

TEACHINGS OF THE BUDDHA

The
Middle Length
Discourses
of the
Buddha



A Translation of the
Majjhima Nikāya



Translated by
Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli *and* Bhikkhu Bodhi

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THE TEACHINGS OF THE BUDDHA

The
Middle Length
Discourses
of the
Buddha



A Translation of the
Majjhima Nikāya



Translated from the Pāli

ORIGINAL TRANSLATION

by

Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli

TRANSLATION EDITED AND REVISED

by

Bhikkhu Bodhi

Third Edition



WISDOM PUBLICATIONS • BOSTON

in association with the

Barre Center for Buddhist Studies

Preface

THE PRESENT WORK OFFERS a complete translation of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, one of the major collections in the *Sutta Piṭaka* or “Basket of Discourses” belonging to the Pali Canon. This vast body of scriptures, recorded in the ancient Indian language now known as Pali, is regarded by the Theravāda school of Buddhism as the definitive recension of the Buddha-word, and among scholars too it is generally considered our most reliable source for the original teachings of the historical Buddha Gotama.

This translation is an extensively revised version of an original draft translation made by the distinguished English scholar-monk Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (1905–1960). During his eleven years’ life in the Buddhist Order, passed entirely at the Island Hermitage in south Sri Lanka, Ven. Ñāṇamoli had rendered into English some of the most difficult and intricate texts of Pali Buddhism, among them the encyclopaedic *Visuddhimagga*. Following his premature death at the age of fifty-five, three thick, hand-bound notebooks containing a handwritten translation of the entire *Majjhima Nikāya* were found among his effects. However, although all 152 *suttas* of the *Majjhima* had been translated, the work was obviously still in an ongoing process of revision, with numerous crossouts and overwritings and a fair number of unresolved inconsistencies. The translation also employed an experimental scheme of highly original renderings for Pali doctrinal terms that Ven. Ñāṇamoli had come to prefer to his earlier scheme and had overwritten into the notebooks. He had used this new set of renderings in several of his final publications, offering an explanation for his choices in an appendix to *The Minor Readings and The Illustrator of Ultimate Meaning*, his translation of the *Khuddakapāṭha* and its commentary.

In 1976 Bhikkhu Khantipālo made a selection of ninety *suttas* from the notebooks, which he edited into a fairly consistent and readable version rearranged according to a topical sequence he himself devised. This was published in Thailand in three volumes under the title *A Treasury of the Buddha’s Words*. In this edition Ven. Khantipālo had endeavoured to make as few changes as possible in the original translation by Ven. Ñāṇamoli, though he inevitably found it desirable to replace some of the latter’s innovative renderings with better-known equivalents, generally choosing the terminology that Ven. Ñāṇamoli had used in *The Path of Purification*, his excellent translation of the *Visuddhimagga*.

The present work contains finished translations of all 152 *suttas*. In editing the ninety *suttas* selected by Ven. Khantipālo, I have worked from the version found in *A Treasury of the Buddha’s Words*, referring to Ven. Ñāṇamoli’s notebooks whenever questions arose or problematic passages were encountered. The other sixty-two *suttas* had to be freshly edited from the notebooks. The translations of all 152 *suttas* have been checked against the original Pali texts and I hope that all errors and omissions have been rectified.

My aim in editing and revising this material, I must frankly state, has not been to reconstruct the *suttas* in a way that would conform as closely as possible to the intentions of the original translator. My aim has been, rather, to turn out a translation of the *Majjhima Nikāya* that simultaneously approaches two ideals: first, fidelity to the intended meaning of the texts themselves; and second, the expression of that meaning in an idiom that would be intelligible to a modern reader seeking in the *Pali Suttas* personal guidance in the proper understanding and conduct of life. Terminological exactitude

and internal consistency have been important guidelines underlying the endeavour to achieve those ideals, but care has been taken that their pursuit should leave the translation transparent as to their meaning.

To produce a translation of the Majjhima Nikāya that is both technically precise and lucid expression required numerous revisions in the manuscript version. Most were quite minor but a few were substantial. Numerous alterations were made in the rendering of Pali doctrinal terms, most of which were Ven. Khantipālo's changes having been incorporated. In place of Ven. Ñāṇamoli's novel renderings have in most cases returned to the clearer and better established terminology he employed in *The Path of Purification*. When doubts arose I always turned for help to Ven. Nyanaponika Mahāthera, whose wise advice helped to steer this translation closer towards its two guiding ideals. The handling of several important technical terms is discussed at the end of the Introduction, to which is attached a list showing the terminological changes that were made for this edition. By consulting the list the reader can obtain some idea of how the manuscript translation reads. A glossary in the back gives the English renderings used for the major Pali doctrinal terms found in the Majjhima Nikāya as well as Pali words and meanings not included in the Pali Text Society's *Pali-English Dictionary*. The subject index also includes, for most entries, the Pali term after its chosen English rendering. Botanical names that could not be easily rendered by familiar English equivalents have been left untranslated.

Ven. Ñāṇamoli's translation was based primarily on the Pali Text Society's roman-script edition of the Majjhima Nikāya, published in three volumes, the first edited by V. Trenckner (1888), the second and third by Robert Chalmers (1898, 1899). This edition was also used to check the translation, but on problematic passages I consulted as well two other editions: the Burmese Buddhasāsana Samiti's Sixth Buddhist Council edition in Burmese script and the Sinhala-script Buddha Jayanti edition published in Sri Lanka. Instances are not unusual where the reading in one or the other of these editions was preferred to that of the PTS edition, though only occasionally are these mentioned in the notes. Seldom too do the notes refer to I. B. Horner's long-standing English translation of the Majjhima Nikāya, *The Collection of the Middle Length Sayings*, with which I sometimes compared Ven. Ñāṇamoli's translation. Since the first volume of that translation was published in 1954, and the next two in 1957 and 1958 while Ven. Ñāṇamoli's manuscript indicates that he did his revised translation between 1953 and 1955 it seems unlikely that he had consulted Horner's version in preparing his own; at most, he might have had access to the first volume after he had completed his first volume.

