes so great that we cannot harmonize the disparate or conflicting aspects we experience of ourself.

attainment of the paths, the fruits and nirvana” (*magga, phala, nibbāna, sampatti*) (DA 3:847 f). Here, we see the usage of both *kusala* (usu used in ref to meditative actions or actions supportive of mental cultivation) and *puñña* (usu used in ref to lay-oriented actions like good rebirth, heavenly rewards etc). Of course, they may also overlap. For a study, see **Beyond good and evil**, SD 18.7.

⁹²⁶ On the name is not the named, see SD 17.4 (4); SD 26.3 (5.1.2.5). On The statement is not the state, see SD 10.16 (1.3.2.3); SD 49.5b (4.6.4.2). On the ineffability of nirvana—the map is not the place; the word is not the thing; etc—see SD 26.3 (5.1.2.5); SD 44.1 (5.4).

⁹²⁷ This subsection is partly based on Cathryn A Baird, “Self-deception,” Sage *Ency of Business Ethics and Society*, 2018 6:3028 f.

⁹²⁸ On the 2 ways of reading the suttas correctly as explicit (*nīṭ’attha*) or as implicit (*neyy’attha*): **Neyy’attha Nīṭ’attha S** (A 2.3.4-5), SD 2.6b; SD 26.11 (1.2); **Poṭṭhapāda S** (D 9) @ SD 7.14 (4.1).

⁹²⁹ See SD 23.3 (1); SD 48.3 (1.2.2.2); SD 49.2 (4.3.2.1); SD 50.8 (1.2.1.7; 2.3.2.6).

For example, if we have a core belief that we are not racist and then are confronted with cases of implicit bias showing that we respond to those of different races in a discriminatory way, we have two choices. We can acknowledge that we *have* racist tendencies and then work to change our core self to adjust our beliefs and behaviours to root out implicit bias as much as possible. Or, we can deny that we have any implicit bias and continue not seeing or naming situations where we are, in fact, being racist. Since this work of adjusting a core self is so difficult, we will be persistently shadowed by self-deception.⁹³⁰

7.7.1.3 We have already noted how Buddhism portrays the human mind as a “party” or *aggregation of conflicting desires, beliefs and attitudes* [7.5.1.3], in which wholesome mental states conflict with unwholesome ones, resulting in inconsistent conduct and in frustration. A very important factor in determining which kind of mentality prevails, according to Buddhist teachings, is the kind of company that we keep.

Our friends and those we associate with tend to exert a strong influence on how we feel and behave, and their influence intrudes into what we believe, and affects our key values. It is important, therefore, to have salutary friends: the Buddha uses the term “**spiritual friends**” (*kalyāṇa, mitta*), that is, those who inspire and encourage us to always cultivate wholesome habits and attitudes.⁹³¹ If we are fortunate enough to have such friends then we are more likely to abandon bad habits and cultivate good ones.

The ultimate goal of spiritual friendship is, of course, that we eradicate our bad habits—so thoroughly that they are fully uprooted. Only at this final stage of our growth can we be said to be *fully integrated* as a true individual (*sappurisa*) of singular wholesomeness. A person who reaches this final stage is called **an arhat** (*arahata*), a noble being worthy of highest respect.⁹³²

7.7.2 “Seven at most”: The significance of the number 7

7.7.2.1 The Buddha identified 3 key psychological hindrances to personal growth and spiritual progress that prevent us from ever setting foot on the path of self-awakening, the opposite of a life of self-deceit. These are **the 3 fetters** (*ti samyojana*), that is, *self-identity view, doubt, and attachment to rituals and vows*. When we fully destroy these 3 fetters, we become streamwinners, that is, those who have gained the first step on the path of awakening, sure of full awakening in not more than 7 lives (*satta-k, khattu*). [3.3.4.1]

I have not found any explanation in the suttas or Commentaries, or from any teachers, dead or living, who could helpfully explain the significance of **the “7 lives.”** Let me, then, hazard an explanation. The earliest connection of **the number 7** with the Buddha, from the Buddhist texts, is when we are told that, at his birth, the Bodhisattva walks 7 steps, holds up his right hand (with his index finger

⁹³⁰ W Greve & D Wentura, “True lies: Self-stabilization without self-deception.” *Consciousness and Cognition* 19 2010: 721-730.

⁹³¹ “If one finds a sensible companion, | with whom to fare, who abides well and wise | then, overcoming all dangers, one should | wander with him in joy and mindfulness.” ... “If one cannot find a sensible companion ... it is better to fare alone: | there is no companionship with the foolish.” (Dh 328-330) See SD 34.1 (2.5); SD 5.18 (6.8-6.10).

⁹³² Oksenberg-Rorty says that if “the self is essentially unified or at least strongly integrated, capable of critical, truth-oriented reflection, with its various functions in principle accessible to, and corrigible by, one another, it cannot deceive itself. According to the classical picture, the self is oriented to truth, or at least directed by principles of corrigibility that do not intentionally preserve error.” (1985:144 = 1988:13). Hayes responds: “Although the classical picture that Rorty has in mind is no doubt that of classical Greece, what she says applies equally well to the portrayal of the ideal person in classical India; the prototypical arhant in Buddhism is, of course, the Buddha himself who was said to be incapable of uttering a falsehood, even in jest. A rather humorless fellow perhaps, but wholesome to the very core.” (1992:13 = 364 n8). Hayes, however, fails to note that the Buddha, true to his awakening, is capable of subtle humour, smiling at the world. See **The Buddha’s humour**, SD 98.1 (forthcoming).

pointing up) and declares that he is “the foremost” (the one and only) in the universe, the Buddha in our world.⁹³³

Interestingly, we are not told whether he could continue to walk after these 7 steps, or he reverted to normal capabilities. Hence, we must conclude that this was probably a vision seen by those present or by the story-teller, or simply a hagiographical myth included in the Buddha-legend to symbolically highlight his unique role in our world from the start (in terms of the Buddha narrative). This is a type of story-telling that is possible *after the fact* to highlight that fact.

