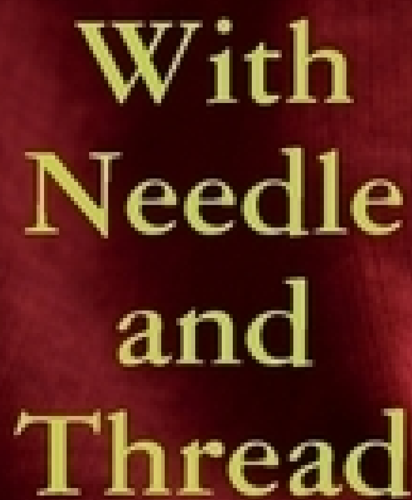

essays on early
Buddhism

Bhikkhu Cintita Dinsmore

With Needle and Thread

essays on early Buddhism

Bhikkhu Cintita

2019

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Preface

The essays of this volume are concerned with repairing tears in the *Dhamma*.

Buddhism began with the Buddha, a towering figure who lived some hundred generations ago, taught for forty-five years, developed a huge following of monastics and laity, kings and paupers, and whose teachings were systematically memorized, compiled and edited over several centuries before being entrusted to written media. With time Buddhism spread into increasingly remote regions and evolved into different schools as a result of regional variation, philosophical elaboration, and adaptation to varying demographics and cultures. Nonetheless, we possess an extensive relatively consistent scriptural heritage from a very early period known as the Early Buddhist Texts (EBT) found in parallel versions in Pali, Chinese, and substantially in other Indic languages and Tibetan. The EBT are the closest we seem to come to what the Buddha actually taught and how he taught it. Although undoubtedly other authors, editors reciters and scribes have had a hand in the corpus that we are heir to, generally without attribution, the surprising level of consistency of the various parallel versions transmitted in remote regions testifies to the relatively reliability of the EBT and its probable closeness to the Buddha.[1]

Moreover, what we find in the EBT, in spite of its scattered history, is astonishingly profound and comprehensive, and, with some scholarly understanding of the cultural and intellectual milieu in which it arose, brilliantly coherent and as intelligible for the modern student as the scriptures of any later school. The genius of the Buddha leaps out in this corpus, not only in the doctrine but in its manner of exposition. However, the profundity of these early teachings came at a cost: the more subtle and sophisticated teachings were easily subject to misunderstandings and to competing interpretations not only in later traditions, but even while the Buddha was still with us, as reported in the EBT itself.[2] Many misunderstandings, I and others feel, have become calcified in centuries of tradition, even others have entered through modernity. The *Dhamma* has become

1 See Sujato and Brahmali (2014) on the provenance and reliability of the EBT.

2 For instance, see the story of Sāti reported in “The Buddha as biologist” in this volume.

like a torn or even partially tattered cloth.[3]

Nonetheless, it should be borne in mind that modern students and scholars of Buddhism, who have the advantage of coming to Buddhism with fresh eyes, have begun spotting many heretofore unacknowledged inconsistencies. I feel we are entering a productive era of needle and thread, as Buddhism comes to the modern world, whereby much of the original intent of the Buddha that has become confused may be restored. At the same time, we must at the same time take care, because modernity itself has its own snags and sharp edges. The present volume attempts to repair what its author, with needle and thread in hand, has concluded are misinterpretations of these earliest sources that have arisen in later traditions and in modernity. Wiser people than myself with better arguments may later want to pull out my stitches and repair anew where I am mistaken.

The essays

In this volume I present a set of essays, each of which is intended to put a few stitches in what I have come to regard as a common traditional or modern misunderstanding of an important point of *Dhamma*, or (in the case of the first essay) *Vinaya*. In each case I advance an alternative interpretation, at least as a way of encouraging further discussion. Of the six essays in this volume, the first concerns the role of women in the Buddhist community, the second concerns issues of faith and belief, the third a seemingly small doctrinal point that has led, I maintain, to great misunderstanding of a significant portion of early *Dhamma*, and the final three with aspects of meditation: mindfulness (*sati*) and concentration (*samādhi*).

Here is an abstract of each:

What did the Buddha think of women?: the story of the early nuns. This challenges the common view that the Buddha's intentions in establishing the nuns' *Saṅgha* were biased by the patriarchal and ofttimes misogynistic attitudes of the dominant culture. It argues that the Buddha did all that he could to secure equal opportunity for practice for women as for men, while, always the pragmatist, maintaining the outward propriety of the *Saṅgha* within the constraints of the dominant culture. Subsequent tradition has not always been so kind.

Take seriously and hold loosely: faith without beliefs. Unlike a “belief system,” the *Dhamma* represents faith with wiggle room. Teachings are to be taken *seriously*, because they have important *practice functions*, to be realized in beneficial results for the practitioner and for the world at large. At the same

3 Not to cause dismay: Even a tattered map can lead us to where we want to go. However, the tatters just make it more difficult.

time, the Buddha's teachings are to be held *loosely*, as flexible working assumptions, because teachings need to be meaningful and acceptable by the individual practitioner in order to fulfill their practice functions.

The Buddha as biologist: true to practice. This challenges the view that three of the twelve links of dependent co-arising, so central to the *Dhamma*, are about conception and development in the womb. Biological processes are substantially beyond immediate experience and therefore not significant factors of practice, and therefore have no substantial role in *Dhamma*. This traditional interpretation of these critical links has only served to mask their true function.

***Sati* really does mean memory: the Buddha's take on mindfulness.** The word we translate as "mindfulness" has been interpreted various ways in later traditions, often as a kind of mind state. However, the word literally means memory or recollection. I argue that in the EBT the word rarely wanders too much astray from recollection of the *Dhamma* (or *Vinaya*). The Buddha meant what he said. This has implications for how we practice this central teaching.

Seeing through the eyes of the Buddha: *samādhi* and right view. This challenges the traditional and modern ways in which *samādhi* has become disassociated from right view through the assumption that the stillness of *samādhi* cannot carry the cognitive load of right view. It then explores how *samādhi* is properly understood precisely as the most effective instrument for internalizing right view, as an entryway to knowledge and vision of things as they are.

How did mindfulness become "bare, non-judgmental, present-moment awareness"? This companion essay to "Sati really does mean memory" discusses the genesis of the widely accepted but very modern understanding of the term "mindfulness," which is quite distinct from the use of *sati* in the EBT. The shift in meaning is attributed in part to a modern retreat from concern for virtue and right view.

