The Middle Path and the Four Noble Truths

The Middle Path

There are two extremes to be avoided by one who has renounced the world: (1) immersion in sensual pleasures, which is pathetic, low, vulgar, dishonorable, and which leads to no true fulfillment; and (2) excessive self-denial and self-mortification, which is painful and dishonorable, and which leads to no true fulfillment.

Avoiding these two extremes, a Tathagata [enlightened one] discovers a Middle Path, which opens the eyes, which bestows understanding, and which leads to peace of mind, to wisdom, to full enlightenment, to Nirvana. And what is that Middle Path? It is the Noble Eightfold Path, namely, Right Views, Right Intent, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. This is the Middle Path . . . .

A Tathagata [enlightened one], does not seek salvation in austerities, but neither does he immerse himself in worldly pleasures, nor does he live in abundance and luxury. He follows the Middle Path. You can't become spiritually purified by abstaining from fish or meat, nor from going naked, nor from shaving the head, nor from wearing matted hair, nor from dressing in a rough garment, nor from covering yourself with dirt, nor from sacrificing to the gods. What you need is to become free from delusion. Similarly, you can't achieve spiritual purity through reading the Vedas [the sacred scriptures of Hinduism], nor through making offerings to priests, nor through sacrifices to the gods, nor through self-mortification . . . ., nor through many penances performed for the sake of immortality. What you need is to be come free from delusion.

It isn't eating meat that makes us unclean. It is anger, drunkenness, obstinacy, bigotry, deception, envy, self-praise, disparaging others, arrogance, and evil intentions . . . .

He who practices extreme self-denial and self-mortification experiences a suffering that produces confusion and sickly thoughts in his mind. This is not conducive even to worldly knowledge. Much less does it lead to victory over the senses! He who fills his lamp with water will not escape the darkness, and he who tries to light a fire with soggy wood will fail. How can anyone become free from self by leading a wretched life of self-mortification? That is not the way to quench the fires of lust or the passion for pleasure. He who has extinguished the ego is free from lust; he desires neither worldly nor heavenly pleasures. For such a one the satisfaction of natural needs does not defile him. Practicing moderation, he eats and drinks in accordance with the actual needs of the body.

It is true that sensuality is debilitating. The immoderate and self-indulgent man is a slave to his passions, and pleasure-seeking is degrading and vulgar. However, to satisfy the necessities of life is not evil. To keep the body in good health is a duty, for otherwise we shall not be able to trim the lamp of wisdom and keep our mind strong and clear. Water surrounds the lotus-flower, but does not wet its petals . . . .

The Four Noble Truths

(1) Now this is the Noble Truth of Suffering [dukkha]: Birth is suffering, aging and deterioration is suffering, disease is suffering, death is suffering. The presence of hateful objects is suffering; the absence of lovable objects is suffering; not

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1Compilation and rendition by George Cronk.
2Samyutta Nikaya 56.11.
getting what we desire [that is, getting what we don't want and not getting what we do want] is suffering. To put it briefly, the fivefold clinging [attachment] to existence [through the body, sensation, consciousness, perception, and volition — the five skandhas or components of human personhood] is suffering.

(2) And this is the Noble Truth of the Cause of Suffering: The cause is selfish craving [tanha, "thirst," "desire"], which leads to rebirth and which is accompanied by lust for pleasure, seeking satisfaction now here, now there. This selfish craving takes three main forms: (a) craving for pleasure, (b) craving for [continued] existence, and (c) craving for the cessation of existence.¹

(3) And this is the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering: Suffering ceases with the complete cessation of selfish craving — a cessation which consists in the absence of every passion [Nirvana, "no passion," the “blowing out” of tanha]. Suffering ceases with the laying aside of, the giving up of, the letting go of, the being free from, the rejection of, and the dwelling no longer upon this selfish craving.

(4) And this is the Noble Truth of the Path that Leads to the Cessation of Suffering [and thence to Nirvana]: It is the Noble Eightfold Path, that is to say, Right Views, Right Intent, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

Teachings from Buddhist Scriptures on the Four Noble Truths²

Digha Nikaya 16

It is through not understanding, not penetrating, the Four Noble Truths that we go around and around on the cycle of birth-and-death . . . . But by understanding these . . . Noble Truths, the craving for becoming is extinguished, becoming itself is destroyed, and there is no more rebirth.

The Noble Truth of Suffering

Samyutta Nikaya 56.11

This is the Noble Truth of Suffering: Birth is suffering, aging and deterioration is suffering, disease is suffering, death is suffering. The presence of hateful objects is suffering; the absence of lovable objects is suffering; not getting what we desire [that is, getting what we don't want and not getting what we do want] is suffering. To put it briefly, the fivefold clinging [attachment] to existence [through the body, sensation, consciousness, perception, and volition — the five skandhas or components of human personhood] is suffering.

Majjhima Nikaya 3.248-252

What, now, is birth? The birth of beings belonging to this or that order of beings, their being born, their conception and issuing into existence, the appearance of dispositions, the arising of sense-activity: this is called birth.

And what is decay? The decay of beings belonging to this or that order of beings; their becoming old, ill, frail, gray-haired, and wrinkled; the failing of their vitality; the wearing out of their minds and bodies: this is called decay.

¹In some traditions, item (c) is craving for happiness.

²The most ancient Buddhist scriptures were composed in India between 500 BC and 100 AD. These writings appeared in two somewhat different versions and in two different languages — in Pali and in Sanskrit. They are known as the “Three Baskets,” Tipitaka in Pali and Tripitaka in Sanskrit. The Sanskrit Canon is considered primary by the Mahayana schools of Buddhism in Tibet, Mongolia, China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, whereas the Pali Canon constitutes the sacred scriptures of the Theravada schools of Buddhism in Southeast Asia and in Shri Lanka (Ceylon). The selections in this section are taken from the Pali Canon.
And what is death? The departing and vanishing of beings out of this or that order of beings; their destruction, disappearance . . . ; the completion of their life-period; the dissolution of the mind and body; the discarding of the body: this is called death.

And what is sorrow? The sorrow arising through this or that loss or misfortune, worrying, being alarmed, inward sadness, inward woe: this is called sorrow.

And what is lamentation? Whatsoever through this or that loss or misfortune makes us wail and lament or puts us into a state of woe: this is called lamentation.

And what is pain? Bodily pain and unpleasantness; painful and unpleasant feelings produced by bodily impressions; any bad feeling: this is called pain.

And what is grief? Mental pain and suffering; any distress of the mind: this is called grief.

And what is despair? Distress caused by this or that loss or misfortune; any tribulation of heart or mind; desperation: this is called despair.

And what is the suffering of not getting what one desires? To beings subject to birth, decay, death, grief, lamentation, pain, misery, and so forth, there comes the desire not to be subject to those evils but to escape them: "O, that we were not subject to these things! O, that these things were not before us!" But escape is not possible through mere desiring; and not to get what one desires is suffering.

And what, in brief, is the fivefold clinging [attachment] to existence? It is embodiment (corporeality), sensation, consciousness, perception, and volition.

The Noble Truth of the Cause of Suffering

Samyutta Nikaya 56.11

And this is the Noble Truth of the Cause of Suffering: The cause is selfish craving [tanha, "thirst," "desire"], which leads to rebirth and which is accompanied by lust for pleasure, seeking satisfaction now here, now there. This selfish craving takes three main forms: (a) craving for pleasure, (b) craving for [continued] existence, and (c) craving for the cessation of existence.

Dhammapada 338, 335-336

If you fall victim to this foul and oppressive craving, your sorrows increase like wild grass after rain. If you conquer this foul and oppressive craving, your sorrows will roll off you, like beads of water off a lotus plant . . . . If its root remains undamaged and strong, a tree, even if cut, will grow again. Similarly, if craving is not rooted out of your existence, your suffering returns again and again.

The Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering

Samyutta Nikaya 56.11

And this is the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering: Suffering ceases with the complete cessation of selfish craving — a cessation which consists in the absence of every passion [Nirvana, "no passion," the "blowing out" of tanha]. Suffering ceases with the laying aside of, the giving up of, the letting go of, the being free from, the rejection of, and the dwelling no longer upon this selfish craving.