The text of the translation is divided into numerical sections. These divisions were introduced by Ven. Ñāṇamoli into his manuscript version of the suttas and are not found in the PTS edition of the Majjhima Nikāya. Sometimes, when logic seemed to dictate it, I have made minor alterations in the divisions. The section numbers are included in the sutta references in the Introduction, Notes, and Indexes. Thus, for example, a reference to MN 26.18 means Majjhima Sutta No. 26, section 18.

The numbers at the top of the pages refer to the volume and page number of the PTS edition of the Majjhima Nikāya, as do the bracketed numbers embedded in the text (except for MN 92 and MN 93 wherein the numbers refer to the PTS edition of the Sutta Nipāta).

The Introduction aims to provide the reader with a thorough study guide to the Majjhima Nikāya by systematically surveying the principal teachings of the Buddha contained in this collection along with references to the suttas where fuller expositions of those teachings can be found. More elementary information on the Pali Canon and on Pali Buddhism in general will be found in Maurice Walshe's introduction to his recent translation of the complete Dīgha Nikāya, *Thus Have I Heard*, which the

present publication is intended to parallel. As a way of easing the reader's entrance into the canonical texts themselves, a summary of the Majjhima's 152 suttas follows the Introduction.

To clarify difficult passages in the suttas and to shed additional light on passages whose meaning richer than appears at first sight, a copious set of back notes has been provided. Many of these notes are drawn from the commentaries on the Majjhima, of which there are two. One is the commentary proper, the *Majjhima Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā*, also known as the *Papañcasūdanī*. This was composed in the fifth century by the great Buddhist commentator, Ācariya Buddhaghosa, who based it on the ancient commentaries (no longer extant) that had been preserved for centuries by the Sangha of the Mahāvihāra at Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka. The commentary is of value not only for elucidating the meaning of the texts but also for filling in the background of events that led to the promulgation of the discourses. The other commentarial work is the subcommentary, the *Majjhima Nikāya Tīkā*, ascribed to Ācariya Dhammapāla, who probably lived and worked in South India a century or more later than Ācariya Buddhaghosa. The main purpose of the Tīkā is to clear up obscure or difficult points in the Aṭṭhakathā, but in doing so the author often sheds additional light on the meaning of the canonical text. In order to keep the notes as concise as possible, almost always the commentaries have been paraphrased rather than quoted directly.

I am aware that the Notes sometimes repeat things already explained in the Introduction, but in work of this nature such repetitions can be of use, particularly as novel ideas briefly treated in the Introduction may slip the reader's memory at the time of reading a sutta to which they pertain.

In conclusion I want to mention the contributions that others have made to the completion of this project.

First, I wish to thank Ven. Nyanaponika Mahāthera for first encouraging me to take up this task which seemed so daunting at the outset, and then for providing valuable advice at every crucial turn along the way. Not only was he always ready to discuss difficult points, but despite deteriorating vision, which drastically reduced the time he had available for reading, he still read through the Introduction, the Notes, and the knottier suttas, offering helpful suggestions.

Second, I thank Ven. Khantipālo (now Laurence Mills) for permission to use his versions of the ninety suttas in *A Treasury of the Buddha's Words* as the working basis for this edition. The work he did on those suttas almost two decades ago greatly facilitated the preparation of this volume.

Third, I must mention the tremendous help received from Ayyā Nyanasirī, who subedited the initial draft, made numerous suggestions for minor improvements, and typed out the entire manuscript. Even though, as my conception of the editorial task changed, several suttas had to be typed a second time, and a few a third time, this was always done with patience and understanding.

Fourth, I thank two fellow bhikkhus, Ven. Ṭhānissaro (U.S.A.) and Ven. Dhammavihārī (Sri Lanka) for reading portions of the manuscript and suggesting minor improvements.

Finally, I wish to express my appreciation to Dr. Nicholas Ribush for his encouragement and helpfulness and to Wisdom Publications for doing such a fine job of production. I am particularly grateful to John Bullitt for his careful and precise management of this project.

For any errors or defects that remain, I myself am fully responsible.

BHIKKHU BODHI
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Note to the Second Edition

This second edition of *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (2001) incorporates a number of corrections and minor changes in the terminology that I have been making over the years to the text of the original edition. It also includes some additions and alterations to the Notes.

Note to the Third Edition

This third edition of *The Middle Length Discourses* (2005) includes numerous corrections and changes suggested to me by Bhikkhu Ñāṇatusita, who diligently compared the entire translation with the original Pāli text. I have also included other changes suggested to me by Ajahn Brahmavaṃso and Sāmaṇera Anālayo.

B.B.

Introduction

THE MAJJHIMA NIKĀYA AS A COLLECTION

THE MAJJHIMA NIKĀYA is the second collection of the Buddha's discourses found in the Sutta Piṭaka of the Pali Canon. Its title means literally the Middle Collection, and it is so called because the suttas it contains are generally of middle length, compared with the longer suttas of the Dīgha Nikāya, which precedes it, and the shorter suttas making up the two major collections that follow it, the Saṃyutta Nikāya and the Anguttara Nikāya.