7.7.2.2 Another significant episode in the Bodhisattva’s life related to the number 7 is when the child Siddhattha sits blissfully deep in **the 1st dhyana** under the jambul tree in the background of the excitement of the ploughing festival led by his father the rajah Suddhodana. The Bodhisattva Siddhattha is only 7 years old then. The canonical version of the story is recorded in **the Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (M 36), where the Buddha relates it in connection with dhyanic joy, which is declared to be wholesome, “not to be feared,” since it is helpful in our attaining of insight wisdom.⁹³⁴

The number 7 is also significantly connected with meditation, that is, in terms of **the cessation of perception and feeling** (*saññā, vedayita, nirodha*), which is the bliss of nirvana that can be experienced here and now but only by arhats (including the Buddha) and some non-returners. It is said that the meditator in cessation may stay up to 7 days in it. This limitation is due to the fact that the human body needs nourishment (at least water or fluids); otherwise, it will not last beyond that period.⁹³⁵

Further, immediately after the Buddha’s awakening, he spends **7 weeks** (7 x 7 days, ie, 49 days) meditating and, in between, reflecting on his awakening. We must remember that his last meal is in the forenoon of his awakening day, and then he goes without food for the 7 weeks that follow.⁹³⁶ This is probably to show the longest duration that a human (especially a good meditator) is able to remain healthy without any food (we are not told whether he drinks any water or not): artistic depictions of the Buddha during this period have imagine him as emaciated but alive and well.⁹³⁷

7.7.2.3 The number 7 seems to be regarded as auspicious and sacred since very ancient times. In Buddhism, based on its usage of the number 7, it seems to symbolize a natural and spiritual **completeness, conclusion, even perfection**.⁹³⁸ To begin with, there are the 7 colours of the rainbow: red, orange yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet (ROYGBIV). The ancient Indians, however, seemed to notice only 4-5 colours in the rainbow (blue, yellow, red, white and orange): they are depicted as the 6 rays of the Buddha’s aura (*cha-b, baṇṇa raṁsī*), that is, the 5 colours and a radiant composite.⁹³⁹ These colours are seen in the modern international Buddhist flag.⁹⁴⁰

Further examples of the early Buddhist usage of the number 7 are found in numerous **teaching septads** of wholesome states or those reflecting completion and completeness include the following:⁹⁴¹

⁹³³ On the “7 steps” episode in the Bodhisattva’s life, see SD 52.1 (3.4).

⁹³⁴ M 36,31 f/1:246 (SD 49.4); MA 2:290 f; Mvst 2:45; SD 52.1 (5.2). The Chin version is at T1428.781a4-6

⁹³⁵ SD 48.2 (3.5.2.2).

⁹³⁶ On the Buddha’s 7 weeks after his awakening, see **Bodhi Ss 1-3** (U 1.1-3), SD 83,13-15; **Nigrodha S** (U 1.4); **The first 7 weeks**, SD 63.1.

⁹³⁷ <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/fasting-siddhartha/QgGcgQazjovxxg?hl=en>.

⁹³⁸ For a mythological background of the number 7, see PED: satta⁴.

⁹³⁹ MA 2:184 f; DhA 3:214; DhA 13 f. On the *cha-b, baṇṇa raṁsī*: SD 27.5b (3.1.1); SD 36.9 (4.5.2); SD 63.1. See **Miracles**, SD 27.5 (2) The transfiguration. (This explanation of the colours attribution is speculative at best. Perhaps someone will give a better explanation in due course.)

⁹⁴⁰ On the modern Buddhist flag: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhist_flag.

⁹⁴¹ For other sets of 7s, see DEB: Numerical Dharmas.

The 7 noble treasures (<i>ariya,dhana</i>)	the 3-training model for the laity: ⁹⁴² faith, moral virtue, moral shame, moral fear, learning, charity and wisdom: Ariya Dhana S (A 7.5 + 6) + SD 37.6 (1.1-2).
The 7 sets of teachings (<i>dhamma</i>)	a full summary of <u>the Buddha's teachings</u> : 4 satipatthanas; 4 right strivings; 4 bases of success; 5 faculties; 5 powers; 7 awakening-factors; noble eightfold path; they comprise <u>the 37 limbs of awakening</u> (<i>bodhi,pakkhiya dhamma</i>): SD 10.1.
The 7 awakening-factors (<i>satta bojjaṅga</i>)	Bojjaṅga Sīla Sutta (S 46.3), SD 10.15.
The 7 bases (<i>satta-ṭ,ṭhāna</i>)	full comprehension of <u>the 5 aggregates</u> : Satta-ṭ,ṭhāna Sutta (S 22.57), SD 29.2.
The 7 stations of consciousness (<i>viññāṇa-ṭ,ṭhiti</i>)	the possible states of rebirth, SD 23.14.
The 7 noble individuals (<i>ariya or puggala</i>)	Kīṭā,giri Sutta (M 70) @ SD 11.1 (5.2).
The 7 lives at the most (<i>satta-k,khattu parama</i>)	one of the 3 kinds of streamwinners (<i>sotāpana</i>): Sa,upādi,sesa Sutta (A 9.12,8-10), SD 3.3(3). [7.7.2.5].

Significantly, we can see that these 7 septads represent the full range of the Buddha's teachings: from those for the laity to those for monastics, the 3 trainings, rebirth and the Buddhist cosmology, and beyond them into the path of awakening and nirvana.

7.7.2.4 Now, we have a very interesting note on a spiritually profound meaning of the number 7. In a number of places in the suttas, the Buddha is referred to as *isi,sattama*. This is a polysemic term that translates *literally* as "the 7th seer" ("seer" or *isi* here meaning "buddha"), that is, counting from the past buddha Vipassī down to our own Buddha. It also translates *idiomatically* as "the supreme seer," that is, the fully self-awakened buddha, of whom there is only one in any universe.⁹⁴³

Sakyamuni is unique, at least to us, because he is the buddha of our own time, thus opening the path of awakening up for us. He is said to be supreme in the sense that there is only *one* such buddha in any universe (there is neither need nor possibility for any other).⁹⁴⁴ The Buddha's teaching—which we call "early Buddhism," to distinguish it from later developments—is still available to us today, preserved in the Pali canon, and there are also renunciants in our midst who train in the early Buddhist path of meditation.

7.7.2.5 The word *sattama* [7.7.2.4] literally means "the 7th," and idiomatically, "supreme, the best." The first component of the phrase *satta-k,khattu parama* is *satta*, which, of course, means "seven," that is, "7 more (*khattu*) lives at the most (*parama*)," in reference to the streamwinner. This means that the best, the supreme (*sattama*), amongst humans, indeed, amongst all beings, the Buddha, has arisen in the world. He has opened up the best of paths—the noble eightfold path—for us, for all beings (Dh 273 f).

When we diligently reflect on the supreme fact of true reality, that of **impermanence**, we will *in this life itself* attain the path of awakening—this is guaranteed by the Buddha in **the (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1)—if not, we will surely attain streamwinning at the moment of our dying.⁹⁴⁵ We can thus call this our "supreme" practice as lay followers of the Buddha, so called because by overcoming the 3 fetters—*self-identity view, attachment to rituals and vows, and doubt*—we uproot our self-deception.