Samyutta Nikaya 12.23

The cessation of selfish craving can be achieved only by one who knows and sees . . . . not by one who does not know and does not see . . . . But knows what and sees what? The nature, origin, and extinction of form [corporeality], and of
sensation, and of consciousness, and of perception, and of volition . . . . The ending of these constructions comes to one who knows in this way and sees in this way.

However, there are preconditions for knowledge and release, namely, dispassion, disenchantment, insight, vision of things as they really are, concentration, serenity, rapture, joy, conviction. Suffering, birth, becoming, clinging, craving, feeling, contact, corporeality, consciousness, etc., also have a precondition, namely, ignorance . . . . [All] the fabrications of unenlightened existence have ignorance as their foundation and cause . . . .

Anguttara Nikaya 10.92 [the chain of interdependent causation]

There is a means by which a disciple of the Buddha can see the connections between things: When this is, that is. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. When this isn't, that isn't. From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that.

Thus, we see that ignorance gives rise to the fabrications of finite existence; such fabrications produce consciousness; consciousness gives rise to name-and-form [psycho-physical existence]; name-and-form lead to sensation, which results in and from contact with the world; contact with the world gives rise to feeling; from feeling comes craving, and craving leads to clinging; clinging causes becoming; becoming results in birth; and from birth, there follow inevitably old age and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair. Such is the origination of the entire mass of suffering.

Now, when ignorance ceases, there are no more fabrications of existence; the non-arising of such fabrications results in no more consciousness; the cessation of consciousness leads to the cessation of name-and-form [psycho-physical existence]; the cessation of name-and-form leads to the non-arising of sensation, which results in the non-arising of contact with the world; the non-arising of contact with the world results in the non-arising of feeling, from the non-arising of feeling, the non-arising of craving follows, and the non-arising of craving produces no clinging; without clinging, there is no becoming; without becoming, there is no birth; and with the cessation of birth, there follows the cessation of old age and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair. Such is the process that results in the cessation of the entire mass of suffering.

The Noble Truth of the Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering

Samyutta Nikaya 56.11

And this is the Noble Truth of the Path that Leads to the Cessation of Suffering [and thence to Nirvana]: It is the Noble Eightfold Path, that is to say, Right Views, Right Intent, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

Right Views

Digha Nikaya 22

And what are right views? Knowledge with regard to suffering, knowledge with regard to the origination of suffering, knowledge with regard to the cessation of suffering, knowledge with regard to the path that leads to the cessation of suffering: This is what is meant by right views.

Majjhima Nikaya 2

Some people get swept away in a blizzard of abstract questions and speculations: Have I lived past lives? Have I not lived past lives? What was I in my past lives? How did I fare in my past lives? What shall I be in my future lives? Or shall I not have any future lives? Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where have I come from? Where am I going? ['I,' "I," "I"]

This leads to puzzling over numerous theories and hypothetical possibilities: I have a self. I have no self. It is through self that I experience self. It is through self that I understand that there is no self. It is through no-self that I perceive self. This very self of mine — the knower, the actor, the one who will be rewarded or punished for his good and bad actions — is a constant, unchanging, everlasting, eternal being that lives forever.
In this way, many people become trapped in a thicket, a wilderness, a morass, a snake-pit, a prison of views. Thus, they are not freed from birth, aging, and death, nor from sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair. They are not freed from suffering.

However, those who attend to the Four Noble Truths develop right views: Knowledge with regard to suffering, knowledge with regard to the origination of suffering, knowledge with regard to the cessation of suffering, knowledge with regard to the path that leads to the cessation of suffering. One who attends in this way to the Four Noble Truths is released from selfhood, from doubt, and from grasping at precepts and abstract concepts.

Samyutta Nikaya 12.15

By and large . . . , this cosmos is grounded in the polarity of existence and non-existence. But when one understands the cosmos as it actually is, then the concepts of "non-existence" and "existence" do not arise.

By and large . . . , this cosmos is in bondage to attachments, clingings, and fixations of consciousness. But a Buddha does not get bogged down in these attachments, clingings, and fixations of consciousness; nor is he focused on "my self." He has no uncertainty or doubt that, when there is arising, only suffering is arising; and that when there is passing away, it is suffering that is passing away. He has right views.

Right Intent

Samyutta Nikaya 45.8

And what is right intent? It is being intent on freedom from sensuality, on freedom from ill-will, on freedom from doing harm: This is called right intent.

Right Speech

Samyutta Nikaya 45.8

And what is right speech? Abstaining from lying, from divisive speech, from abusive speech, and from idle chatter: This is called right speech.

Samyutta Nikaya 3.3

Speak only what neither torments yourself nor does harm to others . . . . Speak meaningfully and usefully . . . .

Anguttara Nikaya 10.99

A disciple of the Buddha abstains from false speech. He speaks the truth, is firm and reliable, and is no deceiver. He abstains from divisive speech. He does not use what he has heard to break people apart from one another. He seeks to reconcile those who have broken apart and to cement those who have united. He loves and serves concord and speaks things that create or sustain concord. He abstains from abusive speech. His words are soothing to the ear and affectionate; they go to the heart; they are polite, appealing, and pleasing to people in general. He abstains from idle chatter. He speaks at the right time; he speaks what is factual and true, what is in accordance with the teaching and discipline of the Buddha . . . .

Majjhima Nikaya 61

Whenever you prepare to speak, you should ask, "Will this verbal act lead to self-harm, or to the harm of others, or to both? Will it have painful consequences?" If, on reflection, you know that your speaking will lead to self-harm, or to the harm of others, or to both, or if you know that it will have painful consequences for anyone, then you should not speak. If, on reflection, you know that your speaking will not cause harm or produce painful consequences for anyone, or if you know that your speaking will do good and produce happy consequences, then you are free to speak . . . .
Right Conduct

Samyutta Nikaya 45.8

And what is right conduct? Abstaining from taking life, from stealing, and from sexual intercourse [or impurity]. This is called right conduct.

Anguttara Nikaya 10.99

Having renounced the world and following the Buddhist monastic life, the bhikkhu\textsuperscript{1} abstains from the taking of life. He lays down his club and his sword. He is kind and compassionate, serving the welfare of all living beings. He abstains from taking what is not given to him. He takes only what is given, accepts only what is given, lives not by stealing but by means that are morally pure. He lives a celibate life, apart, refraining from sexual intercourse.

Anguttara Nikaya 10.176

The lay follower of the Buddhist way of life must abstain from [the taking of life, from stealing, and from] sexual immorality, misconduct, and impropriety . . . .

Right Livelihood

Samyutta Nikaya 45.8

And what is right livelihood? This is where a disciple, having abandoned dishonest livelihood, keeps his life going with right livelihood: This is called right livelihood.

Anguttara Nikaya 5.177

These following five trades . . . [are prohibited]: (1) manufacturing or trading in weapons, (2) trading in living beings [slave-trading and prostitution], (3) trading in meat, (4) trading in intoxicants, and (5) trading in poisons.\textsuperscript{2}

Right Effort

Samyutta Nikaya 45.8

And what . . . is right effort? It is (1) preventing evil and unwholesome states of mind from arising; (2) getting rid of such states of mind that may already exist; (3) bringing about good and wholesome states of mind; and (4) developing and perfecting good and wholesome states of mind that are already present: This form of meditation is called right effort.

Right Mindfulness

Samyutta Nikaya 45.8

And what . . . is right mindfulness? (1) This is where a practitioner remains focused on the body in and of itself — dedicated, aware, and mindful — putting away greed and distress with reference to the world. (2) He remains focused on feelings in and of themselves — dedicated, aware, and mindful — putting away greed and distress with reference to the world. (3) He remains focused on the mind in and of itself — dedicated, aware, and mindful — putting away greed and

\textsuperscript{1}A bhikkhu is a monk, a holy man who has withdrawn from the world to seek spiritual liberation.

\textsuperscript{2}Some lists in the Buddhist scriptures include tax collecting and caravan trading among the prohibited livelihoods.

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distress with reference to the world. (4) He remains focused on mental operations in and of themselves — dedicated, aware, and mindful — putting away greed and distress with reference to the world: This . . . [form of meditation] is called right mindfulness.