These essays are revised versions of essays I have posted on-line over the past seven years.

Methods

These essays represent scholarship and the language and method are scholarly. I think this is necessary for repairing tatters, for we must inevitably defend one possible interpretation against another, generally with reasoned argumentation, citations, footnotes, cross references and cultural and linguistic analysis. The Buddha himself, while denigrating views in general and arguments over views in particular, nonetheless also had to repair misunderstandings, to which he said,

> I don't dispute with the world, the world disputes with me. (SN 22.94)

These essays stand outside of *Dhamma* and look in, as it were. On this note we might distinguish three roles: the *Dhamma* scholar, the *Dhamma* teacher and the *Dhamma* student. Almost no one is purely scholar, teacher or student. I, for instance, am all three in approximately equal measure. A teacher must inspire and therefore should have confidence in what he teaches. Nonetheless, a beginning student will almost inevitably run across conflicting interpretations presented by different teachers and end up having to personally assess their relative merits, even while still falling short of the discernment necessary for this assessment. This is where the scholar is important.

In academic circles the pure scholar is often praised when he is unbiased by the other roles, sometimes forcing academics of Buddhism to be closet Buddhists. I, for one, cannot remove Cintita the teacher and student from Cintita the scholar, nor do I want to. I have great faith in the awakening of the Buddha and the depth and efficacy of the *Dhamma* and these stand as pillars of my scholarly ruminations. For me, Buddhism is alive. Without such faith I would feel like the entomologist pinning butterflies to a board and never observing them in flight. In general, I feel, the *Dhamma* as an integrated functional whole can be fully appreciated only by the devout student or teacher. Without this appreciation many of the points I make here would be beyond the reach of the pure scholar.

Recurring themes

In my experience as student, teacher and scholar, I have come to some principled conclusions about the broad overall shape of the *Dhamma* that I find very reliable and that I refer to in these essays as I take up the following themes.

The awakening of the Buddha. As a primary example, it is easy for the scholar who is neither a student nor a teacher of *Dhamma* to dismiss the depth of the Buddha's attainment, but the EBT in every context show a Buddha of impeccable purity of mind, with no greed or hatred and wise to a fault. This becomes a starting premise for “What did the Buddha think of women?” Conviction of the high attainment of the Buddha is a strong incentive for always probing deeper into the *Dhamma*.[4] All of these essays have benefited from this stance.

Functionalism. The Buddha's teachings are extremely practical, whether they pertain to the values that underlie a Buddhist life, *kamma* and the fruits of *kamma*, merit-making, precepts, purity of mind, the role of refuge and of

4 There is an interesting parallel: One of the early incentives for the development of science, I have read, is thought to have been a deep faith in the rationality of God, from which it was inferred that His creation must also be humanly comprehensible.

monastic practice, the four noble truths, the workings of the human mind, meditation instructions, and so on. In the EBT they virtually never take a strictly theoretical turn. Functionality motivates my discussion most directly in “Take seriously and hold loosely” and “The Buddha as biologist.”

Teachings are practical in that they inform practice, which has to do the way we live our lives, the kinds of attitudes we carry with us and the kinds of actions we routinely perform. And from practice benefits accrue, occasionally awakening, but before that the fruits that come prior to awakening: fulfillment, happiness, calm, virtue and wisdom, along with ensuring the requisite social conditions that encourage individual development of these kinds. To the extend teachings are consistently practical, we should take them seriously. Primarily, we should try to understand the function of teaching and then try to understand the teaching in a way that satisfies that teaching. The *Dhamma* therefore can tolerate alternative understandings and many of the diverse schools of Buddhism that developed in later years might not be that far off base. Nonetheless, if teachings conflict with modern presuppositions, we should be willing to investigate carefully our own tacit assumptions. These considerations are central to “Take seriously but hold loosely.”

Holism. It is important to recognize the extent to which the Buddha's teachings functioning as an integrated whole. We don't accrue half the benefits by diligent practice of half the teachings; we accrue … oh, say … 5% of the benefits. The teachings span virtue, right view and mental development, and even these succeed only in the nesting context of refuge, devotion and faith. Refuge, devotion and faith succeed only in the nesting context of proper social relationships, particularly the presence of admirable friends (*kalyāna mitta*), which for the Buddha thereby constitutes the entirely of the practice,[5] and the institutional *Saṅgha*, in which practice burns brightest. The Buddha spoke of all of these things, clearly considered them all to be impor-tant, so when we leave things out without a very good idea of what their fun-ctions within the integrated whole, we do so at our peril.[6]

The tendency to fragment the teachings underlies the misunderstandings discussed in “Seeing through the eyes of the Buddha” and “How did mindfulness become 'bare, non-judgmental, present-moment awareness'?” The assumption of holism has guided the search for a more coherent understanding of Buddhist meditation.

Modernity. I have mentioned some strengths in modernity. There are also

---

5 SN 45.2.

6 My introduction to early Buddhism, *Buddhist Life/Buddhist Path* (Cintita, 2017) is particularly concerned with touching on the full range of the Buddha's teachings with regard how the various aspects fit into a coherent whole.

many pitfalls. In particular, we bring a lot of tacit presuppositions and habit patterns with it that are manifestations of a complex cultural, religious, scientific and commercial culture. Many of these are poor supports for Buddhist understanding and practice, many others are things Buddhism is intended to cure. In our mix-and-match modern culture we for the most part do not get this right. For instance, we commonly strip meditation from its wider context, get to a level of immediate gratification, but then wonder why we are making no further progress. "Take seriously, but hold loosely" takes up some of these pitfalls.

Abbreviations for early Pali sources

DN	*Dīgha Nikāya*
MN	*Majjhima Nikāya*
SN	*Saṃyutta Nikāya*
AN	*Aṅguttara Nikāya*
Dhp	*Dhammapāda*
Ud	*Udāna*
Iti	*Itivuttaka*
Cv	*Culavagga (Vinaya)*

The sutta number that generally follows one of these abbreviations follows the conventions of the Wisdom Publications translations, and of the Access to Insight and Sutta Central Web sites.

