

SD 64.12j**Attha,vyañjana Sutta****The Discourse on the Spirit and the Letter****A 2.40**

Theme: Dharma as truth and teaching

1 Sutta summary and Commentaries**1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY**

The Attha,vyañjana Sutta (A 2.40) records the Buddha's warning that the suttas are wrongly read in terms of the meaning (*attha*) or the letter (*vyañjana*), this brings untold unhappiness for both gods and humans. The suttas should be faithfully and properly grasped in *both meaning and letter* so that the Dharma will prosper, benefitting both gods and humans.

1.2 SUTTA COMMENTARIES (AA 2:143,10-18)**1.2.1 "With wrongly grasped" (*duggahitehi*) [§2; 1.2.2.1]**

1.2.1.1 The phrase, "**with wrongly grasped**" means "having misunderstood" (*uppaṭipāṭiyā gahitehi*) the text [1.2.2.2], that is, misreading the it and missing its spirit. When we lack proper Dharma training and practice, and try to translate a text or to explain it, we are likely to frame it in the context of our lack Dharma understanding or lack of Dharma experience. This is not to say that we purposefully make bad translations or bad interpretations. Rather, so long as we are unawakened, even we have a deep interest and love for Dharma but lack proper Dharma experience, we are at best guided by our ken, piety and biases.

We see a lot of such errors and uncertainties in the early English translations of the Pali suttas. However, considering these are pioneer works, we must admire the skill and diligence in these translation efforts, which serve as the basis for better future translations (that is, the translations we have today). A translation is thus at best a guide for our Dharma understanding, with which we shape our practice to gain a better understanding of true reality. As our grow in wisdom, we then better understand the Pali texts. With a growing familiarity of the texts, we then re-read the translation with even better understanding. In this sense, early Buddhist teachings are "**the timeless texts and living translations.**"

1.2.1.2 The Subcommentary adds:

"By '**wrongly grasped**' (*duggahitehi*) [§2] is meant poorly grasped in meaning and phrasing, (mis)-understood by distorting through omission, excess, word inversion, mispronunciation, etc." (AAṬ:Be 2:29). We will look at some examples of these in the next section.

1.2.2 "(Consisting of) misleading words" (*vyañjana-p,patirūpakehi*) [§2]

1.2.2.1 The Commentary explains this phrase as meaning "by what resembles the literal word, obtained by the art of letters [philology, etc]." An inexperienced or careless translator may ignore or misinterpret compounds or parse Pali grammatical forms as in English rather than following the Pali idiom. Hence, some translators may have difficulties in appreciating the richness of key Pali terms like *dukkha* ("suffering") and *nibbidā* ("revulsion"), and try to render them in polite or "modern" terms which effectively water down their sense and significance.

1.2.2.2 Moreover, when we are familiar with well-known words and terms in other religions, in science, or in psychology, for example, we are inclined to apply them as Pali or Buddhist categories. A commonly accepted translation of *bhikkhu*, for example, is “monk.” It is unlikely to be the rule that we should always think of a Christian *monk* every time we hear the word! Words are ultimately defined by usage, not by dictionaries (which mainly record such usages).

Often there are advantages in using a familiar or common English word, even when it is found in other religions, but which historically predates those religions (words like “god,” “soul,” “angel”). It helps, however, that when we do use such words, especially for the first time (or in the primary or main occurrence of such words) in our translation, to explain the word’s usage and significance in Buddhism.

1.2.3 Words and their uses

1.2.3.1 There are, of course, words that have had a long dark history of unbuddhist usage; examples are words like “sin” for *pāpa*, and “Soul” (note the initial capital) for *attā* (Skt *Ātman*). Here, we have a choice of translating *pāpa* as bad or evil (some however fear “evil” because of the way some God-believers have used it!). On the other hand, we cannot simply ostracize “soul” or “evil” just because it was used by non-Buddhist Indian traditions or in other religions.

It is helpful to know that early Buddhism rejects the theistic Soul. But the term *anattā* goes much further than merely rejecting the Soul; the term highlights *the lack of any abiding entity or “self” in any state*. Hence, the term nonself is a more helpful translation for *anattā*. Moreover, it would be sad if we piously reject “soul” when it is used in richly expressing *the spiritual, moral or artistic qualities in a person or a work*.

