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The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching

Thich Nhat Hanh

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Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen master, poet, best-selling author and peace activist, has
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Peace Prize. In 1966 he visited the United States and Europe on a peace mission and was unable
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southwestern France, where he teaches, writes, gardens and aids refugees worldwide.

'Thich Nhat Hanh writes with the voice of the Buddha.'

Sogyal Rinpoche

'Thich Nhat Hanh is more my brother than many who are nearer to me in race and nationality
because he and I see things in exactly the same way.'

Thomas Merton

Be Still and Know
Being Peace
The Blooming of a Lotus
Breathe! You Are Alive
Call Me by My True Names
Cultivating the Mind of Love
The Diamond That Cuts through Illusion
For a Future To Be Possible
Fragrant Palm Leaves
The Heart of Understanding
Hermitage among the Clouds
Interbeing
Living Buddha, Living Christ
The Long Road Turns to Joy
Love in Action
The Miracle of Mindfulness
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Sutra on the Eight Realizations of the Great Beings
A Taste of Earth
Teachings on Love
Thundering Silence
Touching Peace
Transformation and Healing
Zen Keys

The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching

TRANSFORMING SUFFERING INTO
PEACE, JOY, & LIBERATION:
THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS,
THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH, AND
OTHER BASIC BUDDHIST TEACHINGS

— 37 —

Thich Nhat Hanh



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To the reader:

Unless otherwise noted, the terms that appear in parentheses throughout the text are in Sanskrit. Sanskrit has been transliterated informally, without the diacritical marks. The ś and ṣ have been written as sh. Sanskrit and other foreign terms are italicized the first time they appear, and definitions are provided at that time. Textual sources are provided in full the first time they are cited; after that, only author and title are noted.

*The Heart of the
Buddha's Teaching*

PART ONE

The Four Noble Truths

CHAPTER ONE

Entering the Heart of the Buddha

Buddha was not a god. He was a [human](#) being like you and me, and he suffered just as we do. If we go to the Buddha with our hearts open, he will look at us, his eyes filled with compassion, and say, "Because there is [suffering](#) in your heart, it is possible for you to enter my heart."

The layman [Vimalakirti](#) said, "Because the world is sick, I am sick. Because people suffer, we have to suffer." This statement was also made by the Buddha. Please don't think that because you are unhappy, because there is pain in your heart, that you cannot go to the Buddha. It is exactly because there is pain in your heart that communication is possible. Your suffering and my suffering are the basic condition for us to enter the Buddha's heart, and for the Buddha to enter our hearts.

For forty-five years, the Buddha said, over and over again, "I teach only suffering and the transformation of suffering." When we recognize and acknowledge our own suffering, the Buddha — which means the Buddha in us — will look at it, discover what has brought it about, and prescribe a course of action that can transform it into peace, joy, and [liberation](#). Suffering is the means the Buddha used to liberate himself, and it is also the means by which we can become free.

The ocean of suffering is immense, but if you turn around, you can see the land. The seed of suffering in you may be strong, but don't wait until you have no more suffering before allowing yourself to be happy. When one tree in the garden is sick, you have to care for it. But don't overlook all the healthy trees. Even while you have pain in your heart, you can enjoy the many wonders of life — the beautiful sunset, the smile of a child, the many flowers and trees. To suffer is not enough. Please don't be imprisoned by your suffering.

If you have experienced hunger, you know that having food is a miracle. If you have suffered from the cold, you know the preciousness of warmth. When you have suffered, you know how to appreciate the elements of paradise that are present. If you dwell only in your suffering, you will miss paradise. Don't ignore your suffering, but don't forget to enjoy the wonders of life, for your sake and for the benefit of many beings.

When I was young, I wrote this poem. I penetrated the heart of the Buddha with a heart that was deeply wounded.