Bhikkhu Cintita
Calgary, Canada
June, 2019

What did the Buddha think of women?

the story of the early nuns

Buddhism is widely known throughout the world as a religion of peace and kindness. It is less known as a religion of gender-equality. And, in fact, many Buddhists throughout the world are taught that women, because of their characteristic karmic dispositions, are incapable of awakening or of becoming a *buddha*, at least without first being reborn as men. Furthermore, relatively few women have gone down in Asian history as teachers, yogis and thinkers; the great Indian scholar-monks were all exactly that, monks, and the ordination and transmission lineages tracked in East Asia list one man after another. The Theravada tradition managed completely to have misplaced its order of fully ordained nuns, and the Tibetan never had one, leaving a decidedly lopsided *Saṅgha* throughout much of Asia, and very limited opportunities for women to receive the support and respect that nourishes the highest aspirations of the Buddhist *Saṅgha*.

Moreover the Buddha himself has been commonly implicated in this bias. For instance, although he created a twofold *Saṅgha* of monks and nuns, he is said to have done so reluctantly, and he seems to have created a degree of dependency of the latter order on the former. He is also reported to have said,

> … in whatever religion women are ordained, that religion will not last long. As families that have more women than men are easily destroyed by robbers, as a plentiful rice-field once infested by rice worms will not long remain, as a sugarcane field invaded by red rust will not long remain, even so the true *Dhamma* will not last long.

Nonetheless, that the Buddha would harbor the slightest bit of ill-will toward women, flies in the face of the complete awakening of the Buddha, which entails that he was utterly pure of thought, kind and well disposed to a fault, completely without defilement or bias of any sort, toward any living being. It is true that the authenticity of many of the passages that have been attributed in this regard to the Buddha in the early scriptures, has in fact been questioned in modern scholarship. Nonetheless, even if we accept these scholarly arguments we can indulge no more than a provisional sigh of relief, for we must then attribute these passages instead to very early and very influential disciples of the Buddha, to monks with the respect and authority needed to shape the already widely disseminated early scriptures, probably to *arahants*. What gives?

Gender equality in early Buddhism

An image that shines through in the discourses repeatedly is, in fact, that of a Buddha who had nothing but the deepest kindness and respect for women, in stark contrast to the standards of the society in which he lived. I think the evidence here overwhelms any allegations of unkindness toward women on the part of the Buddha. Let's consider the evidence:

Buddha's Kindness. The Buddha would have been totally incapable of misogyny. Misogyny is a form of ill-will and to harbor ill-will would belie his awakening and everything he taught about the three fires of greed, hatred and delusion and the training in kindness (*mettā*) and compassion. No species is exempt as an object of kindness, as non-harming to all sentient beings is advocated. Consistently the Buddha's message and training are of boundless kindness and compassion toward all beings, even those who have done great harm, such as King Ajatasattu, who had killed his own father to seize his throne, yet was taken on by the Buddha as a disciple. Given his boundless kindness toward *all* beings, certainly he had boundless kindness toward women.

But how does this kindness with regard to women manifest in practice? Do we find the Buddha actively engaged in improving the social status of, and creating opportunities for, women in the early scriptures? Fortunately, we find in the case of the Buddha a detailed view, almost unique among ancient historical figures, of social engagement. Although the Buddha was not a rabble-rouser in the way Jesus seems to have been, that is, he was not actively engaged in upturning Indian society, the Buddha was the engineer of the monastic *Saṅgha*, in which he created forms and norms afresh, to fashion what, for him, would have been the ideal society. For instance, in the *Saṅgha* he eliminated the caste system altogether and established a consensus democracy with little hierarchy and no centralized authority (outside of himself in the beginning). It is within the monastic *Saṅgha* that we indeed discover his active promotion of the interests of women and the leveling of the disadvantages women would otherwise expect in ancient Indian society, as we will soon see.

Women outside the *Saṅgha*. The Buddha in many places offered advice to householders about the roles and status of the two genders which must have stood out in his culture for the reciprocity and mutual respect he recommended. For instance, he described the respective duties of husbands and wives as follows:

> In five ways should a wife as Western quarter, be ministered to by her husband: by respect, by courtesy, by faithfulness, by handing over authority to her, by providing her with ornaments. In these five ways does the wife minister to by her husband as the Western quarter, love him: her duties are well-performed by hospitality to kin of both, by faithfulness, by watching over the goods he brings and by skill and in-

> dustry in discharging all business. (DN 31)

The Buddha, on learning of King Pasenadi of Kosala was displeased that his queen had just given birth to a daughter rather than the desired son, reassured the king as follows:

> A woman, O lord of the people, may turn out better than a man. She may be wise and virtuous, a devoted wife, revering her mother-in-law. (SN 3.16)

Reliability of women. The Buddha addressed what was apparently a widespread distrust of women in his day. The monks' monastic code makes explicit the Buddha's trust of women to offer testimony as witnesses to possible sexual transgressions by monks. Accordingly we find the two *indefinite (aniyata) rules*, in the Monks' *Patimokkha* (the master list of rules that monks follow) that explicitly *require* consideration by any *saṅgha* of the testimony of trusted women. For modern culture it is a bit of a shock that such rules would be necessary, but their inclusion is itself evidence that they must have contradicted the norms the prevailing folk culture, which would be to dismiss the testimony of women.

Women's potential for awakening. Getting to the core issue of Buddhist practice, the Buddha stated unequivocally that women have the same potential for awakening that men have.

> Women, Ānanda, having gone forth are able to realize the fruit of stream-attainment or the fruit of once-returning or the fruit of non-returning or arahantship. (Cv X.1)

In an early text we have an even clearer statement of the complete irrelevance of gender to attainment. This tells of the nun Sona's encounter with Māra, who characteristically tries to dissuade her from the path, in this case claiming a woman cannot attain awakening. Sona, knowing better, replies,

> What does womanhood matter at all, when the mind is concentrated well, when knowledge flows on steadily as one sees correctly into *Dhamma*. One to whom it might occur, "I am a woman" or "I am a man" or "I'm anything at all" is fit for Māra to address. (SN 5.2)

The Buddha elsewhere attests to the great number of awakened women disciples.