1.2.3.2 On a deeper level, we may see a confounding of similar concepts for those who may not be aware of the **polysemy** that characterizes Pali. Terms like *saṅkhārā* (“formations”) and *kāya* (“body”), for example, may sometimes refer to the 5 aggregates as a whole. “Feelings” (*vedanā*) in early Buddhism has a special sense that may overlap with “joy and pain” (*sukha, dukkha*), but their contexts should be carefully understood and distinguished.

Polysemic words sometimes baffle even the best translators who have to decide on their sense/s or usage as applicable to the context. The term *sūkara, maddava* in the Mahā, parinibbāna Sutta (D 9),¹ for example, may refer to tender pork, a kind of mushroom, young bamboo shoots, or even truffles.² We should thus have some familiarity with Indian social history, culture and natural history of India of the Buddha’s time; or we should be able to access expert sources on these topics to quote them as helpful references and sources.

A polysemic term like *atta, dīpa* should be properly rendered as “self as an island,” which is supported by the Sanskrit cognate, *ātma, dvīpa* (Mvst 1:334). Modern translators sometimes rendered the phrase as “self as a lamp.”³

Certain words like *pāricārikā* and *pāda, pāricārikā* can be troublesome, since they can mean “servant, attendant” or “follower, devotee.” T W Rhys Davids, in his translation of **the Sakka, pañha Sutta** (D 21), rendered it as “wife” (D:RD 2:305);⁴ this is echoed by Malalasekera in his *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names* (1937 2:384), by M C Walshe in his *Dīgha* translation (1995:325), and by N Mudiyanse in his “Kuvera” article in the *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism* (1999:267).

¹ D 9,4.18 f/2:126 (SD 9 (9.6.2; 13.2)).

² DA 2:568; UA 399. See SD 9 (13.2.2.3).

³ SD 3.1 (3.3).

⁴ D 21,1.10.2/2:270,15 f (SD 54.8). See also **Jana, vasabha S** (D 18,1.2), SD 62.3.

Often enough, the Commentaries, even external sources (such as the Brahminical or Jain sources) may help us have a better idea of how certain Pali words or phrases should be understood. However, when we research on such usages of difficult sutta terms, we should understand the contexts of those terms in the sources that we use. We should judiciously translate such terms with sufficient footnotes and explanations, and show how these terms are used or likely to be used in the sutta context.

1.2.4 “(They) Reject both the meaning and the teaching” (*atthañ ca dhammañ ca paṭibāhanti*)

1.2.4.1 This phrase means that there are those who reject the meaning and the text of the well-grasped suttantas, and they show the meaning and the text of their own badly grasped suttantas as superior.

The good sense of passage, phrase or word should also be contrasted with or understood by its opposite.

In this Sutta, the growth and decline of the teaching [dispensation] are spoken of.

(AA 2:143,10-18)

1.2.4.2 Human errors exist even in **manuscript transmission and transcription**, and sometimes passages or pages can get lost in transmission.⁵ Misspellings may also occur in the different manuscripts; these then lead to misreadings and mistranslations of the passages.

Further, not knowing Pali or lacking maturity in the Buddha Dharma, one may be likely to render a sutta dogmatically or intellectually in keeping with the Pali Commentaries (such as those by Buddhaghosa) rather than allowing the suttas to speak for themselves.

A translator should not be tempted to freely alter the sense of a sutta passage to present “what the Buddha taught” or what he really “meant”; to put it lightly, we are then “editing the Buddha.” There is also a real danger of omission when a translator or writer freely renders a sutta passage to make it more “readable” or “modern,” especially by omitting the *peyyālā* (abridgement).

“Therefore,” warns the Subcommentary, “it is said, ‘Showing the meaning and the teaching of their own poorly grasped suttas to be superior [than in the preceding passage].’” (AATBe 2:29) [1.2.4.1]

1.2.4.3 Finally (but not the least), there are Pali **verse** passages, where words often have poetic nuances, or some terms may be abbreviated, or there is the use of “intentional language,” such as in the famous case of **Dh 97**.⁶

*Assaddho akataññū ca
hatâvakāso vantāso*

*sandhi-c,chedo ca yo naro
sa ve uttama,poriso.*

(Dh 97; cf 383; Udana,varga 29.23)⁷

Negative literal sense

The man without faith,
who knows no gratitude,
who is a house-breaker,
who has destroyed his opportunity,
an eater of vomit—
he is indeed one of extreme audacity.