*My youth
an unripe plum.
Your teeth have left their marks on it.
The tooth marks still vibrate.*

*I remember always,
remember always.*

*Since I learned how to love you,
the door of my soul has been left wide open
to the winds of the four directions.
Reality calls for change.
The fruit of awareness is already ripe,
and the door can never be closed again.*

*Fire consumes this century,
and mountains and forests bear its mark.
The wind howls across my ears,
while the whole sky shakes violently in the snowstorm.*

*Winter's wounds lie still,
Missing the frozen blade,
Restless, tossing and turning
in agony all night.¹*

1 "[The Fruit of Awareness Is Ripe,](#)" in *Call Me By My True Names: The Collected Poems* Thick Nhat Hanh (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993), p. 59.

I grew up in a time of war. There was destruction all around — children, adults, values, a whole country. As a [young](#) person, I suffered a lot. Once the door of awareness has been opened, you cannot close it. The wounds of war in me are still not all healed. There are nights I lie awake and embrace my people, my country, and the whole planet with my mindful breathing.

Without suffering, you cannot grow. Without suffering, you cannot get the peace and joy you deserve. Please don't run away from your suffering. Embrace it and cherish it. Go to the Buddha, sit with him, and show him your pain. He will look at you with loving kindness, compassion, and mindfulness, and show you ways to embrace your suffering and look deeply into it. With understanding and compassion, you will be able to heal the wounds in your heart, and the wounds in the world. The Buddha called suffering a Holy Truth, because our suffering has the capacity of showing us the path to liberation. Embrace your suffering, and let it reveal to you the way to peace.

CHAPTER TWO

The First Dharma Talk

Siddhartha Gautama was twenty-nine years old when he left his family to search for a way end his and others' suffering. He studied meditation with many teachers, and after six years practice, he sat under the bodhi tree and vowed not to stand up until he was enlightened. He sat all night, and as the morning star arose, he had a profound breakthrough and became a Buddha, filled with understanding and love. The Buddha spent the next forty-nine days enjoying the peace of his realization. After that he walked slowly to the Deer Park in Sarnath to share his understanding with the five ascetics with whom he had practiced earlier.

When the five men saw him coming, they felt uneasy. Siddhartha had abandoned them, they thought. But he looked so radiant that they could not resist welcoming him. They washed his feet and offered him water to drink. The Buddha said, "Dear friends, I have seen deeply that nothing can be by itself alone, that everything has to inter-be with everything else. I have seen that all beings are endowed with the nature of awakening." He offered to say more, but the monks did not know whether to believe him or not. So the Buddha asked, "Have I ever lied to you?" They knew that he hadn't, and they agreed to receive his teachings.

The Buddha then taught the Four Noble Truths of the existence of suffering, the making of suffering, the possibility of restoring well-being, and the Noble Eightfold Path that leads to well-being. Hearing this, an immaculate vision of the [Four Noble Truths](#) arose in [Kondañña](#), one of the five ascetics. [The Buddha](#) observed this and exclaimed, "Kondañña understands! Kondañña understands!" and from that day on, Kondañña was called "The One Who Understands."

The Buddha then declared, "Dear friends, with humans, gods, brahmins, monastics, and maras as witnesses, I tell you that if I have not experienced directly all that I have told you, I would not proclaim that I am an enlightened person, free from suffering. Because I myself have identified suffering, understood suffering, identified the causes of suffering, removed the causes of suffering, confirmed the existence of well-being, obtained well-being, identified the path to well-being, gone to the end of the path, and realized total liberation, I now proclaim to you that I am a free person." At that moment the Earth shook, and the voices of the gods, humans, and other living beings throughout the cosmos said that on the planet Earth, an enlightened person had been born and had put into motion the wheel of the *Dharma*, the Way of Understanding and Love. This teaching is recorded in the [Discourse on Turning the Wheel of the Dharma](#) (*Dhamma Cakkavattana Sutta*).² Since then, two thousand, six hundred years have passed, and the wheel of the Dharma continues to turn. It is up to us, the present generation, to keep the wheel turning for the happiness of the many.

1 See footnote number 7 on p. 17.

2 *Samyutta Nikaya* V, 420. See p. 257 for the full text of this discourse. See also the *Great Turning of the Dharma Wheel (Taisho Revised Tripitaka 109)* and the *Three Turnings of the Dharma Wheel (Taisho 110)*. The term "discourse" (*sutra* in Sanskrit, *sutta* in Pali) means teaching given by the Buddha or one of his enlightened disciples.

