

Overcoming the 5 mental barrennesses (1 of 2)

Source: (Majjhima) Ceto,khila Sutta, how to free the mind and liberate it (M 16, SD 32.14).¹ by Piya Tan © 2017.

1.1 The Ceto,khila Sutta, the “discourse on mental barrenness,” discusses 10 impediments to spiritual growth and awakening. These 10 impediments are the 5 mental barrennesses (*ceto,khila*) and the 5 mental bondages (*cetaso vinibandha*). The Buddha, unprompted,² gives the teaching to an assembly of monks in Anātha,piṇḍika’s park monastery.

4.1 MENTAL BARRENNESS

4.1.0 Definition

“**Mental barrenness**” refers to unfertile ground, where nothing can grow [3.1.1.1; 3.1.2]. When the mind is barren, it lacks any kind of support for spiritual growth and awakening. If we are mentally barren, we will never evolve as a Buddhist or a spiritual person. Hence, we can say that this is having a negative mindset that is not conducive to the Dharma life.

The 5 mental barrennesses (*ceto,khila*) [3.2] refer to those **cognitive aspects** of our life that only serve to hinder our spiritual development and awakening in this life [3.1.1.2]. They reflect our negative attitudes towards the core and foundation of our spiritual life, that is, the 5 catalytic factors that are the 3 jewels, Dharma training and spiritual fellowship [§§15-19]. We will examine the overcoming of each of these 5 barrennesses in terms of the Dharma and right practice.

4.1.1 “Neither doubtful nor uncertain, but committed and faithful in the teacher” [§15]

4.1.1.1 In post-Buddha times, including our own times, the lack of faith in the historical Buddha is ironically based on the views that either he is dead or that he is not. These are speculative views on the posthumous state of one “thus-gone” (*tathāgata*), which the Buddha advises us to avoid.³ Those who view the Buddha as “dead,” feel abandoned or helpless, and turn to rituals and vows for succour and salvation. Such views turn monastics into priests who dispense blessings and absolve us of our karmic lapses and ill fortune. The Buddha rejects such an externalization of our “refuge” or “locus of control”: see especially **the (Pañcaka) Itṭha Sutta** (A 5.43).⁴

Those who reject the Buddha’s “death,” tend to view him as some kind of “projection” of a cosmic Buddha or Dharma-body (like a Godhead). They regard the historical Buddha as non-existent, that is, merely as a phantom-figure or holographic image who pretends to be human, to teach and so on, Such an wild imaginative theology is totally alien to the early Buddhist texts, and should be rejected outright.

¹ SD 32.14: <http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/32.14-Majjhima-Cetokhila-S-m16-piya.pdf>

² On the occasions for the Buddha’s teaching, see **Vatthūpama S** (M 7), SD 28.12 (2.1).

³ These speculative questions on the Buddha’s posthumous state are the tetralemma on whether after death, the Buddha (1) exists, (2) does not exist, (3) both, and (4) neither: see **Anurādha S** (S 22.86,4) SD 21.13; **Cūḷa Māluṅkyaputta S** (M 63,2.2) + SD 5.8 (2+3); **The unanswered questions** SD 40a.10 (3-4).

⁴ A 5.43/3:47-49 (SD 47.2).

Such speculative views are the reason for their believers' lack of faith in the historical Buddha, his teachings and spiritual community. Or, they are relegated to some "inferior vehicle or path," while they create new Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and paradises, effectively rejecting all the key teachings of the historical Buddha.

4.1.1.2 We do not have "faith" in the Buddha as a person or agent (such as a God-idea or guru figure)—but as the one who has discovered the path to awakening, and we are his followers, as taught in **the Sambuddha Sutta** (S 22.58).⁵ The awakening that we will attain as arhats is the same as the Buddha's awakening: it is just prisoners who have been freed from prison once their sentences has been served or are given their freedom. The freedom of one prisoner is not different from that of any of the others.

4.1.1.3 Note that the Sutta says that we should be committed and faithful "in the teacher" (*satthari*), not in "the Buddha." This is important to note: in terms of our practice, the Buddha is what the Buddha does, so to speak. Almost immediately after his awakening—as recorded in **the Gārava Sutta** (S 6.2)—he declares that he himself will "live in dependence of the Dharma" (*tam eva dhammaṃ ... upanissāya vihareyyam*).⁶

With this vital statement, the Buddha effectively "transfers his charisma" to the Dharma—the Dharma is the teacher. This important event and truth is endorsed again by the Buddha during his last days—as recorded in **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16)—when he declares to Ānanda:

"Ānanda, it may be that you may think:

'Gone is the Teacher's word! We have no teacher.'