Inclusion of women into the monastic *Saṅgha*. The Buddha created a parallel nuns' order about five years after the start of the monks' order. Although there was a rare precedent in some of the Jain schools, the founding of the far more deliberately constituted Buddhist nuns' order must have represented a radical breakthrough in opportunities for women's religious practice. And there is a clear statement in his (albeit mythical) encounter with Māra at the end of his

life that the founding of the nuns' order was his intention from the time of his awakening.

Not only did nuns' ordination in Buddhism give women the opportunity to opt out of an often oppressive patriarchal system, but to partake in almost equal partnership with their monk brothers in the third gem, which, in the time of the Buddha, must have been an enormous honor. It meant that the *Saṅgha* in which all Buddhists, both men and women, take refuge would now consist of both monks and nuns. This must have also been a courageous decision given the standards of Indian society and the practical concerns it brought for the protection of the nuns in a difficult and hazardous way of life.

Protecting the safety of the nuns. The Buddha took care, like a wise parent, to protected nuns from the dangers of the itinerant ascetic lifestyle. Physical dangers came from highway men and cads. More gentle dangers to the nun's practice came from the poor fellow who would see some lovely creature, modest of attire, bald of head and dignified of deportment, enter the village day after day for alms, fall in love and then, through slather of charm and sumptuous gift of meal, undertake to overcome a few of her more irksome vows. The Buddha thereby built protective measures into the monastic rules, the *Patimokkha,* in order to secure for the nuns, in spite of their vulnerability, the same opportunities on the path of practice enjoyed by the monks.

Examples of protective rules are:

> Should any *bhikkhunī* [nun] go among villages alone or go to the other shore of a river alone or stay away for a night alone or fall behind her companion(s) alone, … it entails initial and subsequent meetings of the Community.
>
> Should any bhikkhunī stand or converse with a man, one on one, in the darkness of the night without a light, it is to be confessed.
>
> Should any *bhikkhunī,* lusting, having received staple or non-staple food from the hand of a lusting man, consume or chew it, … it entails initial and subsequent meetings of the *Saṅgha.*

Likewise special rules for the monks, who, though limited by vow, are themselves often subject to the same flames of lust, regulate their interactions with nuns. For instance,

> Should any *bhikkhu* sit in private, alone with a *bhikkhunī,* it is to be confessed.
>
> Should any *bhikkhu,* by arrangement, get in the same boat with a *bhikkhunī* going upstream or downstream — except to cross over to the other bank — it is to be confessed.

Protecting nuns from conventional gender roles. The Buddha also took care to protect the nuns and monks from falling into accustomed roles to the disadvantage of the nuns. We find rules in both *Patimokkhas* to inhibit this. The nuns' *Patimokkha*, as one instance, contains the rule:

> Should any *bhikkhunī*, when a bhikkhu is eating, attend on him with water or a fan, it is to be confessed.

Most often it is the monk who is expected to enforce the rule, for instance:

> Should any *bhikkhu* have a used robe washed, dyed, or beaten by a *bhikkhunī* unrelated to him, it is to be forfeited and confessed.
>
> Should any *bhikkhu* chew or consume staple or non-staple food, having received it with his own hand from the hand of an unrelated *bhikkhunī* in an inhabited area, he is to acknowledge it: "Friends, I have committed a blameworthy, unsuitable act that ought to be acknowledged. I acknowledge it."

It is instructive to observe however that nuns in modern Theravada countries, who are not fully ordained as "*bhikkhunis*," and therefore fall outside of these original rules, quite commonly fall precisely into the willing role of serving monks, exactly as the Buddha clearly feared.

Accomplishments of women. In the Suttas the Buddha explicitly extolled the accomplishments of the bhikkunis. At least one nun, Dhammadinnā, is found in the Suttas teaching in the Buddha's stead, to which the Buddha comments that he would have explained the topic at hand in exactly the same way she did. The *Therigati*, a section of the *Khuddaka Nikaya* in the Suttas, is a collection of poems composed by early awakened nuns, said to be the only canonical text in all the world's religions dealing first-hand with women's spiritual experiences.

In fact the Buddha's and his early disciples' promotion of women's practice seems to have been wildly successful in early Buddhism . The record of King Ashoka, the 3rd Century BCE emperor of much of India and great exponent and supporter of Buddhism, gives us a unique snapshot of the state of Buddhism in India two centuries after the Buddha, through his edicts issued as stone inscriptions. In these earliest written texts related to Buddhism, many contemporary monks and nuns are named for their accomplishments as teachers, scholars and workers of good, including Ashoka's own daughter, Ven. Saṅghamittā, who founded the nuns' *Saṅgha* in Sri Lanka. What is striking is how prominent the nuns are in these inscriptions, apparently appearing almost as often as monks. This is evidence for King Ashoka's high regard for the Nuns' *Saṅgha*, for the achievements of the early nuns, and for the Buddha's compassionate and wise cultivation of the conditions conducive to the nuns' practice, in an otherwise generally unsupportive cultural environment.

Shining Forth. The Buddha that shines forth from the suttas is one of complete purity of purpose, always looking for the benefit of all — really all – and incapable of even the slightest hint of bias or unkind thought. This is a Buddha that must make the most feminist in the Buddhist community smile.

I should note that I use the phrase "shines through" is a special sense. The ancient Suttas and the *Vinaya* are not entirely reliable texts, having passed through both oral and orthographic transmissions and suffering from faults of memory, embellishments, insertions, deletions and other edits along the way. Modern techniques of textual analysis are useful in sorting the authentic from the inauthentic but no particular passage can ever be proven to be original. In fact, the inconsistencies in the early scriptures are great enough that by cherry picking relevant passages one could attribute almost any position to the Buddha one wants. I have even read arguments that his teachings are indistinguishable from those of the Veda-toting Brahmins. This is where "shining through" is important.

The adept reader of the early scriptures will with time recognize an overriding and repeated consistency behind the passages. It is as if he is piecing together a jigsaw puzzle in which some pieces are missing and in which other pieces have been mixed in from other jigsaw puzzles, but at some point clearly recognizes, "Oh, I get it: This is the Golden Gate Bridge!" This is what it means for a particular interpretation to shine forth. Although it cannot be proven decisively, and still admits of debate, the convergence of evidence from many sources becomes so overwhelming to those who see what shines through that doubt disappears. The accomplished Buddhist practitioner is even more ready to witness this shining through than the scholar because his own experience might provide decisively confirming evidence from direct experience. He is like the jigsaw enthusiast who has actually been on the Golden Gate Bridge, who is already familiar with its features and the contours of the land- and sea-scape around it. Once the Golden Gate Bridge has shined through it becomes the basis of interpreting the remaining unplaced pieces, but also rejecting some altogether as intruders from other people's jigsaw puzzles.