Three points characterize this sutra. The first is the teaching of the [Middle Way](#). The Buddha wanted his five friends to be free from the idea that austerity is the only correct practice. He had learned firsthand that if you destroy your health, you have no energy left to realize the path. The other extreme to be avoided, he said, is indulgence in sense pleasures — being possessed by sexual desire, running after fame, eating immoderately, sleeping too much, or chasing after possessions.

The second point is the teaching of the Four Noble Truths. This teaching was of great value during the lifetime of the Buddha, is of great value in our own time, and will be of great value for millennia to come. The third point is [engagement in the world](#). The teachings of the Buddha were not to escape from life, but to help us relate to ourselves and the world as thoroughly as possible. The Noble Eightfold Path includes Right Speech and Right Livelihood. These teachings are for people in the world who have to communicate with each other and earn a living.

The *Discourse on Turning the Wheel of the Dharma* is filled with joy and hope. It teaches us to recognize suffering as suffering and to transform our suffering into mindfulness, compassion, peace, and liberation.

CHAPTER THREE

The Four Noble Truths

After realizing complete, perfect awakening (*samyak sambodhi*), the Buddha had to find words to share his insight. He already had the water, but he had to discover jars like the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path to hold it. The Four Noble Truths are the cream of the Buddha's teaching. The Buddha continued to proclaim these truths right up until his Great Passing Away (*mahaparinirvana*).

The Chinese translate Four Noble Truths as "Four Wonderful Truths" or "Four Holy Truths." Our suffering is holy if we embrace it and look deeply into it. If we don't, it isn't holy at all. We just drown in the ocean of our suffering. For "truth," the Chinese use the characters for "word" and "king." No one can argue with the words of a king. These Four Truths are not something to argue about. They are something to practice and realize.

The [First Noble Truth](#) is [suffering \(*dukkha*\)](#). The root meaning of the Chinese character for suffering is "bitter." Happiness is sweet; suffering is bitter. We all suffer to some extent. We have some malaise in our body and our mind. We have to recognize and acknowledge the presence of this suffering and touch it. To do so, we may need the help of a teacher and a *Sangha* of friends in the practice.

The [Second Noble Truth](#) is the origin, roots, nature, [creation, or arising \(*samudaya*\)](#) of [suffering](#). After we touch our suffering, we need to look deeply into it to see how it came to

The Four Noble Truths & the [Noble Eightfold Path](#)