The Majjhima Nikāya consists of 152 suttas. These are divided into three parts called Sets of Fifty (*pañṇāsa*), though the last set actually contains fifty-two suttas. Within each part the suttas are further grouped into chapters or divisions (*vagga*) of ten suttas each, the next to the last division containing twelve suttas. The names assigned to these divisions are often derived solely from the titles of the opening sutta (or, in some cases, pair of suttas) and thus are scarcely indicative of the material found within the divisions themselves. A partial exception is the Middle Fifty, where the division titles usually refer to the principal type of interlocutor or key figure in each of the suttas they contain. Even there the connection between the title and the contents is sometimes tenuous. The entire system of classification appears to have been devised more for the purpose of convenience than because of any essential homogeneity of subject matter in the suttas comprised under a single division.

There is also no particular pedagogical sequence in the suttas, no unfolding development of thought. Thus while different suttas illuminate each other and one will fill in ideas merely suggested by another, virtually any sutta may be taken up for individual study and will be found comprehensible on its own. Of course, the study of the entire compilation will naturally yield the richest harvest of understanding.

If the Majjhima Nikāya were to be characterised by a single phrase to distinguish it from among the other books of the Pali Canon, this might be done by describing it as the collection that combines the richest variety of contextual settings with the deepest and most comprehensive assortment of teachings. Like the Dīgha Nikāya, the Majjhima is replete with drama and narrative, while lacking much of its predecessor's tendency towards imaginative embellishment and profusion of legend. Like the Saṃyutta, it contains some of the profoundest discourses in the Canon, disclosing the Buddha's radical insights into the nature of existence; and like the Anguttara, it covers a wide range of topics with practical applicability. In contrast to those two Nikāyas, however, the Majjhima sets forth this material not in the form of short, self-contained utterances, but in the context of a fascinating procession of scenarios that exhibit the Buddha's resplendence of wisdom, his skill in adapting his teachings to the needs and proclivities of his interlocutors, his wit and gentle humour, his majestic sublimity, and his compassionate humanity.

Naturally the greatest number of discourses in the Majjhima are addressed to the bhikkhus—the monks—since they lived in closest proximity to the Master and had followed him into homelessness to take upon themselves his complete course of training. But in the Majjhima we do not meet the Buddha only in his role as head of the Order. Repeatedly we see him engaged in living dialogue with people

from the many different strata of ancient Indian society—with kings and princes, with brahmins and ascetics, with simple villagers and erudite philosophers, with earnest seekers and vain disputants. It is perhaps in this scripture above all others that the Buddha emerges in the role ascribed to him in the canonical verse of homage to the Blessed One as “the incomparable leader of persons to be tamed, the teacher of gods and humans.”

It is not the Buddha alone who appears in the Majjhima in the role of teacher. The work also introduces us to the accomplished disciples he produced who carried on the transmission of his teaching. Of the 152 suttas in the collection, nine are spoken by the venerable Sāriputta, the General of the Dhamma; three of these (MN 9, MN 28, MN 141) have become basic texts for the study of Buddhist doctrine in monastic schools throughout the Theravāda Buddhist world. The venerable Ānanda, the Buddha’s personal attendant during the last twenty-five years of his life, delivers seven suttas and participates in many more. Four suttas are spoken by the venerable Mahā Kaccāna, who excelled in elaborating upon the brief but enigmatic sayings of the Master, and two by the second chief disciple, the venerable Mahā Moggallāna, one of which (MN 15) has been recommended for a monk’s daily reflections. A dialogue between the venerable Sāriputta and the venerable Puṇṇa Mantāṇiputta (MN 24) explores a scheme of seven stages of purification that was to form the outline for Ācariya Buddhaghosa’s great treatise on the Buddhist path, the *Visuddhimagga*. Another dialogue (MN 4) introduces the bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā, whose replies to a series of probing questions were so adroit that the Buddha sealed them for posterity with the words “I would have explained it to you in the same way.”

The formats of the suttas are also highly variegated. The majority take the form of discourses proper, expositions of the teaching that pour forth uninterrupted from the mouth of the Enlightened One. A few among these are delivered in a series of unadorned instructional propositions or guidelines to practice, but most are interlaced with striking similes and parables, which flash through and lighten up the dense mass of doctrine in ways that impress it deeply upon the mind. Other suttas unfold in dialogue and discussion, and in some the dramatic or narrative element predominates. Perhaps the best known and most widely appreciated among these is the *Angulimāla Sutta* (MN 86), which relates how the Buddha subdued the notorious bandit Angulimāla and transformed him into an enlightened saint. Equally moving, though in a different way, is the story of Raṭṭhapāla (MN 82), the youth of a wealthy family whose precocious insight into the universality of suffering was so compelling that he was prepared to die rather than accept his parents’ refusal to permit him to go forth into homelessness. Several suttas centre upon debate, and these highlight the Buddha’s wit and delicate sense of irony as well as his dialectical skills. Particular mention might be made of MN 35 and MN 50 with their subtle humour leavening the seriousness of their contents. In a class of its own is the *Brahmanimantanika Sutta* (MN 49), in which the Buddha visits the Brahma-world to detach a deluded deity from his illusions of grandeur and soon finds himself locked in a gripping contest with Māra the Evil One—an inconceivable alliance of Divinity and Devil defending the sanctity of being against the Buddha’s call for deliverance into Nibbāna, the cessation of being.