Positive Dharma sense

The man without desire,
who knows the unmade [uncreated],
who has cut off the link,
who is rid of the occasions (for quarrels and rebirth),
who is an eater of what is abandoned by others—
he is indeed the highest person.

⁵ For a possible missing passage in a well-known text, see SD 15.10a (3).

⁶ **Dh 97** (SD 10.6); another similar verse is **Dh 294** which needs a figurative tr: SD 10.6 (6.2).

⁷ Cf *āsraddho* [...] *sa ve uttimaporuṣo* in **Patna Dharmapada** v333 in Cone (1989:191) or Roth (1980:127).

2 The spirit and the letter

2.1 THE SPIRIT OF DHARMA

2.1.1 Meaning and purpose

2.1.1.1 By “**the spirit**” (*attha*) means both the original or intended meaning of the sutta passage and the purpose for which it was taught. By “**meaning**” is meant how the word or passage should be understood in the context of the teaching given and the Buddha Dharma as a whole. “**Purpose**” means that ultimately all teachings and practices should lead one closer to the path of awakening for the sake of gaining awakening and freedom from suffering.

2.1.1.2 A central discussion in contemporary Buddhism concerns the tension between preserving the timeless, traditional teachings—the Buddha-Dharma—and adapting teachings and practices to fit modern culture, especially in a global context. There are 2 primary schools of thought on this: the traditional and the modernist.

(1) The traditionalist view is essentially that translation work is about the preservation of the early and authentic teachings of the Buddha. This can be contentious when there are a number of major Buddhist schools today and also other influential (and affluent) sects and cults. Each group tends to view and preach that their tradition or lineage is the “complete and timeless truth and path,” even when they have usurped the Buddha’s place and replaced him with their own supreme authority.

However, as Buddhism becomes better understood and taught today, there is a growing acceptance that while a group may hold on to its own cultural or traditional Buddhism, there is a **canon** of teachings and core of practices—that is, those of the 4 noble truths, the eightfold path, dependent arising—which are ultimate truths, not cultural artifacts. Revising any of these key teachings risks diluting their core purpose: the complete cessation of suffering.

A vital aspect of the traditional view is the preservation and propagation of **the early Buddhist texts**, especially the Pali canon, traditional meditation practices and the Vinaya (monastic discipline) for renunciants. All this may be said to constitute the *spirit of Buddhism*.

(2) The modernist or reformist view essentially seeks human-centred adaptation of the Buddha’s teachings. In modernist terms, we can say that many contemporary teachers and practitioners argue that the Dharma has always evolved to survive in new cultures in terms of a Dharma core and spiritual focus.

Dharma core refers to Buddhism’s “natural genius” in its ability to separate cultural trappings from the core message. Modernists emphasize applying the teachings to modern psychological, social, and environmental issues. Such a practical **focus** is often the basis or rationale for “Secular Buddhism” or “Engaged Buddhism,” which strips away traditional cosmology (like rebirth or complex rituals) to focus purely on mindfulness, ethics, and mental well-being in daily life.

Such focus groups do not reject the traditional core; rather they *focus* on immediate needs and realities that should be addressed, and do so on a human rather than a personal level. In other words, these focus groups remain mindful of and loyal to the traditional core of Dharma.

In practical terms, both approaches—so long as they are Dharma-spirited—offer value. **Traditionalists** ensure that the integrity, depth and efficacy of the teachings are not lost, while **reformists** ensure that the Dharma remains accessible, practical and relevant for people navigating the complexities of the modern world. In either case, the core is the Dharma spirit.

2.1.2 The Pali sense

2.1.2.1 The practical core of Buddhism that is **the Dharma spirit** is clearly the early Buddhist texts, of which its full extant form is in the Pali canon. In a vital sense, we can say that we are drawn to Buddhism ultimately because of the Dharma spirit; that is, we see the meaning of life (suffering) and purpose of life (ending of suffering) in the Dharma spirit.