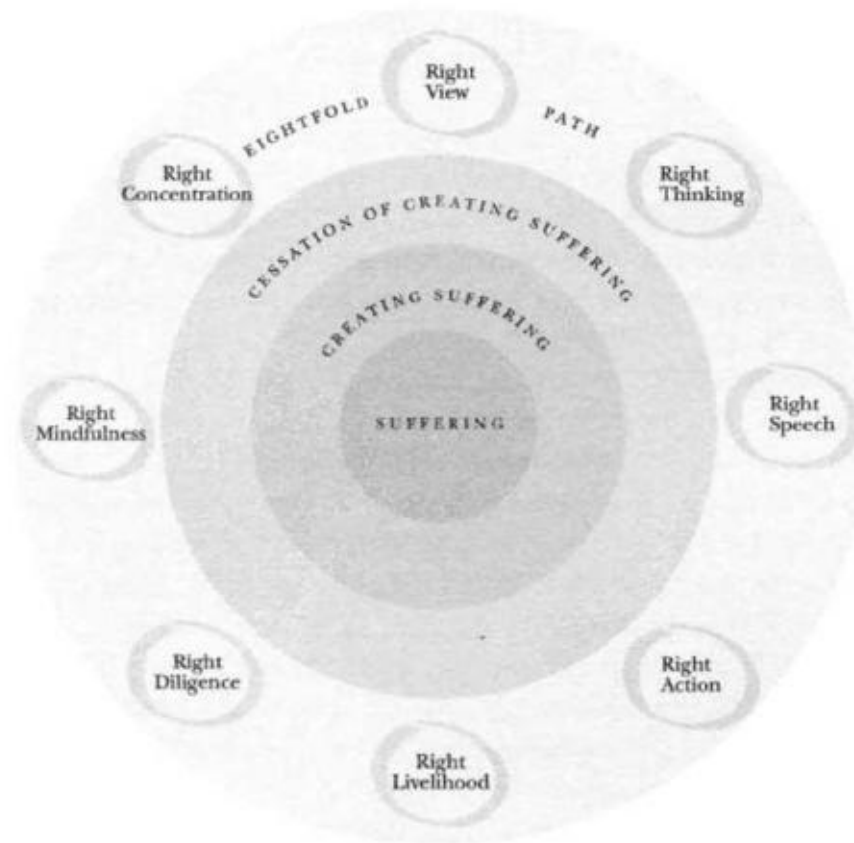


Figure One

be. We need to recognize and identify the spiritual and material foods we have ingested that are causing us to suffer.

The [Third Noble Truth](#) is the cessation (*nirodha*) of creating suffering by refraining from doing the things that make us suffer. This is good news! The Buddha did not deny the existence of suffering, but he also did not deny the existence of joy and happiness. If you think that Buddhism says, "Everything is suffering and we cannot do anything about it," that is the opposite of the Buddha's message. The Buddha taught us how to recognize and acknowledge the presence of suffering, but he also taught the [cessation of suffering](#). If there were no possibility of cessation, what is the use of practicing? The Third Truth is that healing is possible.

The [Fourth Noble Truth](#) is the path (*marga*) that leads to refraining from doing the things that cause us to suffer. This is the path we need the most. The Buddha called it the Noble Eightfold Path. The Chinese translate it as the "Path of [Eight Right Practices](#)": Right View, Right Thinking, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Diligence, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.¹

1 The Pali word for "[Right](#)" is *samma* and the Sanskrit word is *samyak*. It is an adverb meaning "in the right way," "straight," or "upright," not bent or crooked. Right Mindfulness, f

example, means that there are ways of being mindful that are right, straight, and beneficial. ~~Wrong mindfulness means that there are ways to practice that are wrong, crooked, and~~ unbeneficial. Entering the Eightfold Path, we learn ways to practice that are of benefit, the "Right" way to practice. Right and wrong are neither moral judgments nor arbitrary standards imposed from outside. Through our own awareness, we discover what is beneficial ("right") and what is unbeneficial ("wrong").

CHAPTER FOUR

Understanding the Buddha's Teachings

When we hear a Dharma talk or study a sutra, our only job is to remain open. Usually when we hear or read something new, we just compare it to our own ideas. If it is the same, we accept and say that it is correct. If it is not, we say it is incorrect. In either case, we learn nothing. If we read or listen with an open [mind](#) and an open heart, the rain of the Dharma will penetrate the soil of our consciousness.¹

1 According to Buddhist psychology, our consciousness is divided into eight parts, including [mind consciousness \(*manovijñāna*\)](#) and store consciousness ([*alayavijñāna*](#)). [Store consciousness](#) is described as a field in which every kind of seed can be planted — seeds of suffering, sorrow, fear, and anger, and seeds of happiness and hope. When these seeds sprout, they manifest in our mind consciousness, and when they do, they become stronger. See fig. 5 on p. 208.

*The gentle spring rain permeates the soil of my soul.
A seed that has lain deeply in the earth for many years just
smiles)*²

2 From Thich [Nhat Hanh](#), "[Cuckoo Telephone](#)," in *Call Me By My True Names*, p. 176.

While reading or listening, don't work too hard. Be like the earth. When the rain comes, the earth only has to open herself up to the rain. Allow the rain of the Dharma to come in and penetrate the seeds that are buried deep in your consciousness. A teacher cannot give you the truth. The truth is already in you. You only need to open yourself — body, mind, and heart — so that his or her teachings will penetrate your own seeds of understanding and enlightenment. If you let the words enter you, the soil and the seeds will do the rest of the work.