THE BUDDHA IN THE MAJJHIMA NIKĀYA

Biographical information for its own sake was never an overriding concern of the redactors of the Pa

Canon, and thus the data the Majjhima provides on the life of the Buddha is scanty and uncoordinated, included principally because of the light it sheds on the Buddha as the ideal exemplar of the spiritual quest and the fully qualified teacher. Nevertheless, though it subordinates biography to other concerns, the Majjhima does give us the fullest canonical account of the Master's early life as Bodhisatta, a seeker of enlightenment. With the Dīgha it shares the miraculous story of his conception and birth (MN 123), but its version of his great renunciation has been stripped to bare essentials and related in the stark terms of existential realism. In his youth, having seen through the sensual delights to which his princely status entitled him (MN 75.10), the Bodhisatta decided that it was futile to pursue things subject like himself to ageing and death and thus, with his parents weeping, he left the home life and went in search of the ageless and deathless, Nibbāna (MN 26.13). MN 26 tells of his discipleship under two accomplished meditation teachers of the day, his mastery of their systems, and his consequent disillusionment. MN 12 and MN 36 describe his ascetic practices during his six hard years of striving, a path he pursued almost to the point of death. MN 26 and MN 36 both relate in lean and unembellished terms his attainment of enlightenment, which they view from different angles, while MN 26 takes us past the enlightenment to the decision to teach and the instruction of his first disciples. From that point on connected biography breaks off in the Majjhima and can only be reconstructed partially and hypothetically.

Again, despite the absence of any systematic account, the Majjhima offers a sufficient number of cameo portraits of the Buddha for us to obtain, with the aid of information provided by other sources, a fairly satisfactory picture of his daily activities and annual routine during the forty-five years of his ministry. A commentarial text shows the Buddha's daily schedule as having been divided between periods of instructing the bhikkhus, giving discourses to the laity, and secluded meditation, during which he usually dwelt either in the "abode of voidness" (MN 121.3, MN 122.6) or in the attainment of great compassion. The day's single meal was always taken in the forenoon, either received by invitation or collected on almsround, and his sleep was restricted to a few hours per night, except in the summer, when he rested briefly during the middle of the day (MN 36.46). The annual routine was determined by the Indian climate, which divided the year into three seasons—a cold season from November through February, a hot season from March through June, and a rainy season from July through October. As was customary among the ascetics of ancient India, the Buddha and his monastic community would remain at a fixed residence during the rainy season, when torrential rains and swollen rivers made travel almost impossible. During the rest of the year he would wander through the Ganges Valley expounding his teachings to all who were prepared to listen.

The Buddha's main seats of residence for the rains retreat (*vassa*) were located at Sāvattihī in the state of Kosala and Rājagaha in the state of Magadha. At Sāvattihī he would usually stay at Jeta's Grove, a park offered to him by the wealthy merchant Anāthapiṇḍika, and accordingly a great number of Majjhima discourses are recorded as having been given there. Occasionally at Sāvattihī he would reside instead at the Eastern Park, offered by the devout lay-woman Visākhā, also known as "Migāra's mother." In Rājagaha he often stayed at the Bamboo Grove, offered by the king of Magadha, Seniya Bimbisāra, or for greater seclusion, on Vulture Peak outside the city. His wanderings, during which he was usually accompanied by a large retinue of bhikkhus, ranged from the Angan country (close to modern West Bengal) to the Himalayan foothills and the Kuru country (modern Delhi). Occasionally when he saw that a special case required his individual attention, he would leave the Sangha and travel alone (see MN 75, MN 86, MN 140).

Although the Canon is precise and reliable in affording such details, for the early Buddha

community interest focuses upon the Buddha not so much in his concrete historical particularity as his archetypal significance. Whereas outsiders might view him as merely one among the many spiritual teachers of the day—as “the recluse Gotama”—to his disciples “he is vision, he is knowledge, he is the Dhamma, he is the holy one,...the giver of the Deathless, the lord of the Dhamma, the Tathāgata” (MN 18.12). The last term in this series is the epithet the Buddha uses most often when referring to himself and it underscores his significance as the Great Arrival who brings to fulfilment the cosmic, repetitive pattern of events. The Pali commentators explain the word as meaning “thus come” (*tathā āgata*) and “thus gone” (*tathā gata*), that is, the one who comes into our midst bearing the message of deathlessness to which he has gone by his own practice of the path. As the Tathāgata he possesses the ten powers of knowledge and the four intrepidities, which enable him to roar his “lion’s roar” at the assemblies (MN 12.9–20). He is not merely a wise sage or a benevolent moralist but the latest in the line of Fully Enlightened Ones, each of whom arises singly in an age of spiritual darkness, discovers the deepest truths about the nature of existence, and establishes a Dispensation (*sāsana*) through which the path to deliverance again becomes accessible to the world. Even those of his disciples who have attained unsurpassable vision, practice, and deliverance still honour and venerate the Tathāgata as one who, enlightened himself, teaches others for the sake of their enlightenment (MN 35.26). Looking back at him following his demise, the first generation of monks could say: “The Blessed One was the arouser of the unarisen path, the producer of the unproduced path, the declarer of the undeclared path; he was the knower of the path, the finder of the path, the one skilled in the path,” which is followed by and attained to afterwards by his disciples (MN 108.5).

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

The Buddha’s teaching is called the Dhamma, a word that can signify both the truth transmitted by the teaching and the conceptual-verbal medium by which that truth is expressed in order that it can be communicated and made comprehensible. The Dhamma is not a body of immutable dogmas or a system of speculative thought. It is essentially a means, a raft for crossing over from the “near shore” of ignorance, craving, and suffering to the “far shore” of transcendental peace and freedom (MN 22.13). Because his aim in setting forth his teaching is a pragmatic one—deliverance from suffering—the Buddha can dismiss the whole gamut of metaphysical speculation as a futile endeavour. Those committed to it he compares to a man struck by a poisoned arrow who refuses the surgeon’s help until he knows the details about his assailant and his weaponry (MN 63.5). Being struck by the arrow of craving, afflicted by ageing and death, humanity is in urgent need of help. The remedy the Buddha brings as the surgeon for the world (MN 105.27) is the Dhamma, which discloses both the truth of our existential plight and the means by which we can heal our wounds.