It should not be seen thus, Ānanda, for **the Dharma and the Vinaya** [the teaching and the discipline] that I have taught and explained to you, will, at my passing, be your teacher.

D 16,6.1/2:154 (SD 9) + nn

The Buddha's declaring the Dharma to be our teacher means that the Buddha effectively lives on, as it were as our teacher, even to this day—that is, as long as we understand, practise and realize the Dharma. This Dharma, then, is like the Constitution of a democratic country. We may not have faith in the human leaders, but we have faith that the Constitution defines our nation and protects our basic rights as citizens. Hence, it is clear why the Buddha places the Dharma above even himself.

For that reason, too, we should have our full and wise faith in the Buddha, even after his passing, especially today when his teachings face greater challenges than ever before, and is vitally needed than ever before.⁷ **The Buddha's passing** finally authenticates his own teaching and confirms the nature of true reality—that everyone, all that exist—whether unawakened or awakened, human or divine, animate or inanimate, in the past, present or future—is subject to change, unsatisfactoriness and non-self.⁸

⁵ S 22.58 (SD 49.10).

⁶ S 6.2,8/1:138-140 (SD 12.3).

⁷ On Sāriputta's having "no faith" in the Buddha, see SD 40a.8 (5.6.2). On Citta the householder's statement that it is "not by faith" in the Buddha that he has attained spiritual states of distinction, see SD 40a.8 (5.6.3).

⁸ This is an abridgement of the "totality formula" summarizing the nature and extent of the 5 aggregates (*pañcakkhandha*), ie, "whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near": **(Dve) Khandha S** (S 22.48) + SD 17.1a (3); **Anatta,lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59,17-21) SD 1.2.

This power of awakening is not embodied merely in the Buddha himself, but more so—but the transferring of his charisma onto the Dharma, not upon himself—he has allowed the Dharma to preserve and propagate the possibility for self-awakening down to this day, and to the foreseeable future. For this, we unreservedly rejoice in wise faith in and gratitude to the Buddha.

4.1.2 “Neither doubtful nor uncertain, but committed and faithful in the Dharma” [§16]

4.1.2.1 According to the **Gāraṇa Sutta** (S 6.2) and the **Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), as stated above [4.1.1.3], the Dharma is our one and only refuge. It is the Dharma that the Buddha himself respects (*gāraṇa*), and it is the realization of the Dharma that there are those who form the sangha of noble saints. Traditionally, this is the Buddha Dharma (*buddha,dhamma*),⁹ but a better known term is the Buddha’s teaching (*buddha,sāsana*).

In worldly terms, the Dharma is “**early Buddhism**,” the teachings of the historical Buddha in the early Buddhist texts called *suttas* (*sutta*). Although *sutra* is also commonly used amongst the Theravāda communities, more broadly it has come to refer to post-Buddha works by various teachers and writers propounding their own views and ideologies.

4.1.2.2 The teachings of the historical Buddha are preserved as the “**early Buddhist texts**” (EBT) in the *Ti,piṭaka*, which is also called “the Pali canon,” since it uses Pali throughout. It helps to see these early Buddhist texts, especially the *suttas*, to be like computer programmes. Such programmes need to be run for their benefits to take effect. They may not be perfect programmes—all computer programmes somehow have errors and glitches—but if we run them, we will work fine enough for us to have a very good idea of what the Buddha intends us to know, practise and realize for ourselves.

Merely reading and studying computer programmes—even all the world’s computer programmes or even just the best ones—will not bring us awakening. The EBTs are the Buddha’s programmes for us to run in our computer that is the mind: it teaches us to cultivate moral virtue (such as keeping a minimum of the 5 precepts), mental concentration (at least being mindful of our thoughts, speech and actions), and insight wisdom (to at least habitually reflect on the impermanence of all existence). These are the **3 trainings**¹⁰ for happiness and self-awakening in this life.

4.1.2.3 Faith in the Dharma does not entail neither rituals nor vows. When we turn to rituals and vows to seek solace or find solutions for our problems, then we are looking for answers *outside* of ourself when the problems are caused from *within* our own minds. To be faithful to the Dharma means to stay with it from the start, right in the middle, to the very end: *the start is a morally upright life; the middle is a calm and mindful habit; and the end is wisdom into the impermanence of all things*.

For this reason, the Buddha declares amongst his last instructions that the highest respect or worship we can show the Buddha is not praying or even letting playing divine music and song to fill the air, or rain flowers and scent from the skies, but the personal practice of the Dharma to restrain our senses and speech, to free the mind of defilements, and wise up to the impermanent nature of all things—in short,

⁹ This term is rare in the *suttas*, found only in later works, eg, **Vinaya** (V 2:29 ×2), **Buddha,vaṃsa** (B 13-15, 26), **Apadāna** (Ap 1.6, 2:587, 594), **Milinda,pañha** (Miln 285) and the *comys*.