I submit that the Buddha that shines through the early scriptures is clearly one with complete kindness and compassion toward women, one who was very actively engaged with providing for women equal opportunities for practice and who established a nuns order for that purpose, one who took great pains to care for the security and well-being of the members of that order and to protect their practice from the incursion of conventional social roles. No other interpretation makes sense.

But how about the pieces that do not yet fit?

Gender inequality in early Buddhism

The commonly cited and worrying instances of gender inequality in Buddhist scriptures include isolated passages that openly disparage women, special rules allegedly imposed by the Buddha that entail an unequal relationship between the nuns' and monks' orders, the alleged reluctance of the Buddha to create a nuns' *Saṅgha*, the greater number of rules nuns must follow in contrast to monks, and the poor historical track record of almost every sect of Buddhism with regard to gender equality. As we consider these remaining pieces the ocean fog might seems to roll in to obscure the Golden Gate Bridge that seemed a moment ago to shine through clearly. Let's look at these points one by one.

Isolated statements attributed to the Buddha in the discourses that seem to disparage women. Here is an example from the early discourses:

> "Venerable sir, what is the reason that women neither come to the limelight, nor, doing an industry, see its benefits?"
>
> "Ānanda, women are hateful, jealous, miserly and lack wisdom, as a result they neither come to the limelight, nor do an industry and see its benefits." (AN 4.80)

Whoa! Where did that come from? Does that sound at all like the kind nurturing Buddha we met above, for whom women clearly *do* come to the limelight?

In fact this exchange is tacked awkwardly onto the very end of a sutta which begins with the theme of "non-sensual thoughts, non-hateful thoughts, non-hurting thoughts and right view" and furthermore seems to bear, suspiciously, no relationship whatever to anything else in the sutta. Yet there it is. As mentioned, the ancient suttas have a complex history with much editing and insertion often by lesser minds long forgotten. There can be little doubt that this is a piece that belongs to someone else's grim jigsaw puzzle. The suttas must always be read for the system that shines forth, the consistent message. We have to conclude that such remarks, not common in the suttas, was a later insertion by a benighted monk, perhaps some once jilted lover, and not the words of the Buddha.

Although the origin of this kind of discrepancy often seems clear, I should caution against dismissing too readily any statement in the scriptures that seems initially inconsistent to the reader. For instance, many passages, discourage monks from contact with women, not to look at them, not to talk with them, not to touch them, not to enter into a secluded space with them. For those unfamiliar with the nature or functions of Buddhist monastic practice, this sometimes initially suggests misogyny clear and simple. But in fact ascetic traditions such as Jainism and monastic Buddhism give careful attention to

controlling the passions, in particular sexual passion.[1] This has nothing to do with gender bias at all; the *woman* renunciate is equally expected to avoid contact with *men* in exactly equivalent ways. One should always be willing to look a little deeper.

Another example where the Buddha might seem to disparage women, is the Buddha's often referenced statement in MN 115 that a woman cannot become a *buddha*. On the surface this seems to place a limit on a woman's spiritual attainment, but the context reveals that this does not contradict womens' equal potential for awakening at all. In Early Buddhism a *buddha* is not only an awakened one, but also someone who has the particular and very rare historical role of restoring Buddhism in the world, so that others can achieve awakening. That is,

> Buddha = Awakened One + Original Teacher.
> Arahant = Awakened One.

Only once in many eons, a *buddha* arises in the world, discovers the truth that no one can teach him, and then propagates that truth so that others can share that *buddha's* awakening, thereby getting the ball rolling again. There is no question in the early scriptures that women can be *arahants*, that is, can share the Buddha's awakening. The claim must therefore be that only a man can be an Original Teacher. The context provided in the relevant passage confirms this, in which parallel statements are made about universal monarchs, and dieties who bear influence in the world.

> It is impossible that a woman should be the Perfectly Awakened One. It is possible that a man should be the perfect rightfully Enlightened One. It is impossible that a woman should be the Universal Monarch … the King of Gods … Māra … Brahmā …

Now, being an Original Teacher requires a number of personal qualities beyond awakening, including charisma, physical stature, skill in exposition, a nurturing attitude, aptitude for strategic planning, a low, booming and articulate voice, etc. Which qualities are relevant is largely determined by the society in which he lives, so that a patriarchal society, for instance, one with little regard for feminine qualities, would not produce feminine original teachers, universal monarchs or Māras, any more than a society which values thick heads of hair will produce bald televangelists. In short, the Buddha's statement, I submit, is more about the society in which the Buddha lived, than of women.

The *garudhammas* (heavy rules). The most cited evidence of gender bias in the early texts where reportedly imposed by the Buddha as he established the nuns' *Saṅgha*. They are recorded in the Vinaya as follows:

1 See Cintita (2011) on why this is part of Buddhist practice.

1. A nun who has been ordained even for a hundred years must greet respectfully, rise up from her seat, salute with joined palms, do proper homage to a monk ordained but that day.
2. A nun must not spend the rains in a residence where there are no monks
3. Every half month a nun should desire two things from the monks' *Saṅgha*: the asking as to the date of the *uposatha* day, and the coming for the exhortation.
4. After the rains a nun must 'invite' before both *Saṅghas* in respect of three matters, namely what was seen, what was heard, what was suspected.
5. A nun, offending against an important rule, must undergo manatta discipline for half a month before both *Saṅghas*.
6. When, as a probationer, she has trained in the six rules for two years, she should seek higher ordination from both *Saṅghas*.
7. A Monk must not be abused or reviled in any way by a nun.
8. From today, admonition of monks by nuns is forbidden, admonition of nuns by monks is not forbidden. (Horner, 1993, vol V, 354-55)

Let me provide some brief explanations that will dispel some, but indeed not all, of the shock the Westerner generally experiences on first encountering these rules. They actually have less bite than bark, which, as we will see, is probably their primary purpose.