⁹⁴² This is the "simplified" 3 trainings for the laity (without need of dhyana), for the attaining of streamwinning, ie, **the 7 noble treasures** (*satta ariya,dhana*). For the 3 trainings in full (leading to arhathood), see **(Ti) Sikkhā S** (A 3.88), SD 24.10c; **Sīla samādhi paññā**, SD 21.6; SD 1.11 (5).

⁹⁴³ SD 49.8b (8.1.1.1).

⁹⁴⁴ See **Bahu,dhātuka S** (M 115,14), SD 29.1a.

⁹⁴⁵ S 25.1 (SD 16.7) or any of the 10 suttas of S 25, the Okkanta Saṃyutta.

We can then see ourself for *what* we truly are: not only are we capable of **self-reliance**, but without it there is no way to attain the path of awakening. We can and must make the effort in this life itself. Upon attaining the path, we will attain arhathood within 7 lives: this is our supreme effort towards awakening ourself. In other words, we are sure of awakening but the timing depends on further effort by us.

The reason for this is that the “**7 lives**” is not measured in *time* but by the kind of rebirth that we assume. For example, with our good karma, we may be reborn in Tāvātimsa, the heaven of the 33, where the lifespan is 500 celestial years, of which a day is about a single human lifespan! From this ratio, we can work out how long we may continue to live in great happiness, reducing our karmic potential for rebirth. When we are reborn in the lowest Brahma world, the lifespan of Great Brahma is 1 world-cycle (the lifespan of our universe). The lifespan of the highest of the formless brahmas is 84,000 world cycles! Imagine the length of the “7 lives” of true happiness as we move closer to awakening.⁹⁴⁶

7.7.2.6 One last point I would like to reflect on is whether the Buddha, when he was a bodhisattva, had attained **streamwinning**. We know that from the time that the Bodhisattva (the future Buddha Gotama) was the ascetic Sumedha, he aspired to buddhahood before Dīpaṅkara Buddha, who confirmed Sumedha’s future buddhahood. However, we are not told whether Sumedha became a monk under Dīpaṅkara or became a streamwinner. It is clear, however, that his life was then geared towards the path of awakening.

We are also not told of the number of lives that our future Buddha took before becoming Gotama. He could, of course, have been reborn in any of the higher dhyanic realms where he would outlive a number of other Buddhas. Finally, he himself becomes the 24th buddha after Dīpaṅkara, or the 28th buddha after Taṇhaṅkara.⁹⁴⁷

My understanding is that after having met Dīpaṅkara (which is itself a momentous turning-point in his life), Sumedha’s life would have changed so significantly that he would neither have any self-centred views, nor be attached to any rituals and vows, nor have any doubt regarding true reality as he has learned about it from the Buddha(s). Hence, effectively, he was a **streamwinner**. The only difference is that this was regarded as a natural process without any need of affirming it in terms of teaching-sets, which are, after all, for our practice.

This is just a seed-thought for reflecting on the Buddha, about how Sumedha struggled towards the path of buddhahood. As we search the suttas, meditate on the Dharma, and deepen our wisdom, we would surely have deeper and clearer insights into the life of the Buddha and his past, so that we will live our own Buddha-inspired lives until we ourself gain the path.

7.7.2.7 Since we have mentioned past buddhas and the Buddha’s past lives, let us examine how we should treat such stories in terms of self-deception. Are we deceiving ourselves by believing that such stories are true, when we have no way of knowing it? We should here apply what I call **the rule of context**, which is essentially about being guided by the principle of putting the “teaching above the teacher,” of putting principles above personalities; basically, we are asking: What is this teaching or story really about?

The Jātaka (the 10th book of the Khuddaka Nikāya) contains ancient verses, many of which have been taken from non-Buddhist sources. These verses must have been used by the Buddha to relate stories of his own past lives, through fables (stories with morals) familiar to his audience.⁹⁴⁸ The stories behind these verses, as we have them today, are preserved in **the Jātaka Commentary** (*jātak’aṭṭ-*

⁹⁴⁶ For a table of the 31 planes of existence (according to Pali sources), see Appendix 3, DEB or SD 1.7 (App).

⁹⁴⁷ On the past 28 buddhas, see SD 36.2 (3.4).

⁹⁴⁸ See K Crosby, *Theravāda Buddhism: Continuity, Diversity, and Identity*, 2013:103-105.

thakathā), most of them were old Indian fables adapted to relate how the Bodhisattva (the Buddha-to-be) cultivated certain personal virtues, and perfecting them⁹⁴⁹ over the 547 or more stories.⁹⁵⁰

While almost all the Jātaka stories are fables—that is, instructive Buddhist stories with morals—we do not have to *believe* that they are historical events, but instead emulate the morals they highlight, reflecting the Buddha’s teaching. However, the last 10 Jātaka stories are clearly Buddhist. They are lengthy epics, often with layers of embedded stories, and, as stories, are unique to Buddhism. Even then, such stories are not meant to be taken as “sutta teachings,” but as literature to be enjoyed, with morals to be remembered and lived.

We should skilfully put *the teaching above the teacher*, and be mindful of the truth these stories illustrate. With this application of the “**rule of context**” [1.2.7.1 n], we need not wonder whether such stories are true or not, just as we enjoy and learn from the great literature of the world. Indeed, the Jātakas are part of the world’s great literature.⁹⁵¹

7.7.3 Understanding the self

7.7.3.1 What limits our personal growth is often, ironically, **our own self-image**. Fortunately, for most of us, our acts of denial, repression and self-deception are mostly mundane and momentary. Notice when someone sees us as a good or willing listener, he would often present some political views which we would rather not hear, but we politely listen anyway. When we are open-minded—which means we can see a wider range of the situation—we know that he is just wrong, or not completely right.

On the other hand, how we respond to that person is even more interesting: are we more concerned with our own self-image or with the facts (that he’s wrong). We simply cannot see it as self-deceiving into everything we hear or don’t want to hear, or everything we say or don’t say, or even a forgetful moment or an embarrassing situation we were in. Even if self-deception is the root-cause of any or all of these, they are fairly harmless.

7.7.3.2 Yet, somewhere along the scale between “totally insignificant” and “extremely harmful” self-deception, we see familiar situations. If we accept Buddhist wisdom as right and the quest to “know thyself” as a fundamental part of human flourishing, of our personal growth then we know that self-deception undermines the central aims of the good life. Deceiving ourselves with what is clearly false or impossible is both existentially harmful and socially crippling: it is a symptom of our malaise, prompted by the unsettling awareness of our identity and potential.