The Dhamma that the Buddha discovered and taught consists at its core in Four Noble Truths:

- the noble truth of suffering (*dukkha*)
- the noble truth of the origin of suffering (*dukkhasamudaya*)
- the noble truth of the cessation of suffering (*dukkhanirodha*)
- the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering (*dukkhanirodhagāmini paṭipadā*)

It is these four truths that the Buddha awakened to on the night of his enlightenment (MN 4.31, MN 36.42), made known to the world when he set rolling the matchless Wheel of the Dhamma at Benar

(MN 141.2), and held aloft through the forty-five years of his ministry as “the teaching special to the Buddhas” (MN 56.18). In the *Majjhima Nikāya* the Four Noble Truths are expounded concisely at MN 9.14–18 and in detail in MN 141, while in MN 28 the venerable Sāriputta develops an original exposition of the truths unique to that sutta. Yet, though they may be brought forth explicitly only on occasion, the Four Noble Truths structure the entire teaching of the Buddha, containing its many other principles just as the elephant’s footprint contains the footprints of all other animals (MN 28.2).

The pivotal notion around which the truths revolve is that of *dukkha*, translated here as “suffering.” The Pali word originally meant simply pain and suffering, a meaning it retains in the texts when it is used as a quality of feeling; in these cases it has been rendered as “pain” or “painful.” As the first noble truth, however, *dukkha* has a far wider significance, reflective of a comprehensive philosophical vision. While it draws its affective colouring from its connection with pain and suffering, and certainly includes these, it points beyond such restrictive meanings to the inherent unsatisfactoriness of everything conditioned. This unsatisfactoriness of the conditioned is due to its impermanence, its vulnerability to pain, and its inability to provide complete and lasting satisfaction.

The notion of impermanence (*aniccatā*) forms the bedrock for the Buddha’s teaching, having been the initial insight that impelled the Bodhisatta to leave the palace in search of a path to enlightenment. Impermanence, in the Buddhist view, comprises the totality of conditioned existence, ranging in scale from the cosmic to the microscopic. At the far end of the spectrum the Buddha’s vision reveals a universe of immense dimensions evolving and disintegrating in repetitive cycles throughout beginningless time—“many aeons of world-contraction, many aeons of world-expansion, many aeons of world-contraction and expansion” (MN 4.27). In the middle range the mark of impermanence comes to manifestation in our inescapable mortality, our condition of being bound to ageing, sickness, and death (MN 26.5), of possessing a body that is subject “to being worn and rubbed away, to dissolution and disintegration” (MN 74.9). And at the close end of the spectrum, the Buddha’s teaching discloses the radical impermanence uncovered only by sustained attention to experience in its living immediacy: the fact that all the constituents of our being, bodily and mental, are in constant process arising and passing away in rapid succession from moment to moment without any persistent underlying substance. In the very act of observation they are undergoing “destruction, vanishing, fading away, and ceasing” (MN 74.11).

This characteristic of impermanence that marks everything conditioned leads directly to the recognition of the universality of *dukkha* or suffering. The Buddha underscores this all-pervasive aspect of *dukkha* when, in his explanation of the first noble truth, he says, “In short, the five aggregates affected by clinging are suffering.” The five aggregates affected by clinging (*pañc’upādānakkhandhā*) are a classificatory scheme that the Buddha had devised for demonstrating the composite nature of personality. The scheme comprises every possible type of conditioned state which it distributes into five categories—material form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. The aggregate of material form (*rūpa*) includes the physical body with its sense faculties as well as external material objects. The aggregate of feeling (*vedanā*) is the affective element of experience, either pleasant, painful, or neutral. Perception (*saññā*), the third aggregate, is the faculty responsible for noting the qualities of things and also accounts for recognition and memory. The aggregate of mental formations (*sankhārā*) is an umbrella term that includes all volitional, emotive, and intellectual aspects of mental life. And consciousness (*viññāṇa*), the fifth aggregate, is the basic awareness of an object indispensable to all cognition. As the venerable Sāriputta shows in his masterful analysis of the first noble truth, representatives of all five aggregates are present on every occasion

experience, arising in connection with each of the six sense faculties and their objects (MN 28.28).

The Buddha's statement that the five aggregates are dukkha thus reveals that the very things we identify with and hold to as the basis for happiness, rightly seen, are the basis for the suffering that we dread. Even when we feel ourselves comfortable and secure, the instability of the aggregates is itself a source of oppression and keeps us perpetually exposed to suffering in its more blatant forms. The whole situation becomes multiplied further to dimensions beyond calculation when we take into account the Buddha's disclosure of the fact of rebirth. All beings in whom ignorance and craving remain present wander on in the cycle of repeated existence, *saṃsāra*, in which each turn brings the suffering of new birth, ageing, illness, and death. All states of existence within *saṃsāra*, being necessarily transitory and subject to change, are incapable of providing lasting security. Life in our world is unstable, it is swept away, it has no shelter and protector, nothing of its own (MN 82.36).