First, putting aside gender roles, although the form of respectful greeting (rule #1) is quite foreign to Western culture it would have been familiar in the Buddha's world, and still in most of Asia today it is a part of common etiquette, found for instance in the way children greet parents, students greet teachers, junior monks greet senior monks and lay men and women greet both monks and nuns. Yet the specific rule cited here clearly imposes a gender-based distinction within the *Saṅgha*, even while there are, for instance, no similar caste-based distinctions at all.

Second, there is little here in the way of a power structure. While the nuns may ordain other nuns, a group of monks must concur (rule #6). And should a nun be sanctioned for a serious disciplinary infraction, a group of monks must agree with the terms of the sanctions (rule #5), which are largely specified in the *Vinaya* in any case. That's it, and for most nuns this is a rare or even once-in-a-lifetime matter. Otherwise monks have no authority at all to tell nuns what to do. Should a nuns' community find the local community of monks uncooperative or obstructive in some way, they are free to align themselves with a more agreeable community of monks. To the extent the *garudhammas* are present in the Nuns' *Patimokkha*, their violation is atoned by simple acknowledgement. Although the power allocated to the monks is of very limited scope, the rules again clearly do express a gender bias, for monks do not seek ap-

proval from nuns for their ordinations, nor for the terms of sanctions against their misbehavior.

Third, these rules set up a partial dependency of the nuns' community on the monks' community with regard to teaching and training, particularly during the time of the three-month yearly rains retreat (rule #2 and rule #3). Whereas this can be viewed primarily as an obligation of the monks to the nuns, and any potential for abuse of this relationship is carefully circumscribed in the ways already described, there is nonetheless an asymmetrical relationship that attributes greater competence in practice and understanding to the monks.

Fourth, critical feedback flows in only one direction, from monks to nuns. The "invitation" (*pavārana*) is an occasion at the end of the rains retreat in which each monk or nun invites the others to provide constructive criticism of one's actions. Criticism of monks by nuns is excluded on this occasion (rule #4) and on any other occasion (rule #8). The puzzling inclusion of rule #7 is not as gender-biased as it seems, since monks are already prohibited from abusing or reviling *anybody* in any way.

As in the case of isolated statements, there is strong evidence that these rules, or at least some of them, are not the words of the Buddha. Not the least of this evidence is that the origin story makes little chronological sense given other events reported in the Suttas. Ānanda's intervention on behalf of the would-be nuns, for instance, seems to have happened when he would have still been a young boy. Nonetheless if the *garudhammas* did not originate with the Buddha they must have originated with very influential early disciples of the Buddha, since they have a prominent place in every known version of the *Vinaya*. I think we do well to uncover the foggy motivation behind the *garudhammas* before we attribute a discrepant understanding to these otherwise worthy disciples.

The Buddha's resistance to establishing the order of nuns. The Vinaya also tells us that Buddha at first resisted his aunt Mahapaāpati's lobbying effort to form a nuns' *Saṅgha*, until Ānanda interceded on her behalf and elicited the famous statement from the Buddha that women's capabilities for attainment and awakening were equivalent to men's. It should be noted that the Buddha never refused to found a nuns' *Saṅgha*, he simply puts Mahapajāpati off with the words, "Don't ask that." Nonetheless, after he agrees to begin ordaining nuns, and imposes the *garudhammas*, he expresses some concern about his decision.

> If, Ānanda, women had not obtained the going forth from home into homelessness in the *Dhamma* and discipline proclaimed by the Truth-finder, the *Dhamma* would have lasted long. The true *Dhamma* would have endured for a thousand years. But because women have gone forth . . . in the *Dhamma* and discipline proclaimed by the Truth-finder, now the *Dhamma* will not last long. The true *Dhamma* will en-

> dure only for five hundred years. Even, Ānanda, as those households which have many women and few men easily fall prey to robbers, to pot-thieves . . . in whatever *Dhamma* and discipline women obtain the going forth . . . that *Dhamma* will not last long. Even as when the disease known as white bones (mildew) attacks a whole field of rice, that field of rice does not last long, even so, in whatever *Dhamma* and discipline women obtain the going forth . . . that *Dhamma* will not last long.
>
> Even as when the disease known as red rust attacks a whole field of sugar-cane, that field of sugar-cane will not last long, even so, in whatever *Dhamma* and discipline women obtain the going forth . . . that *Dhamma* will not last long. Even as a man, looking forward, may build a dyke to a great reservoir so that the water may not over-flow, even so, were the eight *garudhammas* for the nuns laid down by me, looking forward, not to be transgressed during their lives."

Again, some scholarship has questioned the authenticity of this statement along with the entire origin story of the *garudhammas*, but also again it came from somewhere, so let us consider what the concern is, that is expressed here. This envisions the slow deterioration of the Buddhist movement. Although the condition for this deterioration is identified as allowing women to ordain into the *Saṅgha*, how or why the deterioration proceeds is left obscure. This is what we should take pains to discover. It is also unclear to me whether or not the last line says that through the *garudhammas* the problem has been fixed, that is, that the envisioned early demise of the Buddhist movement will thereby be averted.

Although the similes here make use of some strong negative imagery for the deterioration of the Buddhist movement, I think it is very rash indeed to see blatant misogyny in this, as if it were saying that *women* are like pot-thieves, white bones or red rust. In fact, the first simile makes clear that the threat described comes from without, but the presence of nuns represents a secondary condition of vulnerability rather than the most direct cause of the problem, since the nuns certainly correspond to the many women in the victimized household. What this passage clearly does say is that, all things considered, expanding the *Saṅgha* to include women has the potential to set off a gradual deterioration of the *Dhamma* . Given that great cost, it is no wonder that the Buddha would be hesitant to take the risk to include women in the *Saṅgha*. His boldness in allowing the value he place in women's practice to override this grave concern is to be commended. What is still obscure is what the external threat is, how and why the inclusion of women, in spite of the Buddha's best intentions, might initiate this process of deterioration, and how the *garudhamma* might help to avert this. I will take up this can of worms momentarily.

The greater number of monastic rules imposed on nuns. The Theravada *Patimokkha*, the master list of rules, enumerates 227 rules for monks and 311 for nuns, and other *Vinaya* traditions reveal similar proportions. This is often cited as evidence for gender bias, but, in fact, the reasons for the extra rules are complex and diverse and do not admit to such a simple conclusion.