French existentialist philosopher, **Jean-Paul Sartre** (1905-80), in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), invokes the concept of *mauvaise foi*, “bad faith,” to explain self-deception. He argues that many people are afraid to confront themselves, preferring to *follow prescribed norms and fulfil pre-assigned roles* rather than to strive for self-realization and self-fulfillment. He illustrates bad faith with a few examples: a woman’s hesitant reaction to a man’s advances, a waiter’s self-identification as “nothing more” than a waiter,⁹⁵² a homosexual’s unwillingness to acknowledge his sexuality. Our habits of postponement and misrepresentation force us to hide our true nature even from ourself.

⁹⁴⁹ Hence, they are called “perfections” (*pāramī*), of which there are 10, a set that rose in post-Buddha times. These are: (1) giving (*dāna*), (2) moral virtue (*sīla*), (3) renunciation (*nekkhamma*), (4) wisdom (*paññā*), (5) effort (*virīya*), (6) patience (*khanti*), (7) truth (*sacca*), (8) determination (*adhiṭṭhāna*), (9) lovingkindness (*mettā*), and (10) equanimity (*upekkhā*) (J 1:73; DhA 1:84); see SD 15.7 (2.4) (1) n.

⁹⁵⁰ There are certainly more than 547 stories: K R Norman, *Pali Literature*, 1983b:79 f. There are also canonical Jātakas embedded in the suttas, a canonical collection called **Cariyā,piṭaka** (the 15th and last book of the Khuddaka Nikāya). (Norman 1983b:79-84)

⁹⁵¹ For a list of the [Jātaka Index \(aimwell.org\)](http://aimwell.org). For complete translation (ed E B Cowell), click here: [Jataka Full Translation by E. B. Cowell: Epub, Kindle, Mobi – Reading Faithfully](http://www.dhammadownload.com/EBC/FullJatakaFullTranslationbyEBCowellEpubKindleMobi-ReadingFaithfully.pdf).

⁹⁵² Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* (1989) is a modern classic about a butler’s self-conditioned servitude. It received the 1989 Booker Prize for Fiction and the 2017 Nobel Prize for Literature. [4.5.3.2 n].

Sartre deplores this mode of life, for, while such strategies might serve as effective coping mechanisms in the short term, in the long run they are existentially paralysing.

7.7.3.3 This kind of self-deception, the sort rooted in conformity to norms or stereotypes, is extremely difficult to detect, is the most common, and is naturally the hardest to root out. This is especially clear in cases of discrepancy between what we profess and how we feel and behave. The point is that we don't always know ourselves as well as we think, and often we convince ourselves of that which is evidently false or highly improbable.

The fine line between resolution and self-deception often shows itself as the New Year draws close, when we are forced to concede that we have mostly, even totally, failed in our goals for self-improvement. Now we work to delude ourselves again with renewed wishful thinking. If self-deception is paradoxical, the experience itself is even more perplexing.

Unlike the immediacy of other experiences, we can only know *retrospectively* that we have been self-deceived, after the spell has been broken, since self-deception is always a passive reaction. Take the Greek myth of **Oedipus**, the mythical young king of Thebes. Fearing that the prophecies of patricide and incest will be fulfilled, he leaves his adopted family, and unknowingly returns to his own family. Though he is genuinely shocked and sickened at the discovery of his true identity, his *willful* ignorance leads to his tragic end.⁹⁵³

Despite his fear of patricide, why does Oedipus go on to kill an elderly man? Despite his fear of incest, why does he marry a widow without first investigating her background? An astute audience would have suspected that Oedipus must have been dimly aware of his true identity before the tragic revelation that leads him to be literally blinded. (At the story's end, he blinds himself.)⁹⁵⁴ Either he has repressed this awareness or deceived himself into unbelieving the painful truth until it was too late.⁹⁵⁵

7.7.4 Seeing ourselves as we truly are

7.7.4.1 Western philosophy and early Buddhism are generally divided in their understanding of the nature of **the mind**. Scholars who accept the Cartesian model of the unitary mind ("I think, therefore I am") [1.1.1.1] often have difficulties understanding or accepting early Buddhist psychology of mind. They are simply different models from different times: the former is a theistic notion meant to endorse Catholic teachings, the latter refers to a complex set of ideas analysing the nature of the mind that a modern psychologist is likely to find interesting and useful.⁹⁵⁶

As we near the close of our study, let us recap the early Buddhist teaching on self-deception. We begin with an overview of the Buddhist description of the mind, and the place of the unconscious (latent tendencies) in it.

7.7.4.2 According to early Buddhism, the mind comprises "many elements" (*bahu, dhātuka*): there is the mind or consciousness behind each physical sense-experience (of the eye, ear, nose, tongue and body), and, of course, the mind itself, as a sense-faculty (or mental faculty). In this specific sense, there is **the mind element** (*mano, dhātu*) [1.1.1.6], the natural objects of "pure" experience. Then, there are the mind-object element (*dharmā, dhātu*), and the mind-consciousness element

⁹⁵³ Oedipus is the anti-hero of the Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex* (Oedipus the king) by Sophocles, first performed around 429 BCE.

⁹⁵⁴ In Shakespeare's tragedy, *King Lear* (1606), in the middle of the play (Act 3 scene 7), Lear declares that though he has eyes, he is as good as blind since he is unable to see his own foolishness, for which he loses his kingdom.

⁹⁵⁵ See K Javanaud, "Buddhism and self-deception," Aeon+Psyche, 2019: esp 3. <https://aeon.co/essays/how-buddhism-resolves-the-paradox-of-self-deception>. If page is unstable, google "How Buddhism resolves the paradox of self-deception."

⁹⁵⁶ See Javanaud, "Buddhism and self-deception," Aeon essay, 2019:4.