THE TEACHING OF NON-SELF

Inextricably tied up with impermanence and suffering is a third principle intrinsic to all phenomena of existence. This is the characteristic of non-self (*anattā*), and the three together are called the three marks or characteristics (*tilakkhaṇa*). The Buddha teaches, contrary to our most cherished beliefs, that our individual being—the five aggregates—cannot be identified as self, as an enduring and substantial ground of personal identity. The notion of self has only a conventional validity, as a convenient shorthand device for denoting a composite insubstantial situation. It does not signify any ultimate immutable entity subsisting at the core of our being. The bodily and mental factors are transitory phenomena, constantly arising and passing away, processes creating the appearance of selfhood through their causal continuity and interdependent functioning. Nor does the Buddha posit a self outside and beyond the five aggregates. The notion of selfhood, treated as an ultimate, he regards as a product of ignorance, and all the diverse attempts to substantiate this notion by identifying it with some aspect of the personality he describes as “clinging to a doctrine of self.”

In several suttas in the Majjhima Nikāya, the Buddha gives forceful expression to his repudiation of views of self. In MN 102 he undertakes a far-reaching survey of the various propositions put forward about the self, declaring them all to be “conditioned and gross.” In MN 2.8 six views of self are branded as “the thicket of views, the wilderness of views, the contortion of views, the vacillation of views, the fetter of views.” In MN 11 he compares his teaching point by point with those of other recluses and brahmins and shows that beneath their apparent similarities, they finally diverge on just this one crucial point—the rejection of views of self—which undermines the agreements. MN 22 offers a series of arguments against the view of self, culminating in the Buddha's declaration that he does not see any doctrine of self that would not lead to sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair. In his map of the steps to liberation, identity view (*sakkāyadiṭṭhi*), the positing of a self in relation to the five aggregates is held to be the first fetter to be broken with the arising of the “vision of the Dhamma.”

The principle of non-self is shown in the suttas to follow logically from the two marks of impermanence and suffering. The standard formula states that what is impermanent is pain and suffering, and what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change cannot be regarded as mine, I, or self (MN 22.26, MN 35.20, etc.). Other passages highlight the relationship among the three characteristics from different angles. MN 28 points out that when the external physical elements

earth, water, fire, and air—vast as they are, are periodically destroyed in cosmic cataclysms, there can be no considering this transitory body as self. MN 148 demonstrates by a *reductio ad absurdum* argument that impermanence implies non-self: when all the factors of being are clearly subject to rise and fall, to identify anything among them with self is to be left with the untenable thesis that self is subject to rise and fall. MN 35.19 connects the mark of non-self with that of dukkha by arguing that because we cannot bend the five aggregates to our will, they cannot be taken as mine, I, or self.

THE ORIGIN AND CESSATION OF SUFFERING

The second of the Four Noble Truths makes known the origin or cause of suffering, which the Buddha identifies as craving (*taṇhā*) in its three aspects: craving for sensual pleasures; craving for being, that is, for continued existence; and craving for non-being, that is, for personal annihilation. The third truth states the converse of the second truth, that with the elimination of craving the suffering that originates from it will cease without remainder.

The Buddha's discovery of the causal link between craving and suffering accounts for the apparently "pessimistic" streak that emerges in several suttas of the Majjhima Nikāya: in MN 13 with its disquisition on the dangers in sensual pleasures, form, and feeling; in MN 10 and MN 119 with the cemetery meditations; in MN 22, MN 54, and MN 75 with their shocking similes for sensual pleasures. Such teachings are part of the Buddha's tactical approach to guiding his disciples to liberation. By its own inherent nature craving springs up and thrives wherever it finds something that appears pleasant and delightful. It proliferates through mistaken perception—the perception of sense objects as enjoyable—and thus to break the grip of craving on the mind, exhortation is often not enough. The Buddha must make people see that the things they yearn for and frantically pursue are really suffering, and he does this by exposing the dangers concealed beneath their sweet and charming exteriors.

Although the second and third noble truths have an immediate psychological validity, they also have a deeper aspect brought to light in the suttas. The middle two truths as stated in the general formulation of the Four Noble Truths are actually telescoped versions of a longer formulation that discloses the origin and cessation of bondage in saṃsāra. The doctrine in which this expanded version of the two truths is set forth is called *paṭicca samuppāda*, dependent origination. In its fullest statement the doctrine spells out the origination and cessation of suffering in terms of twelve factors connected together in eleven propositions. This formulation, laid down schematically, will be found at MN 38.17 in its order of arising and at MN 38.20 in its order of ceasing. MN 115.11 includes both sequences together preceded by a statement of the general principle of conditionality that underlies the applied doctrine. A more elaborate version giving a factorial analysis of each term in the series is presented at MN 9.26, 66, and a version exemplified in the course of an individual life at MN 38.26–40. Condensed versions are also found, notably at MN 1.171, MN 11.16, and MN 75.24–25. The venerable Sāriputta quotes the Buddha as saying that one who sees dependent origination sees the Dhamma and one who sees the Dhamma sees dependent origination (MN 28.28).

According to the usual interpretation, the series of twelve factors extends over three lives and divides into causal and resultant phases. The gist of it can be briefly explained as follows. Because of ignorance (*avijjā*)—defined as non-knowledge of the Four Noble Truths—a person engages in volition

actions or *kamma*, which may be bodily, verbal, or mental, wholesome or unwholesome. These kammic actions are the formations (*sankhārā*), and they ripen in states of consciousness (*viññāṇa*)—first as the rebirth-consciousness at the moment of conception and thereafter as the passive states of consciousness resulting from kamma that matures in the course of a lifetime. Along with consciousness there arises mentality-materiality (*nāmarūpa*), the psychophysical organism, which is equipped with the sixfold base (*saḷāyatana*), the five physical sense faculties and mind as the faculty for the higher cognitive functions. Via the sense faculties contact (*phassa*) takes place between consciousness and its objects, and contact conditions feeling (*vedanā*). The links from consciousness through feeling are the products of past kamma, of the causal phase represented by ignorance and formations. With the next link the kammically active phase of the present life begins, productive of a new existence in the future. Conditioned by feeling, craving (*taṇhā*) arises, this being the second noble truth. When craving intensifies it gives rise to clinging (*upādāna*), through which one again engages in volitional actions pregnant with a renewal of existence (*bhava*). The new existence begins with birth (*jāti*), which inevitably leads to ageing and death (*jarāmaraṇa*).