The primary reason for the rule count differential seems to be that the nuns' *Patimokkha* was compiled at a later date than the monks' *Patimokkha*. Each represents a kind of snapshot of a moving target, one earlier than the other. In fact, the body of rules prescribed by the Buddha seems to have grown over a long period of time, some of these rules specific to monks and some to nuns, but the bulk of them the same or equivalent. Each *Patimokka*, because it is a kind of master list serving for memorization and group recitation, seems to have been closed to further additions at a certain time even as the rules imposed by the Buddha continued to grow, first the monks' *Patimokkha* was closed then the newer nuns'. This gave us two snapshots, the second showing a bigger set than the first, so that, in fact, many rules prescribed by the Buddha for *both* monks and nuns elsewhere in the Vinaya are listed in the Nuns' *Patimokkha* but missing in the monks'.

The nuns' *Patimokkha* additionally includes most of the *garudhamma* rules and the Monks' *Patimokkha* does not. As noted in the section on gender equality, differing but complementary rules also protect the nuns from potential gender-associated vulnerabilities in their interactions with monks and laity. Also the origin stories of the rules reveal that a number of rules that apply only to nuns arose from complaints lodged by nuns against the misbehavior of other nuns.

Finally the nuns also have more rules specifically regulating sexual conduct. A body of rules for each order not only enforces celibacy but also helps the monastic to avoid compromising situations and to maintain propriety in this critical aspect of monastic practice. However, the nuns' circumstances are stricter in this regard probably because the nuns are easily subject to male aggression and are able to become pregnant. Consider how well-intentioned modern parents generally subject their teenage daughters to more oversight than they do their sons. The Buddha seems to have shared this attitude.

Gender bias in later Buddhism. Virtually every sect of Buddhism seems to have developed a degree of gender bias beyond the best intentions of the Buddha, for instance the loss of the nuns' *Saṅgha* in many traditions. Since my concern here is the role of women in early Buddhism I do not need to say much about this. Presumably this gender bias has arisen largely through the attitudes and continual pressure of the embedding patriarchal cultures found throughout much of Asia, as it has undoubtedly in other institutions — businesses, government, military and so on. The Buddha described his teaching as "against the

stream," which means that there is a constant tension between the *Dhamma-Vinaya* on the one hand and popular opinion and habit on the other. When the latter overwhelms the former the *Saṅgha* has failed to preserve the purity of the teachings. How could this happen?

Woefully, it seems that as the early context in which the scriptures arose began to recede into ancient history, particularly quickly in lands outside of India itself, many passages were reinterpreted to endorse various forms of gender discrimination. We have seen, for instance, that the statement that a woman cannot become a *buddha* was probably somewhat benign in its original context, carrying no substantial relevance for the spiritual expectations of women practitioners. However the meaning of "*buddha*" shifted in the later Mahayana tradition to become, rather than a rare historical role, an attainment higher than *arhantship* to which all Buddhists were encouraged to aspire. When the word "*buddha*" was reinterpreted in this way then the statement that a woman cannot become a buddha indeed limited a woman's spiritual expectations. This may be a basis of the common Mahayana view that women have an unequal capacity for progress on the path, or that, in order to attain awakening, they must first be reborn as men. Likewise the *garudhamma* rules, whose motivation in Buddha's India we have yet to fully examine, could then easily be read as confirmation of women's inferior capacities, once these motivations are obscured, particularly because they are formulated in such symbolic (bark) rather than practical (bite) terms.

The fog clears. In summary the fog that threatened to obscure the image of the Buddha and early Buddhism, the image that had clearly shined through by the end of the section on gender equality, has almost lifted. Taken on a case-by-case basis each piece that seemed to challenge our puzzlers' skill has snapped into place or been attributed as an intrusion from someone else's puzzle … except around two remaining issues: the purpose of the *garudhamma* rules and the Buddha's reported hesitation in establishing the nuns' *Saṅgha*. These require closer examination.

Fitting the most challenging pieces into the puzzle

What does a jigsaw practitioner do with incongruous pieces? The Golden Gate Bridge clearly shines through, but remaining pieces might depict a lion and a skateboard! It is important not to give up. In the end it might be discovered that the photographer has chosen an angle in which a boy appears in the foreground, wearing baseball cap and printed t-shirt sailing through a parking lot on his skateboard as the Golden Gate Bridge looms in the background.

Recall that the *garudhammas* are the eight rules that symbolically put the nuns under the thumb of the monks, and that they were intended to remedy a threat to the lifespan of the *Dhamma* which arose in the establishing the nuns'

Saṅgha. I will argue here that the threat is that the nuns' *Saṅgha* would have fit poorly into the social norms of patriarchal India, that it would have been difficult for the nuns to receive the lay support already enjoyed by the monks and that the reputation of the *Saṅgha* as a whole would have declined. The remedy was to present the *appearance* of conformity to social norms. The real intention was to promote, not denigrate, the interests of women, all the while preserving the *Dhamma.*

The challenge of establishing a nuns' *Saṅgha*. To understand the argument it is necessary to understand the status of women in Buddha's India. India seems have been on a long trajectory of increasing patriarchy before and after the time of the Buddha. In early Vedic India women apparently enjoyed a status considered much more equal to men, and the egregiously patriarchal practice of *sati,* the self-immolation of widows on their deceased husbands' funeral pyres, would still not be known in India until several hundred years after the Buddha. By the Buddha's time India had become a highly stratified society, in which each person is born into a social caste with no prospect of upward mobility. Spiritual practice and education were widely considered masculine pursuits. Furthermore women were generally subject in all stages of life to masculine authority. The last point is described, for instance, in the following ancient passage,

> By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house. In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent.
> (*Laws of Manu*, V, 147-8)

Women who were nonetheless independent of masculine authority, by choice or happenstance, were commonly regarded as "loose women," or as prostitutes. But apparently even prostitutes could regain much of their status and security by becoming official wards of the male-administered villages where they offered their services.