Samyutta Nikaya 47.20

Suppose that a large crowd of people comes thronging together, shouting, “The beauty queen! The beauty queen!” And suppose that the beauty queen is excellent at singing and dancing so that an even greater crowd comes thronging, shouting, “The beauty queen is singing! The beauty queen is dancing!” Then a man comes along, desiring life and shrinking from death, desiring pleasure and repelled by pain. They say to him, “Now look here, you must take this bowl filled to the brim with oil and carry it on your head through the great crowd. A soldier with a sword will follow right behind you and if you spill even a drop of oil, he will cut your head off right on the spot.”

Will that man allow himself to be distracted by the crowd or by the beauty queen's singing and dancing? Will he remove his attention from the bowl of oil? By no means! He will concentrate fully on the bowl and on his own walking . . . .

The bowl of oil stands for mindfulness immersed in the body. Thus you should train yourself to develop mindfulness immersed in the body, to pursue it, to make it your vehicle, to make it your abode. You should practice it, acquaint yourself with it fully, and proceed with it properly and with diligence.

Right Concentration

Samyutta Nikaya 45.8

And what . . . is right concentration? (1) The practitioner, withdrawn from sensual pleasures and detached from all negative states of mind, enters and remains in the first jhana: rapture and pleasure resulting from detachment, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation. (2) With the cessation of directed thought and evaluation, he enters and remains in the second jhana: rapture and pleasure born of one-pointed concentration, accompanied by internal calm and peace of mind. (3) With the fading of rapture, he remains in a state of equanimity — mindful, fully aware, physically sensitive to pleasure; he enters and remains in the third jhana: cessation of all passions and prejudices, accompanied by a continued sense of joy. (4) With the cessation of both pleasure and pain, he enters and remains in the fourth jhana: total tranquility and equanimity, accompanied by complete awareness. This [form of meditation] is called right concentration.

Anguttara Nikaya 4.41

These are the four levels of right concentration: (1) The level of concentration that leads to a pleasant abiding in the here and now. [This level is described in the preceding paragraph from the Samutta Nikaya 45.8.]

(2) The level of concentration that leads to the attainment of knowledge and vision: This is where the practitioner has a well-fixed perception of daylight at any hour of the day. Daytime, for him, is the same as nighttime, and nighttime is the same as daytime. By means of an awareness open and unhampered, he develops an illumined mind . . . .

(3) The level of concentration that leads to mindfulness and alertness: This is where the practitioner is aware of feelings as they arise, as they persist, and as they subside. He is aware of perceptions as they arise, as they persist, and as they subside. He is aware of thoughts as they arise, as they persist, as they subside . . . .

(4) The level of concentration that leads to the ending of the fivefold clinging [attachment] to existence [through the body, sensation, consciousness, perception, and volition — the five skandhas or components of human personhood]: This is where the practitioner remains focused on the arising and subsiding of the five components: Such is form [corporeality], such is its origination, such is its subsiding. Such is feeling . . . . Such is perception . . . . Such are processes . . . . Such is consciousness, such is its origination, such is its subsiding . . . .
The Three Marks of Existence

Transitoriness and impermanence (*anicca*)

Whether Buddhas arise . . . or whether Buddhas do not arise, it remains a fact and a fixed and necessary characteristic of existence that all things are transitory and impermanent. A Buddha discovers and masters this fact, and when he has discovered and mastered it, he broadcasts, teaches, publishes, proclaims, and discloses it, and he explains it in minute detail, making it clear that all things are transitory and impermanent.

Suffering (*dukkha*)

Whether Buddhas arise . . . or whether Buddhas do not arise, it remains a fact and a fixed and necessary characteristic of existence that all things are subject to suffering. A Buddha discovers and masters this fact, and when he has discovered and mastered it, he broadcasts, teaches, publishes, proclaims, and discloses it, and he explains it in minute detail, making it clear that all things are subject to suffering.

No-self (*anatta*)

Whether Buddhas arise . . . or whether Buddhas do not arise, it remains a fact and a fixed and necessary characteristic of being that there is no such thing as ego or self [a substantial, permanent self-nature]. A Buddha discovers and masters this fact, and when he has discovered and mastered it, he broadcasts, teaches, publishes, proclaims, and discloses it, and he explains it in minute detail, making it clear that there is no such thing as ego or self.

The Three Marks of Existence and Nirvana

The Buddha teaches that all things are transient and impermanent, that all things are subject to suffering, that there is no such thing as ego or self. How, then, can there be Nirvana, a state of eternal bliss?

To this question, the Buddha has answered as follows: There is . . . an uncreated state where there is neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor air; neither infinity of space nor infinity of consciousness, nor nothingness, nor perception nor non-perception; neither this world nor another world; neither sun nor moon. In that state, there is neither coming nor going nor stasis; neither passing away (death) nor arising (birth). In that state there is no stability, no foundation, no change. It is eternal. It never originates, and it never passes away. There is the end of suffering.

The dependent being wavers. The independent being does not waver. No waverings — tranquility. Tranquility — no desire. No desire — no coming or going. No coming or going — no passing away or arising. No passing away or arising — no here, no there, no in-between. There is the end of suffering.

It is hard to understand this. The truth is not easily grasped. Craving is overthrown by knowledge. For one who sees, there is nothing.

Nirvana is unborn, unoriginated, uncreated, unfinished. Were there not this unborn, unoriginated, uncreated, and unfinished, there would be no liberation from the world that is born, originated, created, and fabricated. But since there is an unborn, unoriginated, uncreated, and unfinished, there is liberation from the world that is born, originated, created, and fabricated.

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1 Anguttara Nikaya 3.134.

The Fire Sermon\textsuperscript{1}

On one occasion, when the Buddha was living at Gaya . . . , together with a thousand of his disciples, he addressed the bhikkhus as follows:

Bhikkhus, all is aflame. And what is the all that is aflame? The eye is aflame. Forms seen are aflame. Eye-consciousness is aflame. Eye-contact is aflame. Whatever arises on contact with the eye — whether experienced as pleasure, or as pain, or as neither pleasure nor pain — that also is aflame. Aflame with what? Aflame with the fire of passion, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of delusion. Aflame, I tell you, with birth, with aging and death, with sorrow, with lamentation, with pain, with distress, and with despair.

The ear is aflame. Sounds heard are aflame. Ear-consciousness is aflame. Ear-contact is aflame. Whatever arises on contact with the ear — whether experienced as pleasure, or as pain, or as neither pleasure nor pain — that also is aflame. Aflame with what? Aflame with the fire of passion, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of delusion. Aflame, I tell you, with birth, with aging and death, with sorrow, with lamentation, with pain, with distress, and with despair.

The nose is aflame; odors are aflame . . . . The tongue is aflame; flavors are aflame . . . . The body is aflame; bodily sensations are aflame . . . . The mind is aflame; ideas are aflame . . . . They are all aflame. Aflame with what? Aflame with the fire of passion, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of delusion. Aflame, I tell you, with birth, with aging and death, with sorrow, with lamentation, with pain, with distress, and with despair.

When the true disciple sees thus, he becomes disenchanted with the eye . . . , disenchanted with the ear . . . , disenchanted with the nose . . . , disenchanted with the tongue . . . , disenchanted with the body . . . , and disenchanted with the mind . . . . Whatever arises — whether experienced as pleasure, or as pain, or as neither pleasure nor pain — with that also he becomes disenchanted.

With disenchantment, the disciple becomes dispassionate. Dispassionate, he experiences liberation . . . . He understands that the cycle of birth-death-rebirth is ended; he has lived a holy life; he has transcended . . . .

Discourse on Dependent Origination\textsuperscript{2}

. . . And what is dependent origination? Ignorance gives rise to fabrications. Fabrications give rise to consciousness. Consciousness gives rise to name-and-form [psycho-physical existence]. Name-and-form give rise to the six sense faculties. The six sense faculties give rise to contact with the world. Contact with the world gives rise to feeling. Feeling gives rise to craving. Craving gives rise to clinging. Clinging gives rise to the impulse toward becoming. The impulse toward becoming gives rise to birth. Birth inevitably gives rise to aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair. This is how the entire mass of suffering originates.

Now what are aging and death? Aging is decrepitude, brokenness, graying, wrinkling, dissipation of the life-force, weakening of the mental faculties. Death is deceasing, passing away, breaking up, disappearance, dying, completion of one’s lifetime, break up of the aggregates of personhood, casting off of the body, interruption of the life-force.

And what is birth? It is taking on a new life, descent back into this world, coming-to-be, coming-forth, appearance of the aggregates of personhood, and acquisition of the sense faculties.