We are each touched by the Dharma spirit in our own way, often darkly at first. As in almost any religious belief, so it is with Buddhism; when we are initially drawn to Buddhism, it can be any of these responses:

- there is something which we like about Buddhism (or a kind of Buddhism) that resonates with a strong view that we have; or
- there is something that we dislike about religion (such as the God idea), and we find that Buddhism articulates this well with our biases; or
- we are drawn to some aspect of Buddhism that reflects our personality, be it some social circumstance, an intellectual or academic interest, the enigmatic doctrines and rituals, or some spiritual aspects (especially meditation).

With such an interest in Buddhism, we are likely to follow certain teachers that we approve of; we are less likely to carefully examine the suttas for the sake of proper understanding and practice. Even when we do read the suttas, we are likely to be selective with what we read (not to mention the kind of translation that we choose to read): we are likely to “read” the suttas that reflect or endorse our own beliefs and biases. The final effect is that we each create our own “Buddhism,” of which there are only 2 kinds: Mine and Yours. It seems clear which is the right and true Buddhism. This happens so long as we do not really know the Dharma.

2.1.2.2 Even when we choose to read suttas as a committed Buddhist or as a serious researcher or student, we are likely to be biased by what we know and, more often, by what we don’t know. What we know may hinder, warp or colour our understanding of the suttas. Burdened by such biases and ignorance we are likely to miss or misread the many profound aspects of Dharma hinted at by simple words such as “all” (*sabba*),⁸ “something” (*kiñcana*),⁹ and “not that” (*atammaya*).¹⁰ Only with **an open mind** can we appreciate the beautiful simplicity of sutta language, and to listen to the sutta as it resonates in our being.

At some other level, we may apply literary language or poetic imagination to unravel and delve into the suttas. The language of stories and poetry may inspire and instill in us a childlike readiness to simply enjoy the suttas as if we are hearing the Buddha’s own voice (*buddha, vacana*).

2.1.2.3 The natural simplicity of many sutta passages should inspire in us a neophyte’s fresh curiosity and readiness to learn and enjoy (feel joy) in the words and their import. The words *phassati* (to touch) and *phussa* (touched), for example, when used to refer to insight into reality go deeper than merely an act of “sensing” (which has a mundane and emotional connotation). They simply but beautifully mean that reality has “touched” us in a wondrous way.

On the other hand, technical language, especially that of modern psychology, may help us in a better understanding of the early Buddhist language of the mind and meditation, often presented in novel and abstruse terms, formulas and texts. However, we must be extremely judicious to ensure that such

⁸ **Sabba S** (S 35.23), SD 7.1; SD 57.10 (1.2.2.4).

⁹ **Go,datta S** (S 41.7) + SD 60.4 (1.2.1.4 f); SD 50.2 (1.1.3.3); SD 12.4 (6.3) *akiñcana*; SD 40a.10 (1.4(2)) *akiñcana*.

¹⁰ **Atam,maya S** (A 6.104) SD 19.13(2.4); **Atam,mayātā**, SD 19.13.

technical terms do not fix or alienate the Pali expressions from their natural truth and beauty. Academic technicality should neither be forced onto nor limit the sutta context as a mere footnote to modern science. When modern technical language is used for sutta exegesis, it is vital to ensure that the Pali sense is brought out and preserved.

2.1.2.4 In conclusion, by “**Pali sense**” is meant the meaning and purpose that should be teased out of the sutta context as well as in keeping with the Dharma that frees the mind. The word, phrase, passage or sutta should be understood in this way; thus it is said that the meaning (*attha*) should be teased out and understood (*neyy’attha*). When the proper sense and purpose have been understood, especially when practised, envisioning its goal, then it is said that the purpose (*attha*) has been drawn out (*nī’t’attha*).¹¹

2.2 THE DHARMA AS SOUND AND AS FORM

2.2.1 The Dharma as sound

2.2.1.1 At this stage, we should be aware that there are today 3 main specialist Buddhist traditions: the academic, the scholastic and the contemplative. By **academic tradition** is meant Buddhist studies as an academic discipline which mainly sees Buddhism as *text and tradition* which are, as a rule, centred on certain scholars and scholarly traditions. It has little interest, if any, in the 3 trainings, except where they are studied with purely academic interest.