(*mano.viññāṇa,dhātu*), which forms the last triad in the set of **the 18 elements**, as mentioned in **the Bahu Dhātuka Sutta** (M 115), thus:⁹⁵⁷

(1) the eye element	<i>cakkhu,dhātu,</i>
(2) the form element	<i>rūpa,dhātu,</i>
(3) the eye-consciousness element	<i>cakkhu.viññāṇa,dhātu;</i>
(4) the ear element	<i>sota,dhātu,</i>
(5) the sound element	<i>sadda,dhātu,</i>
(6) the ear-consciousness element	<i>sota.viññāṇa,dhātu;</i>
(7) the nose element	<i>ghāṇa,dhātu,</i>
(8) the smell element	<i>gandha,dhātu,</i>
(9) the nose-consciousness element	<i>ghāṇa.viññāṇa.dhātu;</i>
(10) the tongue element	<i>jivhā,dhātu,</i>
(11) the taste element	<i>rasa,dhātu,</i>
(12) the tongue-consciousness element	<i>jivhā.viññāṇa.dhātu;</i>
(13) the body element	<i>kāya,dhātu,</i>
(14) the touch element	<i>phoṭṭhabba,dhātu,</i>
(15) the body-consciousness element	<i>kāya.viññāṇa,dhātu;</i>
(16) the mind element	<i>mano,dhātu,</i> ⁹⁵⁸
(17) the mind-object element	<i>dhamma,dhātu,</i> ⁹⁵⁹
(18) the mind-consciousness element	<i>mano.viññāṇa,dhātu.</i> ⁹⁶⁰

While 1-15 refer to the sensing process at each of the physical sense-faculties, 16-18 refer to the purely mental experience. **The mind element** is what we may, for convenience, call the “process mind,” which is what probably is meant by the Cartesian mind: very simply, this is our “mental process.” This is how the mind works at any of the 5 physical senses, that is, the “5-door⁹⁶¹ process” (*pañca,dvāra vithi*),⁹⁶² and at the mind-door itself, that is, the “mind-door (cognitive) process” (*mano,-dvāra vithi*).⁹⁶³ Since these are “mechanical” mental processes, we shall leave them at that.⁹⁶⁴

⁹⁵⁷ On this diagram, see **Bahu Dhātuka S** (M 115,4), SD 29.1a.

⁹⁵⁸ The Abhidhamma describes the mind-element in more complex terms as including the consciousness that adverts [directs itself] to the 5 sense-objects impinging on the 5 sense-faculties (*pañca.dvār'āvajjana,citta*) [**Nimitta & anuvyañjana**, SD 19.14 (2)] and the consciousness that receives the object after it has been cognized via the senses (*sampañicchana,citta*).

⁹⁵⁹ The mind-object element includes the types of subtle material phenomena not involved in sense-cognition, the 3 mental aggregates of feeling, perception, and formations, and nirvana. Technically, it does not include concepts, abstract ideas, judgements, etc—these are incl in the notion of **mind-object** (*dhamm'ārammaṇa*), the mind-object *element* includes only things that exist by their own nature, not things constructed by the mind (M:NB 1324 n1077). This is as far as Abhidhamma goes. See SD 60.1b (2.1.1.6).

⁹⁶⁰ The mind-consciousness element is “pure thoughts,” ie, all types of mind-consciousness *except* the 5 sense-consciousnesses and the mind-element [above]. In other words, it comprises purely *mental* states arising via all the 6 sense-bases.

⁹⁶¹ The term, “door” (*dvāra*), is a metaphorical term for “sense-faculty”; hence, the “eye-door, ear-door, nose-door” and so on simply the eye faculty, etc—also called “the 5 sense-faculties” (*pañc'indriya*)—constituting the “5 physical sense-doors” (*pañca,dvāra*). The mind forms its own separate “door,” the mind-door (*mano,dvāra*). When the “6 senses” are taken as a set, the term **āyatana**, “(sense-)bases,” is used; hence, the 6 sense-bases (*saḥ-āyatana*): SD 29.5 (1.3). In early Buddhist psychology, the word “eye” (as an organ), means just that, and is not used in the psychological context. For details, see **Sal-āyatana Vibhaṅga S** (M 137), SD 29.5.

⁹⁶² Also called “mind process” (*citta vithi*) or “cognitive (or consciousness) process” (*viññāṇa vithi*) or “cognitive function” (*viññāṇa kicca*): SD 19.14 (2-4); SD 47.19 (3.2.2.3). On the mind-door (cognitive) process (*mano,-dvāra vithi*): SD 19.14 (3).

⁹⁶³ SD 19.14 (3).

It gets more interesting at the level of **the mind-object element**, that is, basically, the 3 mental aggregates of feelings (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), formations (*saṅkhārā*), and the experience of nirvana. Technically, self-deception, which is a karmically potent process, occurs as formations, that is, as part of the mind-object element. But it does not occur by itself, since it is a latent tendency (*anusaya*), rooted in the unconscious (hence, it is not part of any of the above as conscious processes).⁹⁶⁵ [2.1.1.4]

For a better understanding of how self-deception works, we may see the totality of the mental processes described as constituting our “self” (at least, a mental self). However, as we have noted, the “deception” arises from our unconscious, through the mind-object element, and arises as thoughts in our mind. The deception is then complete: we become what we think. But we mistake a process for a state; and we view our state as a status: we reify a delusion with the mind’s grammar of “I, me, mine” [7.6.1.2].

7.7.4.3 We can thus see that in the early Buddhist explanation of the mind, there are **mental “partitionings,”** that is, the conscious mind and its various processes and layers, including the unconscious. There are also **“temporal partitionings,”** since early Buddhism views the mind as an endless series that runs so long as we are awake or at “rest,” that is, it sinks into the life-continuum (*bhavaṅga*) during sleep and unconsciousness.⁹⁶⁶ In other words, our consciousness-stream is a series of discrete moments, something like an endless series of billiard balls or bouncing balls in a Newton’s cradle.⁹⁶⁷

Such a scientific model helps to show that self-deception does not require simultaneous belief in *p* and *not-p* (that something is true as well as not true). Instead, all that is required is an intention to induce the belief *not-p* at the time of believing *p*. In this case, the thought that we have rejected the Vinaya (for example) does not occur at all. Perhaps, if there were an inkling that the thought may arise, we at once invoke the belief that it is to our great merit that we *are* monks and studying Buddhism (however it is defined), and so on. In our daily life as “scholar monks,” we have forgotten all about the Vinaya, about reciting the Patimokkha, and so on: we have forgotten our act of deception.

When someone mentions that monks should keep to the Vinaya (like in this essay), we simply remain silent, letting the moments pass, pretending that it is not happening. There may be some sort of inner struggle at first, but with practice, we easily keep the idea out of our conscious mind. What matters is that temporal partitioning challenges the idea that *the act* of deceit and *the knowledge* of deceit must coincide. Deceiving oneself, therefore, is like deceiving somebody else, a more unusual case of lying.⁹⁶⁸

7.7.4.4 A profoundly unwholesome karmic nature of this kind of self-deception is that we have effectively pretended to be 2 different persons: the monk who is defined by the Vinaya, and the one who masquerades as a monk but does not keep to it. Although there is a separation in time between

⁹⁶⁴ On the cognitive process, see Abhs ch 4: Abhs:BRS 149-184; the 5-door process (153-162); the mind-door process (164-171).