And what is becoming? There are three types of becoming: sensual becoming, bodily becoming, and psychological becoming . . . .

\textsuperscript{1}Samyutta Nikaya 35.28.
\textsuperscript{2}Samutta Nikaya 12.2.
And what is clinging? There are four types of clinging: sensual clinging, clinging to views, clinging to precepts and practices, and clinging to the idea of self.

And what is craving? There are six classes of craving: craving for forms [physical things], craving for sounds, craving for smells, craving for tastes, craving for tactile sensations, and craving for ideas.

And what is feeling? There are six classes of feeling: feeling stimulated by eye-contact, feeling stimulated by ear-contact, feeling stimulated by nose-contact, feeling stimulated by tongue-contact, feeling stimulated by bodily-contact, and feeling stimulated by the intellect.

And what is contact? There are six classes of contact: eye-contact, ear-contact, nose-contact, tongue-contact, bodily-contact, and intellectual-contact.

And what are the six sense faculties? They are the faculty of seeing (vision), the faculty of hearing (audition), the faculty of smelling (olfaction), the faculty of tasting (gustation), the faculty of touching (tactility), and the faculty of thinking (intellection).

And what are name-and-form? Name [psychical existence] refers to feeling, perception, intention, contact, and attention. Form [physical existence] refers to the four physical elements [fire, water, earth, and air].

And what is consciousness? There are six types of consciousness: visual-consciousness, auditory-consciousness, olfactory-consciousness, gustatory-consciousness, tactile-consciousness, and intellectual-consciousness.

And what are fabrications? There are three kinds of fabrications: bodily fabrications, verbal fabrications, and mental fabrications.

And what is ignorance? It is not knowing the pervasiveness and inevitability of suffering, not knowing how suffering originates, not knowing how the cessation of suffering can be brought about, and not knowing the path that leads to the cessation of suffering.

Now, with the cessation of ignorance comes the cessation of fabrications. With the cessation of fabrications comes the cessation of consciousness. With the cessation of consciousness comes the cessation of name-and-form. With the cessation of name-and-form comes the cessation of the six sense faculties. With the cessation of the six sense faculties comes the cessation of contact. With the cessation of contact comes the cessation of feeling. With the cessation of feeling comes the cessation of craving. With the cessation of craving comes the cessation of clinging. With the cessation of clinging comes the cessation of becoming. With the cessation of becoming comes the cessation of birth. With the cessation of birth comes the cessation of aging and death, of sorrow, of lamentation, of pain, of distress, and of despair. This is how the entire mass of suffering ceases.

Name and Form

[With regard to] . . . the nature of human existence . . . , [what is] the relationship of Name and Form [the psychological and the physical dimensions of human nature]? Every human being consists of Name and Form ["mind" and body]. Under "Name" [mind, consciousness], there are three non-corpooreal functions: sensation, perception, and volition. Under "Form" [body, corporeality], there are four elements: earth, water, fire, and air (the gaseous element). These four elements constitute a man's bodily form, being held together so that this machine [the body] moves like a puppet. How are Name and Form related, and how do they function together?

Life is transitory. Living is dying. Just as a chariot-wheel rolls only at one point of the tire and rests only at one point — in the same way, the life of a living being lasts only for the period of one thought. As soon as that thought has ceased, the living being ceases existing. As has been said, “A past thought has lived, but it does not live [now], nor will it live [in the future]. A future thought will live, but it has not lived [in the past], nor does it live [in the present]. A present thought lives [now], but it has not lived [in the past], nor will it live [in the future].”

We must understand how Name and Form interact. Name has no power of its own; it cannot move itself, either to eat, or to drink, or to utter sounds, or in any other way. Form, too, has no self-moving power or ability. It has no desire to eat, or to drink, or to utter sounds, or to do anything else. However, Form moves when it is supported by Name, and Name moves when it is supported by Form. When Name desires to eat, or to drink, or to utter sounds, or to do anything else, then Form eats, drinks, utters sounds, etc.

Once there were two men. One was blind from birth, and the other was a cripple. They both wanted to go traveling. The blind man said to the cripple, “Look: I am able to walk, but I can't see.” And the cripple replied, “Listen: I can see, but I can't walk.” So the blind man, pleased and delighted, took the cripple upon his shoulders; and the cripple, sitting on the blind man’s shoulders, directed him, saying: “Go to the right; go to the left.” Here, the blind man is without power of his own; he cannot move without support from outside himself. The cripple also has no power of his own; he also needs support from outside himself. Yet when they mutually support one another, it is not impossible for them to travel. In exactly the same way, Name is without power of its own, and cannot move itself, nor perform this or that action. Form also is without power of its own, and cannot move itself, nor perform this or that action. But when they mutually support one another, it is not impossible for them to rise up and move on.

Now, Name and Form are just fabrications of finite existence; and when they cease to exist in this world, they do not "go" anywhere else in the universe. After they have ceased to be here, they do not go on existing anywhere else. When someone plays a lute, the music produced does not arise out of a pre-existing storehouse of sound; and when the music ceases, it does not "go" anywhere. It just stops. It does not go on existing anywhere. It is, indeed, nowhere. Having not existed previously, the music came into existence because of the character of the lute and the operations of the lute-player; and after existing for a time, it passed away. Similarly, all forms being, both corporeal and non-corporeal, come into existence after having previously been non-existent; and having then existed for a time, they all subsequently pass away.

There is no self dwelling within Name and Form. The interactions between Name and Form produce what we call a human being. Just as the word "chariot" is but a general expression for axle, wheels, the chariot-body, and other constituents arranged in a certain way, so a human being is the appearance of elements conjoined in a certain configuration. Just as the chariot has no self, so a human being has no self.

This is a certain and absolute truth: there is no self in addition to the constituent parts of a human being. “Self” is just a name for a certain configuration of Name and Form. In reality, there is no ego-substance, no self.

Here is a seeming paradox: there is a road to travel on, and there is traveling going on; but there is no traveler. There are deeds being done, but there is no doer. There is a blowing of the air, but there is no wind that does the blowing. Self is an illusion; it is as hollow as the plantain tree and as empty as water bubbles in a brook.

Since there is no self, there is no transmigration of a self. However, there are deeds and their continuing effects. There is karma and rebirth; there is reincarnation. This follows from the law of cause and effect. Just as a wax impression reproduces the configurations of a seal, so the thoughts, characters, and aspirations of men living now are transferred to and impressed upon future lives. Both good and bad deeds of those living now continue to have consequences and recompense in future lives . . . .

The body is a configuration of perishable organs. It is subject to decay; and we should care for it as if it were wound; we should supply its needs without loving or being attached to it. The body is like a machine. There is no self or soul in it that makes it walk or act. It is just the interaction of Name and Form that cause this machine to work . . . . Just as machines are designed to work by ropes; so the action of the human body is directed by a system of psycho-physical pulleys . . . .
Give up the illusion of selfhood. Do not hang on to things that are transitory. Instead, perform good deeds; for the consequences of deeds endure, and through deeds your karma continues.

Since . . . there is no self, there can be no after-life of a self or soul . . . . But your deeds have an after-life in their consequences, which will play out after "you" are dead and gone. Therefore, be careful in what you do. All beings are governed by the law of karma. They build up their own karma in a world already conditioned by the karma of those who have gone before . . . .

There are ten types of bad action. By avoiding these, you do good. There are three evils of the body: murder, theft, and adultery; there are four evils of the tongue: lying, slander, abusive speech, and idle talk; and there are three evils of the mind: covetousness, hatred, and error.

Questions That Tend Not to Edification

On one occasion . . . , Bhikkhu Malunkyaputta became perturbed because the Buddha had consistently refused to take a position on certain philosophical questions that Malunkyaputta found interesting:

1. Is the cosmos eternal, or is it not eternal? Or is it both eternal and not eternal? Or is it neither eternal nor not eternal?

2. Is the cosmos finite, or is it infinite? Or is it both finite and infinite? Or is it neither finite nor infinite?

3. Are the soul and body identical, or are they two different things? Or are they both identical and two different things? Or are they neither identical nor two different things?

4. Does a Tathagata (enlightened one) continue to exist after death or not? Or does he both continue to exist after death and not continue to exist after death? Or does he neither continue to exist after death nor not continue to exist after death?