The transmission of [the teachings of the Buddha](#) can be divided into three streams: [Source Buddhism](#), [Many-Schools Buddhism](#), and [Mahayana Buddhism](#). Source Buddhism includes all the teachings the Buddha gave during his lifetime. One hundred forty years after the Buddha's Great Passing Away, the Sangha divided into two [schools: *Mahasanghika*](#) (literally "majority school," referring to those who wanted changes) and *Sthaviravada* (literally, "School of Elders," referring to those who opposed the changes advocated by the Mahasanghikas). A hundred years after that, the Sthaviravada divided into two branches — [*Sarvastivada*](#) ("the School that Proclaims Everything Is") and *Vibhajyavada* ("the School that Discriminates"). The Vibhajyavadins were supported by King Ashoka, flourished in the Ganges valley, while the Sarvastivadins went north to Kashmir.

For four hundred years during and after the Buddha's lifetime, his teachings were transmitted only orally. After that, monks in the [Tamrashatiya School](#) ("those who wear copper-colored robes") in Sri Lanka, a derivative of the [Vibhajyavada School](#), began to think about writing the Buddha's discourses on palm leaves, and it took another hundred years to begin. By that time, it is said that there was only one monk who had memorized the whole canon and that he was somewhat arrogant. The other monks had to persuade him to recite the discourses so they could write them down. When we hear this, we feel a little uneasy knowing that an arrogant monk may not have been the best vehicle to transmit the teachings of the Buddha.

Even during the Buddha's lifetime, there were people such as the monk Arittha, who misunderstood the Buddha's teachings and conveyed them incorrectly.³ It is also apparent that some of the monks who memorized the sutras over the centuries did not understand their deeper meaning, or at the very least, they forgot or changed some words. As a result, some of the Buddha's teachings were distorted even before they were written down. Before the Buddha attained full realization of the path, for example, he had tried various methods to [suppress](#) his mind, and they did not work. In one discourse, he recounted:

3 *Arittha Sutta (Discourse on Knowing the Better Way to Catch a Snake)*, *Majjhima Nikaya* 22. See Thich Nhat Hanh, *Thundering Silence: Sutra on Knowing the Better Way to Catch a Snake* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993), pp. 47-49.

I thought, Why don't I grit my teeth, press my tongue against my palate, and use my mind to repress my mind? Then, as a wrestler might take hold of the head or the shoulders of someone weaker than he, and, in order to restrain and coerce that person, he has to hold him down constantly without letting go for a moment, so I gritted my teeth, pressed my tongue against my palate, and used my mind to [suppress my mind](#). As I did this, I was bathed in sweat. Although I was not lacking in strength, although I maintained mindfulness and did not fall from mindfulness, my body and my mind were not at peace, and I was exhausted by these efforts. This practice caused other feelings of pain to arise in me besides the pain associated with the austerities, and I was not able to tame my mind.⁴

4 *Mahasaccaka Sutta, Majjhima Nikaya* 36.

Obviously, the Buddha was telling us not to practice in this way. Yet this passage was later inserted into other discourses to convey exactly the opposite meaning:

Just as a wrestler takes hold of the head or the shoulders of someone weaker than himself, restrains and coerces that person, and holds him down constantly, not letting go for one moment, so a monk who meditates in order to stop all unwholesome thoughts of desire and aversion, when these thoughts continue to arise, should grit his teeth, press his tongue against his palate, and do his best to use his mind to beat down and defeat his mind.⁵

5 *Vitakka Santhana Sutta, Majjhima Nikaya* 20. This same passage was inserted into Sarvastivada version of the Buddha's discourse on mindfulness, *Nian Chu Jing, Madhyama Agama* 26, *Taisho Revised Tripitaka*.

Often, we need to study several discourses and compare them in order to understand which is the true teaching of the Buddha. It is like stringing precious jewels together to make a necklace. If we see each sutra in light of the overall body of teachings, we will not be attached to any one teaching. With comparative study and looking deeply into the meaning of the texts, we can surmise what is a solid teaching that will help our practice and what is probably an incorrect transmission.