The scholastic tradition is a teacher-centred Buddhist tradition that, as a rule, presents Buddhism in terms of *Abhidhamma* or “*Vipassanā*.”¹² It is “teacher-centred” in the sense that a leading teacher, whether living or dead, is the one who defines the terms of “right practice,” even of enlightenment itself. A well-known example of a modern scholastic tradition is that of Pa-Auk Sayadaw of Myanmar, who teaches that at the deepest level of meditative concentration one should see “molecular or material clusters” (*kalāpa*).¹³

Of these 3 traditions, the best known and most respected is that of **the contemplative tradition**, famously represented by the forest meditative tradition, especially those of north and north-eastern Thailand. They tend to give mostly oral teachings on Samatha or “calmness” meditation.¹⁴ The best-known contemplative tradition today is that of Ajahn Chah and his students who have set up numerous monastic retreat centres all over the world.¹⁵

2.2.1.2 When we listen to Dharma talks by the forest monks (*ārañṇika*) of **the contemplative tradition** [2.2.1.1],¹⁶ we almost never hear any technical terms and rarely hear of any mention of the suttas (by name). The contemplative teaching style, most notably within the Thai Forest Tradition (Theravāda), is characterized by a strong emphasis on oral and direct, experiential insight over academic study. It emphasizes a “back-to-the-roots” approach, focusing on monastic austerity and discipline (Vinaya), and intense meditation practice in natural environments to cultivate a calm, free mind (*samatha*).

The contemplative practice or “**kammathan**” (Thai for *kamma-t, ṭhāna*, “work-station”) is usually “heart-centered,” the goal of which is to purify the mind (*citta*) of greed, hatred and delusion. The mind

¹¹ *Neyy’attha Nī’t’attha S* (A 2.3.5+6), SD 2.6b.

¹² The Burmese Vipassana has a long interesting history: SD 60.1b (2).

¹³ SD 60.1b (8); SD 60.1c (9.2.3); SD 63.5 (2.2.22).

¹⁴ SD 60.1b (4).

¹⁵ SD 60.1b (5.12).

¹⁶ See eg *Andhaka, vinda S* (S 6.13), SD 103.14; SD 3.13 (1.4).

should be cultivated to become “radiant,” “knowing,” and “not-moving,” focused on the present moment. The mind should simply be allowed to naturally settle, rather than chase special experiences.

Forest monks often practise “**tudong**” (Thai for *dhutaṅga*, “ascetic practice”), wandering on foot, often with bare feet, through the open countryside, living on daily alms collected from the public, cultivating detachment and confronting fear, staying in simple, secluded environments, sheltered only by a ကလု *klod* (a specialized umbrella-mosquito-netting) hung from a tree-branch primarily used as protection against insects, sun and rain.

Amongst the eremitic (solitary) forest tradition that exists to this day, there is no Pali recital tradition like that of the coenobitic (settled) monks. The forest monks are well familiar with the basic terminology and practical skills to explain and disseminate meditation methods and related teachings that essentially reflect the sutta teachings.

2.2.2 The Dharma as form

2.2.2.1 The suttas are records of the Buddha’s awakening recounted and preserved by contemporary reciters for our benefit in words and ways accessible to us even to this day. The Buddha himself gave only oral teachings directly to his audience, augmented by teachings and explanations by his saint disciples, especially the arhats (those awakened like him). By Asoka’s time (c 268-232 BCE), at least some of these teachings were recorded in written form.¹⁷ By the 1st century BCE, the whole Tipiṭaka—the Vinaya, the Sutta, and the Abhidhamma Piṭakas—was recorded in writing (on palm-leaves) in Sri Lanka.¹⁸

There is today the **scribal** or textual form of sutta teachings, well known through various translations, especially in English. These Pali texts are based on **the manuscript traditions** of Theravāda countries of South and South-East Asia, especially the Pali traditions of Sri Lanka (Sinhala script), of Myanmar (Burmese script), of Thailand (Siamese script), of Cambodia (Khmer script), and of Lao script.¹⁹

Within each of these linguistic traditions, there are various versions of manuscripts preserved over the centuries, some of which have been recovered from the libraries of old monasteries. The newest manuscript tradition, in Latin or Roman script, is that of **the Pali Text Society** (founded in 1881), compiled and edited from various ancient manuscripts in Ceylonese (Ce) script, in Burmese (Be) script, and in Siamese (Se) script.²⁰

2.2.2.2 Although a growing number of modern scholars and students are proficient in **Pali** and are able to read the suttas directly, there are available today various translations of **the Vinaya, the Suttas** and almost all of **the Abhidhamma** collections (*pīṭaka*). These texts are termed **Pāli**, that is, the primary “text.” The Theravada countries also have their own editions of Pali exegetical works, that is, the Commentaries (*aṭṭhakathā*), the Subcommentaries (*anuṭṭikā*) and other auxiliary texts (the last often in the local vernacular).