So Malunkyaputta resolved to confront the Buddha on this matter.

Malunkyaputta: Master, if you agree to take positions on the philosophical issues I have addressed to you, and if you disclose your positions to me, then I will remain your disciple and continue to live the holy life under you. However, if you will not take such positions and disclose them to me, then I will renounce your teaching and return to the worldly life.

And, Master, let me add this: If you do not know the answers to these philosophical questions, then please say so in a straightforward way. It is no disgrace to admit, "I don't know; I don't see." If you cannot answer my questions because you do not know the answers, then I will remain your disciple and continue to live the holy life under you. However, if you know the answers but will not disclose them to me, or if you do not know the answers but will not say so straightforwardly, then I will renounce your teaching and return to the worldly life.

Buddha: Malunkyaputta, did I ever say to you, “Come, live the holy life under me, and I will disclose to you my answers to whatever philosophical questions you wish to put to me from time to time”?

Malunkyaputta: No, lord.

Buddha: And did you (before now) ever say to me, “Lord, I will live the holy life under your guidance if you will spend time considering and answering the philosophical questions I am interested in”?

Malunkyaputta: No, lord.

1Majjhima Nikaya 63.
Buddha: Then why, I wonder, are you making this demand now?

My dear friend, imagine a man wounded by a poisoned arrow. When his friends and relatives provide him with a surgeon, he declares, "I won't have this arrow removed until I know whether the man who wounded me was a soldier, a priest, a merchant, or a laborer; and I won't have this arrow removed until I know the first and last names of my assailant, and whether he was short or tall, and whether he was dark or golden-colored, and until I know what town he lives in; and I won't have this arrow removed until I know whether the bow with which I was wounded was a long bow or a crossbow, and until I know whether the bowstring with which I was wounded was fiber, bamboo threads, sinew, hemp, or bark, and until I know whether the shaft with which I was wounded was wild or cultivated, and until I know whether the feathers of the arrow's shaft were those of a vulture, a stork, a peacock, or another bird, and until I know whether the arrow's shaft was bound with the sinew of an ox, a water buffalo, or a monkey, and until I know whether the arrow was a common arrow, a curved arrow, or a barbed arrow." Isn't it obvious that this man would die well before all those things could be revealed to him?

In the same way, if anyone were to say, "I won't live the holy life under the Buddha unless he first discloses to me his positions on various philosophical issues," that man would die before ever hearing me address such issues, and thus he would never begin to live the holy life.

Regardless of whether the cosmos is eternal or not eternal, or both eternal and not eternal, or neither eternal nor not eternal, there is still birth, there is still aging, there is still death, there is still sorrow, lamentation, pain, despair, and distress . . . . Answers to your various philosophical questions will not lead to the cessation of birth, aging, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, despair, and distress . . . . Answers to your various philosophical questions will not lead to the cessation of birth, aging, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, despair, and distress, nor will such answers lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, calming, direct knowledge, self-awareness, and liberation from suffering. Therefore, I do not provide answers to such philosophical questions — because such answers are not fundamental to the holy life, because they do not bring us any closer to the goal of ending the disasters of birth, aging, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, despair, and distress.

What I do provide and disclose right here and now is a solution to the problem of suffering: the Four Noble Truths concerning (1) the pervasiveness of suffering, (2) the cause of suffering, (3) the key to ending suffering, and (4) the path that actually leads to the cessation of suffering. This I provide and disclose because it leads to the cessation of birth, aging, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, despair, and distress, and to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, calming, direct knowledge, self-awareness, and liberation from suffering.

The Questions of King Milinda

. . . The Venerable Nagasena lived at the Sankheyya monastery [in Northwestern India] together with 80,000 monks. Once, the Bactrian Greek King Milinda [Menander], a philosopher, accompanied by a retinue of 500 Greeks, visited Nagasena in order to explore certain philosophical questions that the king found interesting . . . .

The chariot

King Milinda [to Nagasena]: How shall I address you, Your Reverence?

Nagasena: I am called Nagasena, O Great King, and that is how my fellow monks address me. But although parents give names to children such as Nagasena, or Surasena, or Virasena, or Sihasena, nevertheless, the word "Nagasena" is just a label, a designation, a conceptual term, a linguistic convenience, nothing whatever but a mere name. There is, in fact, no real person here.

1The Questions of King Milinda (Pali: Milindapanha) was composed in Pali by an unknown author in northern India in the 1st or 2nd century AD. It may be based on an earlier but no longer extant Sanskrit original. King Milinda (Menander) was the Greek ruler of a large Indo-Greek empire in Bactria in the 2nd century BC. He was a patron of and a convert to Buddhism.
King Milinda: Now listen to this, you 500 Greeks and 80,000 monks! This Nagasena tells me that he is not a real person, that he does not really exist! How can I agree with that? If, Most Reverend Nagasena, there are no real persons in existence, who then provides you with your robes, your food, your housing, and your medical care? Who is it that practices morality, meditates, follows the Noble Eightfold Path, and enters Nirvana? Who is it that kills, steals, engages in sexual impropriety, lies, and takes intoxicants? Who is it that commits these sins? If there are no persons, then there is neither merit nor demerit; no performer of good or bad deeds, no consequences of good or bad actions, and no rewards or punishments for them. Nor is the killer of a priest a murderer [since there are no killers and no priests to be killed], nor are there any teachers, or instructors, or ordained monks! Reverend Father, you say that your fellow monks address you as “Nagasena.” Well, just what is this “Nagasena”? Is the hair on your head “Nagasena”?

Nagasena: No, Your Majesty.

King Milinda: Or perhaps the nails, teeth, skin, muscles, sinews, bones, marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, serous membranes, spleen, lungs, intestines, mesentery, stomach, excrement, the bile, phlegm, pus, blood, grease, fat, tears, sweat, spittle, snot, fluid of the joints, urine, or the brain in the skull — are these “Nagasena”? Or is “Nagasena” a body, or a set of feelings, or a configuration of perceptions, or a number of impulses, or a form of consciousness?

Nagasena: No, Great King!

King Milinda: Then is it the combination of body, feelings, perceptions, impulses, and consciousness? Or is it something outside the combination of form, feelings, perceptions, impulses, and consciousness?

Nagasena: No, Great King!

King Milinda: Then, ask as I may, I can discover no Nagasena at all. This “Nagasena” is just a mere sound. But who is the real Nagasena? Your Reverence has told a lie, has spoken a falsehood! There is really no Nagasena!

Nagasena: As a king, you have been brought up in great elegance and you no doubt avoid coarseness of any kind. If you walk at midday on this hot, burning, and sandy ground, then your feet would have to tread on the rough and gritty gravel and pebbles, and they would hurt you, your body would get tired, your mind would become sluggish, and your awareness would be focused on your pain. How then did you come here — on foot or on a mount?

King Milinda: I did not come on foot, Your Reverence, but in a chariot.

Nagasena: Well, then, please explain to me what a chariot is. Is the pole the chariot?

King Milinda: No, Reverend Sir!

Nagasena: Then is the axle the chariot? Or is it the wheels, or the framework, or the flag-staff, or the yoke, or the reins, or the goad-stick?

King Milinda: No, Reverend Sir, none of those.

Nagasena: Then is the “chariot” the combination of pole, axle, wheels, framework, flag-staff, yoke, reins, and goad?

King Milinda: No, Reverend Sir!

Nagasena: Then, is this “chariot” something outside the combination of pole, axle, wheels, framework, flag-staff, yoke, reins, and goad?

King Milinda: No, Reverend Sir!
Nagasena: Then, ask as I may, I can discover no chariot at all. This “chariot” is just a mere sound. But what is the real chariot? Your Majesty has told a lie; you have spoken a falsehood! There is really no chariot! Your Majesty is the greatest king in the whole of India. Why are you afraid to speak the truth? Now listen, you 500 Greeks and 80,000 monks! This King Milinda tells me that he has come here on a chariot. But when asked to explain to me what a chariot is, he cannot establish its existence. How can one possibly approve of that?

(The 500 Greeks thereupon applauded the Venerable Nagasena and said to King Milinda: "Now let Your Majesty get out of that if you can!")

King Milinda: I have not, Nagasena, spoken a falsehood. For it is in dependence on the pole, the axle, the wheels, the framework, the flag-staff, etc., that the designation "chariot" arises, but this designation is merely a conceptual term, a label, a convenient name.