By the time the Buddha's discourses were written down in Pali in Sri Lanka, there were eighteen or twenty [schools](#), and each had its own recension of the Buddha's teachings. The schools did not tear the teachings of the Buddha apart but were threads of a single garment. Two of these recensions exist today: the Tamrashatiya and Sarvastivada canons. Recorded at about the same time, the former was written down in Pali and the latter in Sanskrit and Prakrit. The sutras that were written down in Pali in Sri Lanka are known as the Southern transmission, "Teachings of the Elders" (*Theravada*). The Sarvastivada texts, known as the Northern transmission, exist only in fragmented form. Fortunately, they were translated into Chinese and Tibetan, and many of these translations are still available. We have to remember that the Buddha did not speak Pali, Sanskrit, or Prakrit. He spoke a local dialect called Magadhi or Ardhamagadhi, and there is no record of the Buddha's words in his own language.

By comparing the two extant sutra recensions, we can see which teachings must have preceded Buddhism's dividing into schools. When the sutras of both transmissions are the same, we can conclude that what they say must have been there before the division. When the recensions are different, we can surmise that one or both might be incorrect. The Northern transmission preserved some discourses better, and the Southern transmission preserved others better. That is the advantage of having two transmissions to compare.

The third stream of the Buddha's teaching, Mahayana Buddhism, arose in the first or second century B.C.E.⁶ In the centuries following the Buddha's life, the practice of the Dharma had become the exclusive domain of monks and nuns, and laypeople were limited to supporting the ordained Sangha with food, shelter, clothing, and medicine. By the first century B.C.E., many monks and nuns seemed to be practicing only for themselves, and reaction was inevitable. The ideal put forth by the Mahayanists was that of the bodhisattva, who practiced and taught for the benefit of everyone.

6 See Thich Nhat Hanh, *Cultivating the Mind of Love: The Practice of Looking Deeply in the Mahayana Buddhist Tradition* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1996).

These three streams complement one another. It was impossible for Source Buddhism to remember everything the Buddha had taught, so it was necessary for [Many-Schools Buddhism](#) and Mahayana Buddhism to [renew](#) teachings that had been forgotten or overlooked. Like all traditions, Buddhism needs to renew itself regularly in order to stay alive and grow. The Buddha always found new ways to express his awakening. Since the Buddha's lifetime, Buddhists have continued to open new Dharma doors to express and share the teachings begun in the Deer Park at Sarnath.

Please remember that a sutra or a [Dharma talk](#) is not insight in and of itself. It is a means of presenting insight, using words and concepts. When you use a map to get to Paris, once you have arrived, you can put the map away and enjoy being in Paris. If you spend all your time with your map, if you get caught by the words and notions presented by the Buddha, you'll miss the reality. The Buddha said many times, "My teaching is like a finger pointing to the moon. Do not mistake the finger for the moon."

In the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, it is said, "If you explain the meaning of every word and phrase in the [sutras](#), you slander the Buddhas of the three times — past, present, and future. But if you disregard even one word of the sutras, you risk speaking the words of [Mara](#)."⁷ Sutras are essential guides for our practice, but we must read them carefully and use our own intelligence and the help of a teacher and a Sangha to understand the true meaning and put it into practice. After reading a sutra or any spiritual text, we should feel lighter, not heavier. Buddhist teachings are meant to awaken our true self, not merely to add to our storehouse of knowledge.

⁷ Mara: the Tempter, the Evil One, the Killer, the opposite of the Buddha nature in each person. Sometimes personalized as a deity.

From time to time the Buddha refused to answer a question posed to him. The philosopher [Vatsigotra](#) asked, "Is there a self?" and the Buddha did not say anything. Vatsigotra persisted, "Do you mean there is no self?" but the Buddha still did not reply. Finally, Vatsigotra left. Ananda, the Buddha's attendant, was puzzled. "Lord, you always teach that there is no self. Why did you not say so to Vatsigotra?" The Buddha told Ananda that he did not reply because Vatsigotra was looking for a theory, not a way to remove obstacles.⁸ On another occasion, the Buddha heard a group of disciples discussing whether or not he had said such and such, and he told them, "For forty-five years, I have not uttered a single word." He did not want his disciples to be caught by words or notions, even his own.

⁸ *Samyutta Nikaya* XIV, 10.

When an archaeologist finds a statue that has been broken, he invites sculptors who specialize in restoration to study the art of that period and [repair](#) the statue. We must do the same. If we have an overall view of the teachings of the Buddha, when a piece is missing or has been added, we have to recognize it and repair the damage.

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