⁹⁶⁵ For a graphic representation of the “location” of the latent tendencies (the unconscious), see **Fig 2.2.3** (SD 17.8b).

⁹⁶⁶ This is a general sense of “unconscious” here is meant neither awake nor aware and not responding to stimuli. The psychological “unconscious” (*anusaya*) refers to that part of our mind by which we act or don’t act without any knowledge of it.

⁹⁶⁷ **Newton’s cradle**, named after Isaac Newton, is a device that demonstrates conservation of momentum and energy by way of a series of small swinging spheres. When one on the end is lifted and released, the resulting force travels through the line and pushes the last one upward. The device is also known as “Newton’s rocker,” “Newton’s balls” or “Executive ball clicker.” See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newton's_cradle & <http://science.howstuffworks.com/newtons-cradle.htm>

⁹⁶⁸ See Javanaud 2010:5.

the two “acts,” they are linked by the same **continuity** (*santati*) in the flow of consciousness⁹⁶⁹ (as illustrated by Newton’s cradle) [7.7.4.3].

Another common explanation of self-deception appeals to **the psychological partitioning** between the different facets of the self or mind. Here, self-deception involves simultaneous assent to both *p* and *not-p*, but this is *not* paradoxical because of the multifaceted nature of the self [7.3.1.3]. Rather than treat the self as fully integrated, we see it as a process, the product of a complex structure composed of various elements. One part of the self can conceal its beliefs from another part, making self-deception possible.

According to Javanaud (2010), an advantage of this theory is that it accommodates different levels of self-awareness within one individual, explaining discrepancies between the conscious and unconscious mind. It is only in moments of introspection that the illusion of a unified self is cast into doubt.

The philosopher Amélie Oksenberg-Rorty at Harvard Medical School illustrates how this might work with the case of her colleague, Dr Laetitia Androvna:

A specialist in the diagnosis of cancer, whose fascination for the obscure does not usually blind her to the obvious, she has begun to misdescribe and ignore symptoms [in herself] that the most junior premedical student would recognize as the unmistakable symptoms of the late stages of a currently incurable form of cancer.

Androvna deflects the questions of her concerned colleagues away from her condition, though she does put her affairs in order (eg, by making a will). The mismatch between her behaviour and her consciously held beliefs suggests that, at some level, she recognizes her illness but is finding ways to keep her conflicting acknowledgements apart.⁹⁷⁰

7.7.4.5 Again, the sceptic may argue that psychological partitioning is incompatible with genuine instances of self-deception because this approach likewise undermines the identity of deceiver and deceived. From this perspective, if the self is divisible, then, to be sure, one part might deceive another, but is this *self*-deception? If we challenge the unity of the self, must we also challenge the idea of self-deception too?

According to Buddhism, the answer is *no*.

Early Buddhism does not explicitly discuss the problem of self-deception, at least not as it is understood in Western philosophy. It does, however, provide detailed accounts of **3 teachings** that, collectively, provide a response to both the philosophical and practical aspects of the problem. These are the teachings of:

- (1) nonself (*anattā*);
- (2) willful ignorance (*avijjā*); and
- (3) the 2 truths (*dve sacca*).⁹⁷¹

Although these teachings are variously interpreted by different schools, all of them agree that they can provide transformative insights into our own nature and true reality, thus removing our tendency for self-deception. Interestingly, while we (outside of Buddhism) tend to see self-deception as the exception rather than the rule, Buddhist psychology sees it as the default position. Most people are likely to repress and deny uncomfortable truths, deceiving themselves on an almost unimaginable scale about all manner of things.

⁹⁶⁹ See Abhs 41, Abhs:BRS 228.

⁹⁷⁰ Oksenberg-Rorty, “The deceptive self: Liars, layers, and lairs,” in (edd) McLaughlin & Rorty, *Perspectives on Self-deception*, Berkeley 1988:11-28, qu in Javanaud 2010:5 f.

⁹⁷¹ The usual Pali term is *dve (duve) sacca* (eg DA 2:383; MA 1:138; SA 2:77; AA 1:95; ItA 1:82; KvA 34). The Skt term *satya, dvaya* is, in Pali, *sacca, dvaya*, which however, in Comys, usu refers to the last 2 truths, ie, the ending (*nirodha*) to suffering and the path (*magga*) to its ending, [7.7.5.3]

7.7.4.6 From the Buddhist viewpoint, notes Javanaud, “the skeptic’s only success lies in the extent of their self-deceit: by defining the self in ways that make it impervious to change, they also strip it of potential.”⁹⁷² Specifically, Buddhists claim that we routinely convince ourselves that what is **impermanent** can be a lasting source of satisfaction. This illusion only reinforces our existential situation, which is one of profound **suffering**. From this perspective, even when false beliefs offer temporary relief from painful truths, self-deception *merely prolongs the inevitable*. Since none of us can stave off our death forever, each of us is eventually forced to confront the reality of our own impermanence.

The remedy to all this is a fearless acceptance of our own impermanence and insubstantiality. By abandoning our self-image as fixed centres of agency, Buddhists argue that we eliminate the stultifying effects of greed and hatred borne from egoism. This process eventually leads to liberation through self-awareness, consisting of awareness of the fundamental lack of any *self* at all. (Javanaud, 2010:6)

7.7.4.7 Nonself is the Buddha’s famously unique teaching, and also his most difficult and most frequently misunderstood one. The Pali texts present several arguments against the existence of an unchanging, transcendental, eternal self or soul. To better understand these arguments, it helps if we contextualize them against the backdrop of the Vedic view of the self. That is, that the innermost kernel of a person, his Soul (*ātman*), which is but a passing spark of the fundamental source and universal reality, the *Brahman*, which (in Vedism) is eternal and unchanging.

The Buddha rejects this on two fronts. First, if the self existed in this way, it could not engage in any worldly experience, and would instead stand inertly outside of time and space. It would thus bear no relation to the human being who lives and changes through time. Moreover, since experience confirms that everything is causally conditioned, hence subject to change and decay, an immutable self could never be empirically observed. Second, Buddhists argue that any obsession with a “fixed” self is morally problematic, a notion that initiates, perpetuates and aggravates selfishness. Belief in the self is therefore seen as both the symptom and the cause of deluded attachment.⁹⁷³

7.7.5 Understanding nonself

7.7.5.1 “The human person is a *process*, not a thing” (or, one is a process, not a *product*). Ironically, then, Buddhists are inclined to see belief in an abiding self as the most pernicious case of self-deception. This immediately raises the question: **If there is no self, who is the subject of self-deceit?** To usefully answer, we must invoke the teaching of **the 2 truths** [7.7.4.5], which highlights a distinction between conventional truth (*sammuti, sacca*)⁹⁷⁴ and ultimate truth (*param’attha sacca*).⁹⁷⁵

In his study of self-deception in different traditions, the philosopher **Eliot Deutsch** of the University of Hawaii demonstrates one of the ways in which the nonself theory is often misconstrued. He argues that Buddhists can “have little to say”⁹⁷⁶ about self-deception because they do not accept the ultimate reality of the metaphysical self. If this disqualifies Buddhists from debates on self-deception, it must also disqualify many Western philosophers who do not approach the paradox of self-deception with a unitary self in mind (including advocates of temporal and mental partitionings) [7.7.4.3].