Nagasena: Your Majesty has spoken well of the chariot. It is the same with me. In dependence on the thirty-two parts of the body and the five skandhas, the designation "Nagasena" arises, but this designation is merely a conceptual term, a label, a convenient name. In ultimate reality, however, this "Nagasena" does not exist . . . .

Personal identity and rebirth

King Milinda: When someone is reborn, Venerable Nagasena, is he the same as the one who just died or is he another?

Nagasena: He is neither the same nor another . . . . What do you think, Great King? When you were a tiny infant . . . ., were you then the same as the one who is now grown up?

King Milinda: No, that infant was one; I, now an adult, am another.

Nagasena: If that is so, then, Great King, you have had no mother, no father, no teaching, no schooling [since that all took place when the king was a child — a different being]. Is there one mother for the embryo in the first stage [of pregnancy], another for the second stage, another for the third, another for the fourth, another for the baby, another for the adult man? Is the school-boy one person and the one who has completed his schooling another? Is it one person who commits a crime and then another person whose hands and feet are cut off?

King Milinda: Certainly not! But what, Reverend Sir, is your view on this?

Nagasena: I was neither the tiny infant . . . ., nor am I now the grown-up man; but rather all these phases of “myself” are grounded in one unit, namely, this body of “mine” . . . . If a man were to light a lamp, it could, could it not, give light throughout the whole night . . . ? Well, is the flame that burns in the first watch of the night the same as the one that burns in the second . . . ? Or is the flame which burns in the second watch the same as the one which burns in the third?

King Milinda: Shall I say that the flames that burn in the first, second, and last watches are not one and the same?

Nagasena: Is it then the case that there is one lamp in the first watch of the night, another in the second, and still another in the third?

King Milinda: I don’t want to say that because it seems to me that the light of the lamp shines continuously throughout the night. [The lamp, it seems, is there throughout the night.]

Nagasena: We must view the unfolding of a series of successive dharmas [elements of existence] in the same way. At rebirth, one dharma arises, while another stops; but the two processes take place almost simultaneously (that is, they are continuous). Therefore, the first act of consciousness in the new existence is neither the same as the last act of consciousness in the previous existence, nor it is different from it . . . . [To employ another simile:] Milk . . . ., as time passes, turns into curds; from curds it turns into butter; and from butter it turns into ghee. It would not be correct to say that the milk is the same thing as the curds, or the fresh butter, or the ghee, would it? However, the curds, the butter, and the ghee have
been produced because of the milk. This is also how we must understand the unfolding of a series of successive dharmas.

Personal identity and karma

King Milinda: Is there, Venerable Nagasena, any being which passes on from one body to another body?

Nagasena: No, Your Majesty.

King Milinda: If there is no passing on from one body to another, would not one then in one's next life be freed from the evil deeds committed in the past [that is, from the bad karma accumulated in one's previous life]?

Nagasena: Yes, that would be so if one were not linked once again with a new organism. But since, Your Majesty, one is linked once again with a new organism, one is not freed from one's evil deeds [bad karma]. . . . [Here is a simile:] If a man should steal another man's mangoes, he would deserve a thrashing for that . . . , wouldn't he? But he would not have stolen the very same mangoes as the other one had planted. Why should he deserve a thrashing?

King Milinda: Because the stolen mangoes had grown because of those that were planted.

Nagasena: Yes, Your Majesty, it is because of the deeds one does by means of this psycho-physical organism, whether the deeds be pure or impure, that one is once again linked with another psycho-physical organism and is not freed from one's evil deeds [bad karma]. . . .

Questions about Nirvana

King Milinda: Is cessation [of craving] Nirvana?

Nagasena: Yes, your majesty . . . . All the foolish common people take delight in the senses and their objects, are impressed by them, are attached to them. In that way, they are carried away by the flood [of desire] and are not set free from birth, from old age and death, or from grief, lamentation, pain, sadness, and despair — they are, in brief, not set free from suffering. But he who grasps the Buddha's teaching does not take delight in the senses and their objects, is not impressed by them, is not attached to them, and in consequence his craving ceases. The cessation of craving leads successively to the cessation of grasping, of becoming, of birth, of old age and death, of grief, lamentation, pain, sadness, and despair — that is to say, to the cessation of all this mass of suffering. In this sense, cessation [of craving] is Nirvana.

King Milinda: Very good, Nagasena! How does one reach Nirvana?

Nagasena: To reach Nirvana, one must acquire [through study and meditation] super-knowledge and know those dharmas that should be known, grasp those dharmas that should be grasped, abandon those dharmas that should be abandoned, develop those dharmas that should be developed, and realize those dharmas that should be realized.

King Milinda: Very good, Nagasena! Do those who do not reach Nirvana know how happy a state it is?

Nagasena: Yes, they do.

King Milinda: But how can one know this about Nirvana without having attained it?

Nagasena: Now, what do you think, your majesty? Do those who have not had their hands and feet cut off know how painful it is to have them cut off? [Of course] they do. And how do they know it? From hearing the howling of those whose hands and feet have been cut off. So it is by hearing the testimony of those who have seen Nirvana that one comes to know that Nirvana is an exceedingly happy state. . . .
Characteristics of Nirvana

King Milinda: I have heard, O Nagasena, that Nirvana is absolute bliss, but that its nature cannot be described specifically . . . . However, is there perhaps some quality of Nirvana that it shares with other things and that may be explained, if only through metaphors . . . ?

Nagasena: Nirvana shares one quality with the lotus, two with water, three with medicine, ten with space, three with the wishing jewel, and five with a mountain peak. As the lotus is unstained by water, so is Nirvana unstained by all the defilements. As cool water allays feverish heat, so also Nirvana is cool and allays the fever of all the passions. Moreover, as water removes the thirst of men and beasts who are exhausted, parched, thirsty, and overpowered by heat, so also Nirvana removes the craving for sensuous enjoyments, the craving for further becoming, the craving for the cessation of becoming. As medicine protects from the torments of poisons, so Nirvana protects from the torments of the poisonous passions. Moreover, as medicine puts an end to sickness, so Nirvana puts an end to all sufferings. Finally, Nirvana and medicine both give security. And these are the ten qualities which Nirvana shares with space. Neither is born, grows old, dies, passes away, or is reborn; both are unconquerable, cannot be stolen, are unsupported, are roads respectively for birds and saints to travel on, are unobstructed and infinite. Like the wishing jewel, Nirvana grants all one can desire, brings joy, and sheds light. As a mountain peak is high and exalted, so is Nirvana. As a mountain peak is unshakeable, so is Nirvana. As a mountain peak is inaccessible, so is Nirvana inaccessible to all the passions. As no seeds can grow on a mountain peak, so the seeds of the passions cannot grow in Nirvana. And finally, as a mountain peak is free from all desire to please or dislike, so is Nirvana.

Nirvana is uncreated

King Milinda: You have said that Nirvana does not arise from karma, nor from a cause, nor from nature. But the Lord Buddha proclaimed . . . to His disciples the way to the realization of Nirvana. Doesn't that mean that Nirvana exists? And if it exists, must it not be caused to exist?

Nagasena: It is true that the Lord Buddha has proclaimed to His disciples the way to the realization of Nirvana, but that does not mean that He has spoken of a cause for the creation of Nirvana.

King Milinda: Here, Nagasena, we go from darkness into greater darkness, from a jungle into a deeper jungle, from a thicket into a denser thicket, in as much as we are given a cause for the realization of Nirvana [that is, a way to Nirvana, the Eightfold Path], but no cause for the creation of that same dharma (Nirvana). If there is a cause for the realization of Nirvana, we would also expect one for its creation. If there is a son's father, one would for that reason also expect the father to have had a father; if there is a student's teacher, one would for that reason also expect the teacher to have had a teacher; if there is a seed for a plant, one would for that reason also expect the seed to have had a seed. Just so, if there is a cause for the realization of Nirvana, one would for that reason also expect there to be a cause for its creation. If a tree or creeper has a top, then for that reason it must also have a middle and a root. Just so, if there is a cause for the realization of Nirvana, one would for that reason also expect a cause for its creation.