Ideally, when a translation of the suttas (or of the Vinaya or the Abhidhamma) is made, all the available major manuscripts (Be, Ce, Se and Ee) should be consulted. For explicating various technical and difficult terms, it is necessary to consult the Commentaries and other auxiliary texts. Modern Pali translators and scholars have the benefit of Western academic disciplines (such as philology) and translation

¹⁷ Asoka commissioned more than 30 inscriptions on rocks, cave walls, and pillars, spread across modern-day India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nepal. For maps and illus: [Wiki] 12 Apr 2026.

¹⁸ SD 26.11 (3.1.3.4). The long *ola* leaves come from **the talipot palm** (*Corypha umbraculifera*) or palmyra leaves, boiled in water with herbs, dried in the sun, and smoothed to create a durable, paper-like surface. Scribes use a sharp **stylus** to inscribe letters on them, then a mix of oil and lamp black (or charcoal dust) is rubbed in to make the text legible. Typically, finished pages are about 24-56 cm (9.5-22 in) long and about 4.5-7.5 cm (1.75-3 in) wide.

¹⁹ For Non-PTS editions of Pali texts: [PTS]. Digital Library of Lao Manuscripts: [DLLM]. 22 May 2026.

²⁰ The MSS of the Pali Text Society and other European manuscripts are coded as “Ee” = the European edition.

traditions. However, the translator himself or herself should not only know Pali well, but also be a serious Dharma practitioner so that the translation faithfully reflects not only the Pali language but also the teachings as a living faith as envisioned by the Buddha.

3 Theory, experience and reality

3.1 THE DHARMA AS TEACHING

3.1.1 The Dharma as theory and representation

3.1.1.1 Unlike other religious texts and teachings, **the suttas** neither dictate nor demand belief in any dogmatic facts about certain authority figures or revealed truths from some God or gods. Basically, the suttas record the bodhisattva as looking deep into the nature of life as it really is: *that we age, we suffer pain, we die*. Why do these truths exist? How do they end? What do we do to end them ourselves? These are famously formulated by the Buddha as **the 4 noble truths**: suffering (ignorance), its arising (craving), the way to end it (the noble eightfold path), and its ending (nirvana).²¹

3.1.1.2 The (Khandha) Anurādha Sutta (S 22.86) records the Buddha as famously declaring:

“As before, Anurādha, and even so now, **I declare only suffering and the ending of suffering.**”²²

This statement clearly shows that all teachings given by the Buddha are related to the nature of true reality. We should examine within ourselves, work to overcome the roots of suffering, and walk the path to awakening by our own effort. The effort that we make is itself the path that awakens us to our true nature and so to be free of the suffering that distracts us from being truly liberated and happy.

The Pali texts are thus **practice guides** given by the Buddha or his awakened disciples to first prepare our body (action and speech) so that we are in moral harmony with others. When we are thus bodily cultivated (*bhāṇita, kāya*), we are better prepared to cultivate the mind, to train it to become calm and clear so that we are able to see our being as impermanent. We are then said to be mentally cultivated (*bhāṇita, citta*).

We are each a **body** of senses, that is, *seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching and thinking*. What we sense we **feel** as pleasant or unpleasant. Our **perception** or memory then induces us to colour these feelings as being desirable or undesirable. Then we **form** likes or dislikes on account of being deluded by these feelings. All these feed our **consciousness**, projected as the mind that we imagine to be our “self.”

These aggregates—*forms, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness*—are all impermanent. They change, become other, and pass away. When we try to grasp them or own them, they only frustrate us so that we suffer from lack or from getting what we do not desire. Since they change and bring suffering, we have no real control over them. They lack any abiding entity; they *have* nothing, they are *nothing* that we can really grasp or claim, “This is mine; I am this; this is my self.”²³

3.1.2 The teaching as practice and experience

3.1.2.1 Suffering (*dukkha*) in itself is neither good nor bad; it is the true nature of life and existence. However, when we learn nothing from it, that is bad: we keep on suffering. When we learn something

²¹ See eg **Dhammacakkapavattana S** (S 56.11/5:420-424), SD 1.1.