⁹⁷² Javanaud 2010:6.

⁹⁷³ Javanaud, “Buddhism and self-deception,” 2010:6 f.

⁹⁷⁴ *Sammuti*, also spelt *sammatti* (from Skt *saṃvṛti*, “covered (up); concealed”); sometimes referred to as *pariyāya* or *sappariyāya*, “discursive, provisional,” and *param’atth* as *nippariyāya*, “precise, definitive” [5.1.1.10]. Geiger & Norman, *A Pāli Grammar*, PTS, 1994 §19.2.

⁹⁷⁵ SD 2.6b (1); SD 5.17 (5.3.7); SD 10.6 (3.3).

⁹⁷⁶ E Deutsch, “Self-deception: A comparative study,” in (edd) R T Ames & V Dissanayake, *Self and Deception: A cross-cultural philosophical enquiry*, SUNY Press, 1996:319.

On the contrary, although Buddhists reject the ultimate existence of the self, they accept the conventional (we might say, practical or functional) reality of conceptually constructed persons. And crucially, as we have seen, it is **the conventional person**—not an ultimate *self*—who expresses the full range of human emotions and deploys the tactics of self-manipulation, including self-deception.

7.7.5.2 Buddhists conceive of **conventional reality** in terms of conceptualization (*maññana* or *maññita*), a term which is rooted in √MAN, “to measure,” from which we derive the word *māna*, “conceit,” a measuring of self against others, a struggle between being and having. Hence, the concept of a **person** reflects nothing more than the imposition of this idea on to ephemeral elements or aggregates (*khandha*) of which we are composed.

There are **the 5 aggregates** (*pañca-k,khandha*), that is, form (the physical body), feelings (affective evaluation), perception (recognition of forms), karma-formations (intentional reactions) and consciousness (the mind underlying the whole process). None of these remain stable over time, causally connecting the past with the present, and both the past and the present aggregates defining future aggregates. This is sufficient for some definitive personal identity even though there is really no such thing as a numerically identical self.

In other words, we are reminded: the human person is a *process*, not a thing. Our language typically fails to communicate this fact, and our repeated use of the word “I, me, mine” only projects and sustains the illusion of the self as an underlying, constant, permanent feature of reality. We mistake the grammar for the language, and the language for the feelings and truths communicated and exchanged.

7.7.5.3 To explain how self-deception occurs, Buddhists distinguish ultimate truth from conventional truth. Like the temporal and psychological partitioning approaches, **epistemic partitioning**⁹⁷⁷ (knowing things as experienced and as part of a bigger picture) challenges *the identity* of the deceiver and the deceived. At the level of ultimate truth, there simply is *no self* who could be self-deceived. At the level of conventional truth, we see (or rather imagine) the person, who is really an illusion, and better thought of as “**a sequence of personalities**.”⁹⁷⁸ Unlike temporal and psychological partitioning, however, epistemic partitioning goes a step further. It not only explains the mechanism of self-deception but also contains the seeds of its elimination.

The Buddha’s teachings are renowned for their **therapeutic orientation**; self-deception thus seems to be *the antithesis of an authentic life of human flourishing*. Buddhism stresses that discerning truth, with right view as the first as well as underlying limb on the noble eightfold path, is preceded by and founded on moral fulfilment. We are then purified in both body (action and speech) and mind (thought). Liberation thus means that we free ourselves from ever committing any unwholesome deed.

The distinction between ultimate and conventional truth, then, not only explains the arising (*samudaya*) of our illusions, but helps us to overcome them by seeing through them. Seeing through into the ending (*nirodha*) of their deceptive bent, we also discover the path to spiritual liberation. These are the “2 truths” (*sacca,dvaya*) that the Commentaries often speak of.⁹⁷⁹ [7.7.4.5]

7.7.5.4 The goal of this therapeutic process is the complete alleviation of suffering, especially the suffering arising from self-deception. **Epistemic partitioning** of both *conventional and ultimate knowledge* results in 2 modes of knowing, which we may respectively call the cognitive/intellectual

⁹⁷⁷ Javanaud’s term (2010:7).

⁹⁷⁸ Javanaud’s uses the interesting phrase “a sequence of *person-stages*,” of which the above is a synonym (only that the above highlights the abstract rather than the physical or “personal” aspects).

⁹⁷⁹ MA 1:223; SA 2:18; ItA 1:45.

and the affective/practical.⁹⁸⁰ We might know ultimately that everything is *impermanent* and *insubstantial*, yet remain attached to merely conventional things, especially our self-view. [1.1.2.4]

In “epistemic partitioning” or “part-knowing,” we see our experience only as a shadow or reflection of true reality (yet, we don’t even know this): we are like **Narcissus** falling in love with the moment.⁹⁸¹ Hence, we fail to see its significance, much less to relate it to the bigger picture, freeing ourselves from a narrow mind of provisional views. This is a cognitive or intellectual view of things where we split hairs over the moment; but the moment passes as soon as it arises. Hence, we need to **feel** our experiences with an affective or practical vision: it’s like letting all the musical notes flow as a living stream of sounds, creating beauty to uplift us. Hold a note, the music dies (that’s the truth); free the notes, feel them freely, live the beauty.

7.7.5.5 When we cling to a single musical note, refusing to let it go, we hear a sound as a “truth,” but not hearing the rest of the piece, we miss the beauty of sounds. **Beauty** is seeing impermanence for what it is, as what we really are. It is not an enemy: how can it be when it is a living part of us? When we fear letting go of the moment, we are dead to the present; when we see the passing moment with joyful mindfulness, we live in its rising and falling: this is the truth that frees us. Either way, we make an effort: the former is incomplete and unwholesome, the latter fulfilling and wholesome.