Nagasena: Nirvana, O King, is not something that is created. That is why no cause for its creation has been identified . . . . Attend carefully, Your Majesty, and I will tell you the reason for this. A man with his natural strength could go up from here to the Himalaya mountains. But could that man with his natural strength bring the Himalaya mountains here? No, he could not. Similarly, it is possible to point out the way to the realization of Nirvana, but impossible to show a cause for its creation. A man could with his natural strength cross in a boat over the great ocean and get to the farther shore. But could that man with his natural strength bring the farther shore of the great ocean here? No, he could not. Similarly, one can point out the way to the realization of Nirvana, but one cannot show a cause for its creation. And what is the reason for that? Because that dharma (Nirvana) is unconditioned [uncreated] . . . . [U]nconditioned is Nirvana, not made by anything. Of Nirvana, one cannot say that it is created, or uncreated, or that it should be created; one cannot say that it is past, or present, or future; one cannot say that one can become aware of it by the eye, or the ear, or the nose, or the tongue, or the body . . . .
Does Nirvana exist?

King Milinda: But then doesn't it follow that Nirvana . . . is not, that it does not exist?

Nagasena: Nirvana is something which is recognizable by the mind. A holy disciple, who has followed the right road, sees Nirvana with a mind that is pure, sublime, straight, unhindered, and disinterested.

King Milinda: But what then is that Nirvana like? Give me a simile, and convince me by arguments. For a dharma which exists can surely be illustrated by a simile.

Nagasena: There is, Great King, something called wind. Please, will Your Majesty show me the wind, its color and shape, and whether it is thin or thick, long or short? One cannot point to the wind like that, for the wind does not lend itself to being grasped with the hands, or to being touched. But nevertheless, wind exists. And yet, since one cannot point to the wind, someone might conclude that there is no wind at all.

King Milinda: But, Nagasena, I know that there is wind. I am quite convinced of it, in spite of the fact that I cannot point it out.

Nagasena: Just so, Your Majesty, there is Nirvana although one cannot point to Nirvana, either by its color or its shape . . . .

Arhats and the experience of pain

King Milinda: Does someone who is no more reborn [that is, someone who has attained Nirvana] feel any unpleasant feelings?

Nagasena: He feels some but not others . . . . He feels physical but no mental pain . . . . The causes and conditions which produce feelings of physical pain have not ceased to operate, whereas those which produce feelings of mental pain have . . . .

King Milinda: And when he feels physical pain, why does he not escape by dying immediately and entering into Final Nirvana?

Nagasena: An arhat has no more likes or dislikes. Arhats do not shake down the unripe fruit; they wait for it to mature. And so it has been said by the elder Sariputta: "It is not death, nor is it life I cherish. I bide my time, as a servant waiting for his wages. It is not death, nor is it life I cherish. I bide my time, immersed in mindfulness and wisdom."

King Milinda: Well put, Nagasena! Is the body valued by you bhikkhus?

Nagasena: No, it is not. [And yet, we] . . . look after the body and maintain it. [When a warrior is wounded in battle,] . . . the wound is anointed with salve, smeared with oil, and bandaged with fine linen . . . . [!]Is this treatment a sign that the wound is valued by . . . [the warrior]?

King Milinda: No, but the treatment is given so that the flesh may grow again.

Nagasena: Just so the body is not valued by us recluse. Without being attached to the body, we take care of it for the purpose of making a holy life possible. The Lord Buddha has compared the body to a wound, and so Buddhist recluse

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1In Buddhism, an arhat (Sanskrit) or arahant (Pali) ("one who is worthy") is a perfected (enlightened) person, one who has gained insight into the true nature of existence and who has achieved Nirvana. Having freed himself from the bonds of desire, the arhat will not be reborn again.
care for the body as for a wound, without being attached to it. For as the Buddha said: "A damp skin hides it, but it is a
wound, large with nine openings. All around it oozes impure and evil smelling matter . . . ."

King Milinda: Why is it that arhats experience only one kind of pain, physical but not mental?

Nagasena: The thought of an arhat is developed, well-developed, and it is trained, well-trained; it is obedient and
disciplined. When afflicted with pain, the arhat holds firmly to the idea of the pain's impermanence, and he fastens his
thought to the post of contemplation. His thought, fastened to the post of contemplation, does not tremble or shake; it
remains steady and unperturbed. None the less, the pain makes his body bend, contorts it, and makes it writhe.

King Milinda: That Nagasena, is indeed a most wonderful thing, that the arhat's mind remains unshaken when his
body is shaken . . . .

Nagasena: Suppose, Your Majesty, that there is a gigantic tree, with trunk, branches, and leaves. If it were hit by
the force of the wind, its branches would shake, but its trunk would not also shake . . . . Similarly, the thought of the arhat
does not tremble or shake, like the trunk of the gigantic tree . . . .

Teachings from the Diamond Sutra¹

The paradoxes of the Bodhisattva path

[3]. . . When someone announces that he desires to follow the Bodhisattva path because he wants to save all
sentient beings, whether they are formed in a womb or hatched from an egg; or whether they are worms, insects, butterflies,
mushrooms, or gods; or whether they are endowed with mind or devoid of mind; and that he vows to lead every individual
being to Nirvana; and that he resolves not to reap his reward and enter Nirvana until all other beings have entered therein
before him — then we must remind such a vow-taker that even if such uncountable numbers of beings were so liberated, in
reality no beings would have been liberated. A Bodhisattva does not cling to the illusion of separate individuality or ego-
identity or personhood. In reality, there is no "I" who liberates, and there is no "they" who are liberated. [4] Furthermore, a
Bodhisattva should be detached from all desires, whether they be for beautiful sights or pleasant sounds, or for fragrant
smells or sweet tastes, or for things lovely to touch, or for bringing multitudes to Nirvana . . . .

[6] There will always be Bodhisattvas who are virtuous and wise . . . . [I]n these Bodhisattvas there will be no
delusions, no belief in an individual and separate self, soul, ego, or person. These Bodhisattvas will not conceive of things as
containing intrinsic qualities nor as being devoid of intrinsic qualities. These Bodhisattvas will not distinguish between good
and evil. The discrimination between good and evil must be used as one uses a raft. Once it delivers the stream-crosser to
the other side of the stream, a raft is abandoned . . . .

[17] Anyone who wishes to take the Bodhisattva vow must understand that, if they wish to attain Perfect
Enlightenment, they must be determined to liberate each living being from suffering; and yet they must realize that, in reality,
there are no individual or separate living beings. To be a true Bodhisattva, one must be completely devoid of any
conceptions of separate selfhood . . . . Although there are uncountable Buddha realms and uncountable beings with many
different minds in those Buddha realms . . . ., such minds have no real existence. It is impossible to retain past mind,
impossible to hold on to present mind, and impossible to grasp future mind, for mind has no substance or existence
whatsoever . . . .

¹The Diamond Sutra is one of the Prajñaparamita (Sanskrit: "Perfection of Wisdom") sutras that constitute a central body of
texts in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. The Prajñaparamita sutras were composed in "Buddhist Sanskrit" during the 1st and 2nd
centuries BC, and they were subsequently translated into Tibetan and Chinese a number of times. The Diamond Sutra (Sanskrit
Vajracchedika-Sutra — “Diamond Cutter Sutra”) was written in the 1st century AD. It is considered to be close in spirit to the philosophy
of Zen Buddhism.
The nature of Perfect Enlightenment cannot be taught

[7] The Tathagata has attained Perfect Enlightenment. Is there something about it that the Tathagata can teach . . . ? No, the nature of Perfect Enlightenment cannot be grasped, nor can it be taught. Why? Because . . . Truth is not a thing that can be differentiated or defined, and therefore Truth cannot be expressed or grasped. The Truth neither is nor is not.

Stream-Entrants, Once-Returners, Non-Returners, and Buddhas

[9] A disciple who enters the stream [that leads to Nirvana] cannot say to himself, “I am entitled to recognition as a Stream-Entrant.” A true Stream-Entrant would not think of himself as a separate ego that could be entitled to anything. Only he who does not differentiate himself from others, who pays no regard to name, shape, sound, odor, taste, touch, or any other quality can be a true Stream-Entrant.

An disciple who is subject to only one more rebirth [a Once-Returner] would not say to himself, “I am entitled to recognition as Once-Returner.” “Once-Returner” is merely a label. There is, in reality, no passing away and no coming into being. Only one who realizes this can be a true Once-Returner.

