

## The perfect imperfection

Source: *SD 60.1f Handbook of Meditation in Society 6: A psychopathology of Mindfulness*

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### 5.1.3 The perfect imperfection

**5.1.3.1** Almost all the world's major religions see this world as being imperfect and created, and offer a way out of it for some divine kind of perfection, but each religion's salvific agendum is different from the rest. The God-believers invented the notion of sin—basically a non-acceptance or rejection of their God-idea—but buffers this with another notion: God's grace of forgiving those who do accept him (after all).

Instead of this roundabout mysterious I-Thou relationship, the early Buddhist teaching is simply that this is an imperfect world, physically and ontologically (as a place and as the beings that inhabit it). However, the real imperfection is with *how we view all this*: how we form (*abhisankharoti*) our virtual world (*sankhāra*) out of the imperfect world. This world of formations (*sankhāra, loka*)<sup>1</sup> is the “perfect imperfection” that we have to unravel, see it as is: *to truly see and be free*.

**5.1.3.2** The Buddhist worldview starts with the most obvious place: we really do not know what is going on—**ignorance**. We start by sensing things and making sense of things. As we become more civilized —by extending our sensing and minding, that is, our minds—we begin to see our “sensing” capability as the mind, understand better how we have been “minding” what we sense. We learn through trial and error, painfully slowly over a long time. This is our *collective learning process*, how we are able to transmit our learning to others and to posterity.

This ability to transmit learning, broaden it and repeat it from this growing pool of common knowledge is the basis of our **evolution**. Not only is our body changed and improved, but so is our mind. This can be called our cognitive development rooted in the understanding that we are overwhelmed by ignorance which puts us at a grave disadvantage, which also threatens our *lives, property, freedom, learning and minds*. Very crudely, this is what early Buddhism calls **the 1<sup>st</sup> noble truth**, that of suffering (on account of ignorance).

In our ignorance, we form views and beliefs from our sense-experiences. Before the Buddha's time, we had almost no idea that these views and beliefs are very powerful: they actually drive us to run after those sense-experiences that seem to reward us with *life, things, love (reproduction), knowledge and pleasure*. We feel we need these things; so we crave after them. Following the Buddha's teaching, we learn this to be **the 2<sup>nd</sup> noble truth**, the arising of suffering, that is, our craving pushes us to chase after things, and so view our sense-experiences more than what they really are. Craving and ignorance work together.

**5.1.3.3** Despite the constraints of prevalent religions and culture, the wiser and open-minded amongst our premodern ancestors began to understand how our views, beliefs and attitudes are the circumstantial responses and effects of our own thinking: they are the epiphenomena of our minds [4.2.4]. Even before that, over 2500 years ago in northern India, the Buddha knows this and teaches us to look deeper into this vital reality.

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<sup>1</sup> On the worlds of space, of beings and of formations: SD 15.7 (3.5.1 (2)); SD 17.6 (3.1.3.2).

Since all these views, beliefs and attitudes have arisen in our minds, clearly we have created them *ourselves*. They are all *in* our minds, and will have no effect on us unless we act on them with our body and communicate them to others. Or, we can learn from the effects of these views, beliefs and attitudes, and adjust ourselves accordingly, and even correct those conditions.

Hence, we can *choose* to act on them or not to act on them; in other words, we can also *end* ignorance and craving in a way that is wholesome (beneficial) for us. This is, in fact, the goal of Buddhist practice—the **3<sup>rd</sup> noble truth**: the ending of suffering and the key to our mental liberation. This ideal state is known as “nirvana” (*nibbāna*); perhaps a better term for it is “trans-ideal” since it is free of body and mind, beyond space and time.

**5.1.3.4** The Buddha lived in northern India at a time when society was dominated by those who claimed to be “**noble**” (*ariya*), on account of being “high-born,” fair-skinned, and masters of sacred lore. The Buddha himself was born into a kshatriya clan, one of 4 Aryan classes.<sup>2</sup> The Buddha highlighted the fact that no one is born pure or good: our actions make us so.

While the brahmins ostentatiously perform **karma** as ritual acts of purification and sacraments ostensibly to acclaim the “twice-born” (those born of the womb and of their high caste) for heaven and for the union of their personal Soul (*ātman*) with the universal Soul (*brahman*). The Buddha redefines karma (*kamma*) as “intention” (*cetanā*), any action rooted in *greed, hate or delusion*; this is what makes one impure, unwholesome with painful results for the doer. He rejects any notion of *ātman* or abiding entity.

We are “noble” (*ariya*)—a specific term for those on the path of awakening—because we are wholesome (*kusala*) or “skillful” in our bodily acts, speech and thoughts, and are selfless, having abandoned all thought of self, soul or external agency. Our task as followers of the Dharma, we live the wholesome selfless life. The Buddha rejects the brahminical Dharma of class and external agency and declares the natural Dharma of moral goodness, mental purity and liberating wisdom through personal effort (internal agency). In this way, we are *ennobled* and liberated by our understanding of the 4 noble truths.

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<sup>2</sup> The 4 Aryan classes (*vaṇṇa*; Skt *varṇa*, “colour”) were the kshatriya (*khattiya*; Skt *kṣatriya*), the warrior or ruling landed class; the brahmin (ts, *brāhmana*), the priests or learned class; the vaishya (*vessa*; Skt *vaiśya*), the merchant class; the shudras (*sudda*; Skt *śūdra*), the skilled worker class; and the 5<sup>th</sup> (*pañcama*) “outcastes,” a broad term for the dark-skinned autochthonous people. See Tevijja S (D 13,19 n), SD 1.8; SD 10.8 (6).