The teaching of dependent origination also shows how the round of existence can be broken. With the arising of true knowledge, full penetration of the Four Noble Truths, ignorance is eradicated. Consequently the mind no longer indulges in craving and clinging, action loses its potential to generate rebirth, and deprived thus of its fuel, the round comes to an end. This marks the goal of the teaching signalled by the third noble truth, the cessation of suffering.

NIBBĀNA

The state that supervenes when ignorance and craving have been uprooted is called Nibbāna (Sanskrit *Nirvāṇa*), and no conception in the Buddha's teaching has proved so refractory to conceptual pinning down as this one. In a way such elusiveness is only to be expected, since Nibbāna is described precisely as “profound, hard to see and hard to understand,...unattainable by mere reasoning” (MN 26.19). Yet in this same passage the Buddha also says that Nibbāna is to be experienced by the wise and in the suttas he gives enough indications of its nature to convey some idea of its desirability.

The Pali Canon offers sufficient evidence to dispense with the opinion of some interpreters that Nibbāna is sheer annihilation; even the more sophisticated view that Nibbāna is merely the destruction of defilements and the extinction of existence cannot stand up under scrutiny. Probably the most compelling testimony against that view is the well-known passage from the *Udāna* that declares with reference to Nibbāna that “there is an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned,” the existence of which makes possible “escape from the born, become, made, and conditioned” (Ud 8:3/80). The *Majjhima Nikāya* characterises Nibbāna in similar ways. It is “the unborn, unageing, unailing, deathless, sorrowless, undefiled supreme security from bondage,” which the Buddha attained to on the night of his enlightenment (MN 26.18). Its pre-eminent reality is affirmed by the Buddha when he calls Nibbāna the supreme foundation of truth, whose nature is undeceptive and which ranks as the supreme noble truth (MN 140.26). Nibbāna cannot be perceived by those who live in lust and hate, but it can be seen with the arising of spiritual vision, and by fixing the mind upon it in the depths of meditation, the disciple can attain the destruction of the taints (MN 26.19, MN 75.24, MN 64.9).

The Buddha does not devote many words to a philosophical definition of Nibbāna. One reason is that

Nibbāna, being unconditioned, transcendent, and supramundane, does not easily lend itself definition in terms of concepts that are inescapably tied to the conditioned, manifest, and mundane. Another is that the Buddha's objective is the practical one of leading beings to release from suffering and thus his principal approach to the characterisation of Nibbāna is to inspire the incentive to attain it and to show what must be done to accomplish this. To show Nibbāna as desirable, as the aim of striving, he describes it as the highest bliss, as the supreme state of sublime peace, as the ageless, deathless, and sorrowless, as the supreme security from bondage. To show what must be done to attain Nibbāna, to indicate that the goal implies a definite task, he describes it as the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, dispassion (MN 26.19). Above and beyond Nibbāna is the cessation of suffering, and for those who seek an end to suffering such a designation is enough to beckon them towards the path.

THE WAY TO THE CESSATION OF SUFFERING

The fourth noble truth completes the pattern established by the first three truths by revealing that the way to Nibbāna means to eliminate craving and thereby bring an end to suffering. This truth teaches the “Middle Way” discovered by the Buddha, the Noble Eightfold Path:

1. right view (*sammā diṭṭhi*)
2. right intention (*sammā sankappa*)
3. right speech (*sammā vācā*)
4. right action (*sammā kammanta*)
5. right livelihood (*sammā ājīva*)
6. right effort (*sammā vāyāma*)
7. right mindfulness (*sammā sati*)
8. right concentration (*sammā samādhi*)

Mentioned countless times throughout the Majjhima Nikāya, the Noble Eightfold Path is explained in detail in two full suttas. MN 141 gives a factorial analysis of the eight components of the path using the definitions that are standard in the Pali Canon; MN 117 expounds the path from a different angle under the rubric of “noble right concentration with its supports and its requisites.” The Buddha there makes the important distinction between the mundane and supramundane stages of the path, defines the first five factors for both stages, and shows how the path factors function in unison in the common task of providing an outlet from suffering. Other suttas explore in greater detail individual components of the path. Thus MN 9 provides an in-depth exposition of right view, MN 10 of right mindfulness, MN 19 of right intention. MN 44.11 explains that the eight factors can be incorporated into three “aggregates” of training. Right speech, right action, and right livelihood make up the aggregate of virtue or moral discipline (*sīla*); right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration make up the aggregate of concentration (*samādhi*); and right view and right intention make up the aggregate of understanding or wisdom (*paññā*). This threefold sequence in turn serves as the basic outline for the gradual training, to be discussed later.

In the Pali Canon the practices conducing to Nibbāna are often elaborated into a more complex system comprising seven groups of intersecting factors. The later tradition designates them the thirty-seven aids to enlightenment (*bodhipakkhiyā dhammā*), but the Buddha himself simply speaks of them without

a collective name as “the things that I have taught you after directly knowing them” (MN 103.3, MN 104.5). Towards the end of his life he stressed to the Sangha that the long duration of his teaching the world depends upon the accurate preservation of these factors and their being practised by his followers in harmony, free from contention.