A disciple who will never more be reborn [a Non-Returner] would not say to himself, “I am entitled to recognition as a Non-Returner.” “Non-Returner” is merely a label. There is no returning and no non-returning. One who does not realize this cannot be a true Non-Returner.

A Buddha [realized being] does not say to himself, “I have obtained Perfect Enlightenment.” There is no such thing as Perfect Enlightenment to obtain. If a Perfectly Enlightened Buddha were to say to himself, “I am Perfectly Enlightened,” he would be declaring his individual and separate selfhood and would thus show that he is not a Perfectly Enlightened Buddha . . . .

The Buddha once declared that his disciple, Subhuti, excelled among the bhikkhus in knowing the bliss of samahdi [deep meditation], in being perfectly content in monastic seclusion, and in being free from desire. But Subhuti never claimed such excellence for himself, for if he ever thought of himself that way, then it would not be true that he had escaped the delusion of separate selfhood. In truth, there is no Subhuti; he abides nowhere; he neither knows nor is ignorant of bliss; and he neither is free from nor enslaved by desire.

No doctrines to be learned

[10] In a prior life, the Tathagata [the Buddha] spent much time with Dipankara, the Fully Enlightened One, but he learned no doctrines from him; for there is no such thing as a doctrine to be learned . . . .

The Dhammapada¹

[1] Mind is prior to its objects. The mind’s objects are mind-controlled and mind-constructed. To speak or act with an evil mind brings sorrow upon oneself, like a wheel drawn along behind the feet of an ox pulling a cart . . . . [2] To speak or act with a pure mind brings happiness to oneself, as one’s shadow follows wherever one goes.

[7] The lazy and vacillating man who lives for pleasure, who is controlled by his senses, and who lacks moderation in eating is easily overwhelmed by Mara (the Tempter), like a rotten tree is overthrown by the wind. [8] But Mara cannot overcome a man who is indifferent to pleasure, who is in control of his senses, who eats with moderation, who is resolute, and who is strong in faith, just as the wind cannot overthrow a mountain.

¹Khuddaka Nikaya 2. The Dhammapada (Pali: “Words of Doctrine” or “Way of Truth”) is an anthology of basic Buddhist teachings (primarily ethical teachings). The work contains 423 stanzas arranged in 26 chapters.
[9] One who wears the yellow robe [that is, a Buddhist priest or monk], but who is not pure in heart, lacking self-restraint and uprightness, is unworthy of the robe. [10] But one who is unstained by depravity and who is pure in heart, possessing self-restraint and living uprightly, is indeed worthy of the robe.

[11] One who sees the essence of the inessential and regards the essence as inessential will never grasp the essence of things, but will go on drifting along the path of wrong desire. [12] But one who sees the essence of the essential and recognizes the inessential as inessential will comprehend the essence of things, living as he does in accordance with right desire.

[13] Just as rain breaks into a house with a bad roof, wrong desire invades the mind of one who does not practice meditation. [14] And just as rain cannot break into a house with a good roof, wrong desire cannot penetrate the mind of one who practices meditation.

[19] A thoughtless man who quotes sacred texts, but who does not put them into practice, is like a cowherd counting other people's cows. He is not a participant in the religious life. [20] However, a man who is not familiar with the sacred texts, but who follows the teachings of the Buddha and thus abandons greed, hatred, and delusion, and who develops an insightful mind free from attachment, and who does not cling to anything in this world or in the next — that man is a full participant in the religious life.

[21] Mindfulness leads to immortality. Mindlessness leads to death. Those who are mindful do not die, but the mindless are as good as dead already. [23] Those who persevere in meditation, constantly working hard at it, become wise and experience Nirvana, which is the highest freedom and happiness.

[40] The body is only an earthen vessel. Make war on Mara the Tempter with the sword of wisdom. Make your mind your fortress. Defend what you have won. Remain free from attachment [to the body]. [41] Before long, this body will be lying on the ground, discarded, possessing no consciousness, like a useless piece of wood.

[47] A man with an unfocused mind, who goes about blithely picking flowers, can be swept away by Death the way a sleeping village is overwhelmed by a great flood. [48] A man with an unfocused mind, who goes about blithely picking flowers, can be swept away by Death before he has even collected a small bouquet.

[103] Though one were to defeat thousands upon thousands of men in battle, if another were to overcome just one — himself — he is the supreme victor. [104-105] Victory over oneself is better than victory over others. When a man has conquered himself and always acts with self-control . . . [nothing] can reverse the victory . . .

[121] Do not think lightly of evil; do not think that it has no consequences. A water pot will fill up from dripping drops of water. A fool fills himself with evil, just a little at a time. [122] Do not think lightly of good; do not think that it has no consequences. A water pot will fill up from dripping drops of water. A wise man fills himself with good, just a little at a time.

[128] Not in the sky, nor in the depths of the sea, nor hiding in the cleft of the rocks, there is no place on earth where one can take one's stand to not be overcome by death.

[148] This body is worn out with age, a nest of diseases and falling apart. The mass of corruption disintegrates, and death is the end of life. [149] When these gray bones are cast aside like gourds in autumn, what pleasure will there be in looking at them? [151] Even the splendid carriages of kings wear out, and the body is certainly bound to grow old; but the Truth found by the saints is not subject to aging. That is what the saints themselves proclaim.

[183] Abstain from all evil; do good; and purify your mind — this is the teaching of the Buddha. [185] Do not speak harshly; do no harm to others; practice self-restraint in accordance with the rules of the Order [Sangha]; be moderate in eating; live in an out-of-the-way place; and cultivate the higher levels of consciousness — this is the teaching of the Buddha.

[188-192] Driven by fear, men take to many a refuge, in mountains, forests, parks, sacred groves, and shrines; but none of these is a secure refuge. By taking to these sorts of refuge one is not released from suffering. He who has gone to Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha for refuge, and who with true wisdom understands the Four Noble Truths . . . , this is a secure refuge, this is the ultimate refuge; by taking to this refuge one is indeed released from all suffering.
[210] Never have anything to do with likes and dislikes. The absence of what one likes is painful, as is the presence of what one dislikes. [211] Therefore don't take a liking to anything. To lose what one likes is hard, but there are no bonds for those who have no likes and dislikes.

[212] From preference arises sorrow, from preference arises fear, but he who is freed from preference has no sorrow and no fear. [213] From affection arises sorrow, from affection arises fear, but he who is freed from affection has no sorrow and no fear. [214] From pleasure arises sorrow, from pleasure arises fear, but he who is freed from pleasure has no sorrow and no fear. [215] From sensuality arises sorrow, from sensuality arises fear, but he who is freed from sensuality has no sorrow and no fear. [216] From craving arises sorrow, from craving arises fear, but he who is freed from craving has no sorrow and no fear.

[287] Death comes and snatches away the man infatuated with children and livestock, while his mind is still full of desire, like a great flood sweeping away a sleeping village. [288] There are no children to take refuge in then, no father or any other relative. When a man is seized by that terminator, Death, there is no taking refuge in family. [289] When he has seen the implications of this, a wise man, restrained by morality, should quickly set forth on the path leading to Nirvana.

[338] In the same way that even a felled tree will grow again if its root is strong and undamaged, so if latent desire has not been rooted out, then suffering shoots up again and again. [347] Those on fire with desire follow the stream of their desires, like a spider follows the strands of its self-made web. Breaking the bond, the wise walk on free from longing, leaving all suffering behind.

[393] One is not a true brahmin by virtue of matted hair, family lineage, or caste. Who is a true brahmin? One who grasps the truth and is truthful; [395] one who wears rags, who is emaciated, who meditates all by himself in the forest; [416] one who abandons craving, who has renounced the world, who has become a homeless wanderer, who has given up the search for worldly pleasure; [417] one who has abandoned human ties, who is not attached to the idea of heavenly bliss, who is, in fact, liberated from all attachments; [418] one who is indifferent to both pleasure and pain, who is cool to all things, who is free from the process of continued existence, who has heroically conquered all worlds; [419] one who comprehends the passing away and rebirth of all beings, who is beyond clinging, who is righteous, who is awakened; [421] one who owns nothing, who is indifferent to past, present, and future, who is completely without attachment; [423] one who knows his former lives, who sees heaven and hell themselves, who has reached the end of the cycle of rebirth, who has acquired perfect knowledge, who has mastered all that must be mastered.