We hide in willful ignorance (*avijjā*) of **decay and death** (*jarā, maraṇa*) since we cannot bear to lose the things we hold most dearly, especially our own life. However, once we internalize the truth of impermanence, we will see how delusional compulsions for transient things will be gradually undermined and removed. Just as there is ultimately no real self, neither are there ultimately any real tables, chairs and so forth. The identity we assign to composite things made up of parts is just the product of mental construction, reflecting our ingrained tendency to impose *structure, stability and substance*.

Though we *know* that things **change and decay**, we *act* as though they are *permanent*. Such a discrepancy between conscious cognitive vision and innate affective drive signals self-deceit. Put simply, we display a willful ignorance of decay because we cannot bear to lose the things we hold most dear. **Pygmalion** sculpts a statue of Galataea that appears so beautifully real that he falls in love with her. Aphrodite plays along and brings her to life, but Galataea must now always be *apart* from Pygmalion. Only when he realizes that she is but an external expression of his inner beauty, will he joyfully know that she is always in him, *a part* of him.⁹⁸²

7.7.5.6 Why, then, do Buddhists treat **conventional truths** as *truths* at all? Indeed, if they are nothing but convenient fictions, isn’t this a distortion of truth’s meaning? This is because we see the healing dimension of this teaching as justifying this strategy: we start with the common frivolities of the world, a belief in the self, false and unhelpful. Seeing this for what it is, we look deeper and see the true nature of a person, a *being*: this is the key to harvesting the fruits of personal growth.

Mindfulness forces us first to confront the wide chasm between our constructed self-image and the ultimate truth of our real nature. Secondly, mindfulness helps us to bridge that chasm by becoming increasingly aware of the workings of the mind and its deceptive tendencies so that we no longer repress and deny our true feelings.

Javanaud closes her insightful essay (2010:8) by noting that it may strike the modern reader as patently wrongheaded to suggest that a “religious” tradition (such as Buddhism) contains the seeds of a solution more satisfying than secular wisdom. For, understandably, many see religious belief as coterminous with *wishful thinking* and incompatible with reason. However, the Buddhist response sketched here depends exclusively on arguments about human nature that are equally open to dispute and defence. The proof then is in the pudding.

⁹⁸⁰ For the application of this dichotomy of the cognitive and the affective to faith (*saddhā*), see SD 10.4 (2.2).

⁹⁸¹ SD 34.1 (2.5.2.2).

⁹⁸² On the Greek myth of Pygmalion and Galataea, see SD 17.6 (3.1.3.6), SD 51.18 (2.3.1.5), SD 56.1 (4.3.1.3).

We take no recourse to mystical or non-empirical claims; and because the problem of self-deception is more *personal* than many of philosophy's other problems, viable solutions must work both in theory and in practice. Since there are countless forms of self-deception, our "thick-coming fancies" make the effectiveness of a universally applicable remedy unlikely. Buddhists would thus agree with Macbeth's doctor that "Therein the patient must minister to himself."⁹⁸³

This self-ministry that forms the core teachings of early Buddhism is about:⁹⁸⁴

- (1) discerning **self-deception**, or at least its symptoms,
- (2) understanding of how it arises (or how they arise),
- (3) understanding and working on its ending,
- (4) thus awakening to true freedom.

— — —

220822 221205 230710 230809

⁹⁸³ Shakespeare's Macbeth (Act 5, scene 3); Javanaud 2010:8.

⁹⁸⁴ The 4 truths are here arranged as 1-2-4-3, ie, the practice sequence: **Mahā Saḷ-āyatanika S** (M 149,11 etc) + SD 41.9 (2.4); SD 53.26 (2).

Sutta Discovery (SD) Publication Project (since 2002)

“The most detailed Sutta translation today”

Why support our sutta translation work: Reasons and history

(1) 20 reasons for Sutta Discovery series

1. It is a global resource for Buddhism scholars, Buddhist teachers, students, monastic and lay.
2. The SD series is based on themes to sustain an interesting and connected reading. (For example, SD 37 is on Right Livelihood.)
3. A modern commentarial approach with detailed notes on difficult words, names, and doctrines; and bibliographies.
4. The Sutta’s peyyāla (repetitive cycles) (especially those on Dharma training) are translated in full, for reflection by monastics and lay practitioners.
5. The works are paragraphed, subtitled and numbered in a reader-friendly way for easy reading in a scribal tradition (in contrast to the oral tradition).
6. A high standard of referencing and cross-references to other Suttas, essays, journal articles, etc, that are helpful to specialists and students, for discussion or self-study.
7. A broad-based translation that uses alternative translations, amplified translations, and comparative studies with Sanskrit, Chinese and other texts where necessary.
8. It includes a digest of the related and latest scholarly researches and writings, summarized, explained and discussed.
9. They serve as comprehensive sources and resources for study and teaching notes for Dharma teachers, researchers and students.
10. Easy-to-use handbook for monastics (especially forest monks) and practitioners for Sutta readings (for recording on MP3 etc) and for meditation.
11. Socially-engaged studies and essays to inspire social workers: it addresses various social and historical issues affecting Buddhism and religion.
12. The SD texts are freely available online at our website, <http://dharmafarer.org>, and also separately on Micro SD cards and USB drives. They can be freely used as is.
13. The SD texts form the basis of an online Buddhist studies course.
14. The SD series are the materials for other reference projects such as *Dictionary of Early Buddhism* (DEB), *Sutta Title Index* (STI), *Dictionary of Early Buddhist Names* (DEBN), *Dhamma Numerical Index* (DNI) and *Dictionary of Literary Terms* (DOLT) for *Dhamma Studies*.
15. The translated Suttas will be published separately according to Nikaya, that is, *The Long Texts*, *The Middle-length Texts*, *The Connected Texts* and *the Numerical Texts*.
16. The SD series is inspired by the Mere Buddhist vision, simple Dharma-spirited living that brings awakening in this life itself.
17. The SD series is the basis for Dharma-based reforms in Buddhism today.
18. It is a historical and practical guide to early Buddhist meditation.
19. A helpful introduction to the study of key Pali terms and passages.
20. An excellent and enduring gift of the Dharma to others.

(2) Brief history of the Sutta Discovery

The Sutta Discovery series started with the NUS Buddhist Society weekly Sutta Study Group (SSG) classes in February 2002 and the Buddhist Fellowship in February 2003. A new volume of translations and essays (A4 size, averaging 180 pages) was released every 3 months. These new books were studied at Poh Ming Tse (every 2nd & 4th Sundays), Singapore Buddhist Mission (every 3rd Sunday) and The Minding Centre (every Wednesday, since 2006). By 2022—20 years later—Piya had completed over 80 SD volumes.