The constituents of this set are as follows:

- the four foundations of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*)
- the four right kinds of striving (*sammappadhāna*)
- the four bases for spiritual power (*iddhipāda*)
- the five faculties (*indriya*)
- the five powers (*bala*)
- the seven enlightenment factors (*bojjhanga*)
- the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariya aṭṭhangika magga*)

Each group is defined in full at MN 77.15–21. As examination will show, most of these groups are simply subdivisions or rearrangements of factors of the eightfold path made to highlight different aspects of the practice. Thus, for example, the four foundations of mindfulness are an elaboration of right mindfulness; the four right kinds of striving, an elaboration of right effort. The development of the groups is therefore integral and not sequential. MN 118, for example, shows how the practice of the four foundations of mindfulness fulfils the development of the seven enlightenment factors, and MN 149.10 states that one engaged in insight meditation on the senses brings to maturity all thirty-seven aids to enlightenment.

Factorial analysis of the thirty-seven aids to enlightenment brings to light the central importance of the four factors among them—energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. From this a clear picture of the essential practice can be sketched. One begins with a conceptual understanding of the Dhamma and an intention to achieve the goal, the first two path factors. Then, out of faith, one accepts the moral discipline regulating speech, action, and livelihood. With virtue as a basis one energetically applies the mind to cultivating the four foundations of mindfulness. As mindfulness matures it issues in deepened concentration, and the concentrated mind, by investigation, arrives at wisdom, a penetrative understanding of the principles originally grasped only conceptually.

THE GRADUAL TRAINING

In the Majjhima Nikāya the Buddha often expounds the practice of the path as a gradual training (*anupubbasikkhā*), which unfolds in stages from the first step to the final goal. This gradual training is a finer subdivision of the threefold division of the path into virtue, concentration, and wisdom. Invariably in the suttas the sequence on the gradual training is shown to start with the going forth into homelessness and the adoption of the lifestyle of a bhikkhu, a Buddhist monk. This immediately calls attention to the importance of the monastic life in the Buddha’s Dispensation. In principle the entire practice of the Noble Eightfold Path is open to people from any mode of life, monastic or lay, and the Buddha confirms that many among his lay followers were accomplished in the Dhamma and had attained the first three of the four supramundane stages (MN 68.18–23; MN 73.9–22; the Theravāda position is that lay followers can also attain the fourth stage, arahantship, but having done so the

immediately seek the going forth or pass away). However, the fact remains that the household life inevitably tends to impede the single-hearted quest for deliverance by fostering a multitude of worldly concerns and personal attachments. Hence the Buddha himself went forth into homelessness as the preliminary step in his own noble quest, and after his enlightenment he established the Sangha, the order of bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs, as the resort for those who wish to devote themselves fully to the practice of his teaching undeflected by the cares of household life.

The main paradigm for the gradual training found in the Majjhima Nikāya is that laid out in MN 1 and MN 51; alternative versions are found at MN 38, MN 39, MN 53, MN 107, and MN 125, and some of the more important variations will be briefly noted. The sequence opens with the appearance of the Tathāgata in the world and his exposition of the Dhamma, hearing which the disciple acquires faith and follows the Teacher into homelessness. Having gone forth, he undertakes and observes the rules and discipline that promote the purification of conduct and livelihood. The next three steps—contentment, restraint of the sense faculties, and mindfulness and full awareness—are intended to internalise the process of purification and thereby bridge the transition from virtue to concentration. Alternative versions (MN 39, MN 53, MN 107, MN 125) insert two additional steps here, moderation in eating and devotion to wakefulness.

The direct training in concentration comes to prominence in the section on the abandonment of the five hindrances. The five hindrances—sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and doubt—are the primary obstacles to meditative development and their removal is therefore essential for the mind to be brought to a state of calm and unification. In the sequence on the gradual training the overcoming of the hindrances is treated only schematically; other parts of the Canon provide more practical instruction, amplified still more in the commentaries. The passage on the hindrances is graced in MN 39 by a series of similes illustrating the contrast between the bondage imposed by the hindrances and the joyful sense of freedom that is won when they are abandoned.

The next stage in the sequence describes the attainment of the *jhānas*, profound states of concentration in which the mind becomes fully absorbed in its object. The Buddha enumerates four *jhānas*, named simply after their numerical position in the series, each more refined and elevated than its predecessor. The *jhānas* are always described by the same formulas, which in several suttas (MN 3, MN 77, MN 119) are augmented by similes of great beauty. Although in the Theravāda tradition the *jhānas* are not regarded as indispensable to the attainment of enlightenment, the Buddha invariably includes them in the full gradual training because of the contribution they make to the intrinsic perfection of the path and because the deep concentration they induce provides a solid base for the cultivation of insight. While still mundane the *jhānas* are the “footsteps of the Tathāgata” (MN 27.1–22) and foretokens of the bliss of Nibbāna that lies at the training’s end.

From the fourth *jhāna* three alternative lines of further development become possible. In a number of passages outside the sequence on the gradual training (MN 8, MN 25, MN 26, MN 66, etc.) the Buddha mentions four meditative states that continue the mental unification established by the *jhānas*. These states, described as “the liberations that are peaceful and immaterial,” are, like the *jhānas*, also mundane. Distinguished from the *jhānas* by their transcendence of the subtle mental image that forms the object in the *jhānas*, they are named after their own exalted objects: the base of infinite space, the base of infinite consciousness, the base of nothingness, and the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. In the Pali commentaries these states came to be called the immaterial or formless *jhānas* (*arūpajjhāna*).

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