²² S 22.86, 21.2 (SD 21.13) = (**Avyākata**) **Anurādha S** (S 44.2); the last remark is explained in **Yamaka S** (S 22.85, 37-3:112), SD 21.12; see SD 21.13 (2) & SD 53.40 (2.1.1); also SD 40a.1 (11.1.1).

²³ SD 3.13 (4).

from it, we will go on to notice that the suffering arises from our **craving** (*taṇhā*) for what is not really there. We have created something out of nothing, and *see, hear, smell, taste, touch or think* (know) that it is “good.”

When we understand **craving**, we are also likely to see how it brings about suffering. We may not be able to describe this in words, but we know from experience how it works—we have gone through it and know it; that is **the path**, our understanding of true reality. When we keep on seeing similar patterns of causes and effects, we then understand the pattern of reality. It’s like reading the weather signs; we are then prepared for bad weather safe in our shelter engaged in something beneficial. In simple terms, this is **the ending** of suffering or nirvana.²⁴

3.1.2.2 To truly experience something, we need to see it as nothing but *causes and effects* arising in the moment. When we see only causes and effects, we see *nothing* in between—in between “what?” you ask; that’s the question. It’s like watching a movie; the individual frames move at a certain pace, and we enjoy the movie. A single frame shows us *something*, but it is not really as interesting as the whole movie.

Our own living movie is still in the making. Don’t get caught in a single frame and think a world of it. The happy ending is yet to come; for the moment, we simply keep acting our part well with all that we are.

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²⁴ Here the 4 noble truths have been explained following the “practice” sequence, ie, as 1-2-4-3; the better known “teaching” sequence is 1-2-3-4.

Attha,vyaṇjana Sutta

The Discourse on the Spirit and the Letter

A 2.40

2 “Bhikshus, those monks who, with wrongly grasped suttas consisting of misleading words,²⁵ reject [misinterpret] both **the meaning and the teaching**,²⁶ those monks, bhikshus, are practising for the harm of the many, for the unhappiness of the many, for the disadvantage, harm, and suffering of the many, both gods and humans.
And those monks generate great demerit, and they cause this true Dharma to disappear.

3 Bhikshus, those monks who, with well-grasped suttas consisting of properly read words,²⁷ conform to both **the meaning and the teaching**,²⁸ those monks, bhikshus, are practising for the benefit of the many, for the happiness of the many, for the advantage, benefit, and happiness of the many, both gods and humans.
And those monks generate great merit, and they establish this true Dharma.” [70]

—evaṃ—

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²⁵ *Duggahitehi suttantehi vyanjana-p,patirūpakehi*. For **-patirūpaka** as meaning “counterfeit, a semblance, of misleading appearance,” see such expressions as *amitto mittha,patirūpako* (D 3:185 f); *sakka,patirūpako* (S 1:230,16); *jata,rupa-p,patirūpakaṃ* and *saddhamma-p,patirūpakam* (S 2:224,10-17). Here the cpd prob means the same as *dunnikkhittam pada,vyaṇjanam* (A 2.20, 4.160/2:147,21 and 5.156/3:178,26). Comy takes *dhmma* here to mean the text (*pāḷi*), commenting: “**They exclude the meaning and text** of well-acquired discourses and elevate above them the meaning and text of their own badly acquired discourses.” (AA 2:143,13-16)

²⁶ (Last phrase:) *vyaṇjana-p,patirūpakehi atthaṃ ca dhammaṃ ca paṭibāhanti*.

²⁷ Be here reads *suggahitehi suttantehi byaṇjana-p,patirūpakehi* (Ee ... *vyaṇjana,patirūpakehi*; Se ... *byaṇjana,patirūpakehi*). Ce, oddly, uses the negative: *suggahitehi suttantehi na vyanjana,patirūpakehi*. “Ce may have added *na* to convey the required sense; without it the sentence seems self-contradictory.” (A:B 1630 n277)

²⁸ (Last phrase:) *vyaṇjana-p,patirūpakehi atthaṃ ca dhammaṃ ca anulomenti*.