¹⁰ See **Sīla samādhi paññā**, SD 21.6.

to keep the precept, be mindful and meditate, and cultivate wisdom through learning and seeing. Practising the Dharma is the “supreme worship” (*paramā pūjā*), declares the Buddha.¹¹

This is true faith in the Dharma. We must reflect on the significance of the Buddha placing the Dharma even above himself. Then, we will have our full and wise faith in the Dharma, even after his passing—for, the Buddha as the teacher is in the Dharma: that is why it is called the Buddha Dhamma.

4.1.3 “Neither doubtful nor uncertain, but committed and faithful in the sangha” [§17]

4.1.3.1 The **sangha** (*saṅgha*) here is the third of the 3 jewels—this is the noble sangha (*ariya,saṅgha*) or community of noble individuals (*ariya,puggala*). It is not the conventional sangha (*sammuti,saṅgha*) of monks and nuns who have taken up the training to work for awakening in this life or should be doing so. Even in the case of the conventional sangha, we should not be misled by the external appearances or status or titles or attainments of its members.

The respect we show to such conventional monastics is, firstly, a reminder of their avowed task of working for awakening in this life itself. Secondly, we respect them for their moral virtue, well trained mind and compassionate wisdom. If they should renege on their avowed spiritual task or be slack in their 3 trainings, then, it is not proper to show them any respect, but just to ignore them.

Otherwise, we may well end up having blind faith to those who are only parasiting on our faith and gullibility. We become a part of the conditions that will surely bring about the Dharma-ending age for us.¹² This Dharma-ending age may not be a world-wide or society-wide phenomenon, but it will affect us personally: it’s like being blinded by light. What should be showing us the way, is instead misguiding us and leaving us in karmically precarious situations.

4.1.3.2 There are at least two important ways of having **wise faith in the sangha**. *The first* is that of recollecting of the sangha (*saṅghānussati*), mindfully recalling the struggles and spirituality of the great saints, especially the arhats, of the Buddha’s time. Through the lives and teachings of these noble saints, we can widen and deepen our experience and understanding of the Dharma.

The second way of having wise faith in the sangha is to emulate the good examples set by these great and noble saints. If we hear the call of **renunciation**, and are independent enough to heed it, then we should find a good teacher or monastery to prepare us for such a life. The most crucial time for us as renunciants are the first 5 years of tutelage (*nissaya*), the time and experience that actually makes us a monk or a nun in terms of our personality, not just the robes and appearances.

4.1.3.3 As monastics, our avowed task is to work for awakening in this life itself. Hence, if we plan to be a well-educated monastic, it is only proper to complete our university education as a lay person first, and then renounce when we have graduated and are ready. A monk with a career—any kind of job with wages, or dealings with money—is a contradiction in terms, with serious karmic consequences.

If we diligently commit ourself to monastic training and live in a reclusive contemplative ambience, we are likely to be able to attain arhathood or non-returning in this life itself, if not, at the moment of

¹¹ **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16,5.3.2) + SD 9 (7.2).

¹² On false monastics, see **Dakkhiṇa Vibhaṅga S** (M 142,8) SD 1.9; **Dh 307** SD 19.1(6.3); SD 49.3a(2.1.3); SD 28.9b. See also **Dharma-ending age**, SD 1.10.

passing away. Otherwise, our efforts are never wasted, since they form the karmic basis to expedite our spiritual efforts in the next or subsequent life.

4.1.3.4 If, for any reason, we think that it is difficult, even impossible, to attain arhathood or non-returning in this life, then we should aspire to **streamwinning**. In fact, this is the minimum that we as avowed Buddhists, monastic or lay, should aspire to. Our main preparatory practices are diligently keeping the precepts (at least the 5 precepts), and keeping ourself mindful, if possible (but not necessary) with deep meditation. Our key mindfulness in our aspiration to streamwinning is **the perception of impermanence** (*anicca,saññā*).¹³ A streamwinner is said to have the qualities of wise faith in the 3 jewels, and a moral life that is praised by the noble saints.¹⁴

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¹³ See **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), SD 16.7.

¹⁴ These are the 4 limbs of a streamwinner (*sotāpanassa aṅga*) **(Tad-ah') Uposatha S** (A 3.70,4-7), SD 4.18; **Pañca Vera Bhaya S 1** (S 12.41,10-14), SD 3.3(4.2).