Now the monastic *Saṅgha* stands in most ways apart from the broader community, engineered as a kind of ideal society and built on values and practices that will often seem obscure to the general society. At the same time it is imperative that the *Saṅgha* live in harmony with the general society, for it is fragilely dependent on lay donors for all of its material needs and is, moreover, intent on exerting a civilizing influence on that society. The Buddha was much engaged in maintaining that harmony alongside the integrity of his teachings. In fact, the origin stories of the monastic rules reveal that most originated in feedback from the lay community about what they regarded an inappropriate behaviors of monks and nuns. For instance, the three-month rains retreat of the Buddhist monastic was initially instituted in response to lay pressure, not in response to

monastic needs (yet came to serve monastic practice). As long as they did not violate essential principles, the Buddha was willing to conform to the "Design-a-Monk®" expectations of the general society, to clothe the *Saṅgha* in respectability.

The establishment of a sustainable Monks′ *Saṅgha* presented no great challenges. Wandering mendicants were already very common in India in masculine form, and their aspirations were respected in the general society, at least enough for people to offer alms to help sustain them. The establishment of the Nuns' *Saṅgha* would prove far more challenging. There was apparently little in the way of a tradition of women among the ranks of wandering mendicants, except for recently the Jain experiment with nuns' ordination, which seemed not to be working out so well due to a "decay of morals" (as Dhammavihari puts it) stemming from mingling monks and nuns to an extent that they were often finding each other far more interesting than sitting under a tree following the breath.

The main concern for the Buddha would have been that a public that was already quite supportive of monks would be less supportive, or even hostile, with regard to nuns, and would consequently make it more difficult for the nuns to receive adequate alms to support their practice, for the nuns would be widely regarded as incapable of spiritual progress, or worse, be denigrated as "loose women," and thereby worthy of support only for the wrong reasons, and at the cost of their safety. Unlike the uniform absorption of all castes into the *Saṅgha*, which no doubt must have also occasionally raised lay eyebrows, the presence of two genders in the *Saṅgha* could not be hidden from daily awareness under uniform attire and bald heads.

Initially the nuns would also need a lot of coaching; relatively few would have previous experience in the intense spiritual practice of the mendicant or yogi. Also the nuns would generally be at a disadvantage in general education, education having been largely neglected for women of all social classes. Although the monks' order itself was but a few years old, many of its members would have had decades of ascetic practice behind them before joining the order, and many also apparently came from the educated upper ranks of society and have had, therefore, a leg up in absorbing the Buddha's teaching.

The resolution. Wanting to offer to women the greatest gift he could give, the opportunity to learn, practice and live the *Dhamma* as members of the monastic *Saṅgha*, it is nonetheless no wonder under the circumstances that the Buddha would have hesitated if pressured prematurely to establish a nuns' order, nor that he might have feared dire consequences for the longevity of the Buddhist movement. To resolve the issue he would have to:

1. Provide for the nuns' education and training to bring them up to the level of the monks as well as provide for their safety, yet

2. Keep the two orders physically independent to discourage romantic interludes and flirtatious behaviors, and, to the extent that was not possible, discourage both genders from falling into well-worn domestic roles,
3. Avoid the public impression that nuns were "loose women" by publicly putting them under masculine authority, yet
4. Not create still another patriarchal power structure that would one day be abused by wayward monks.

The *garudhammas* support #1 and #3. They establish a requisite structure of authority, but more importantly serve a public relations function in a rather clever and effective way. They consolidate the relevant points in a single dramatic passage, unmistakably intended for public, not monastic, consumption. They have far more bark than bite. In fact, additional rules dispersed throughout the *Vinaya* and presented in the typical dry language of that text, that only monastics would know of, mitigate the impact of the *garudhammas* and sustain points #2 and #4.

We have already seen the kindness of the Buddha and the early monks' *Saṅgha* in ensuring the safety of the nuns and to keep the monks and nuns from falling into traditional gender roles. It was likewise important that the structures of authority set up in the *garudhammas* carry little real power and in particularly not become abusive. The primary relationship between the two *Saṅghas* in this regard was the periodic "admonishment," basically a pep or *Dhamma* talk. Accordingly, hidden in the *Vinaya* is the careful regulation of this relationship. For instance, an admonishing monk cannot show up among the nuns in the late hours, and must have certain qualifications, described as follows:

> A monk who is entrusted to preside over their welfare should conform to perfect standards of moral virtue. He should also possess a thorough knowledge of the teaching of the Master and know well the complete code of the *Patimokkha* covering both the *bhikkhus* and the *bhikkhunīs*. He should be of pleasant disposition, mature in years and acceptable to the bhikkhunīs, and above all, should in no way have been involved in a serious offense with a *bhikkhunī*. (Vin.IV.51)

Not just any monk could show up to hold forth before the nuns.

Also hidden in the *Vinaya* is the mildness of the consequences to a nun should she fail to observe a *garudhamma*: She need only acknowledge her offense to another nun. That's it. Although one can imagine means by which an ill disposed monks' *Saṅgha* might still use the *garudhammas* to oppress a nuns' *Saṅgha*, most of which probably have been tried, in practical terms the system that was set up is primarily one of service of the monks to the nuns, in providing protection and training.

It should be pointed out also that the application of *garudhamma* #1, whereby nuns must show respect to monks, was adjusted in the *Vinaya* after an incident involving some flirtatious monks who where neither behaving like monks nor respecting these nuns as nuns. After these nuns refused to show respect to the monks, and the matter was taken up by the Buddha, the Buddha took the nuns' side.

Incidentally, this strategy of conforming symbolically and publicly to certain norms in order to appease the general society was probably repeated in China centuries later but in a different context. Chinese society placed enormous value in family and this is enforced in the Confucian code. The monastic habit of leaving family behind for the contemplative life was at odds with this value and might well have threatened the existence of the *Saṅgha*. It has been suggested that this is the origin of the great emphasis in Chinese Buddhists place on lineage,that is, the ancestry and transmission based on successive generations of preceptors and ordainees, teachers and students, within the *Saṅgha*. In this scheme, to enter the *Saṅgha* one leaves one family, but only to enter another, or so it would appear. It was all symbolic (bark) but served served a more amiable public perception of the *Saṅgha*.

Whose resolution was this? As mentioned various inconsistencies call into question the account in which the Buddha proclaimed the *garudhammas* as reported. The account of their function offered here concerning the well-intentioned purpose of the *garudhammas* provides some possible insight into the story of their development.

It seems to me that the bark of the *garudhammas* may not have been necessary while the Buddha was still alive. The glow of his own towering personal stature would have extended to the whole *Saṅgha* and the nuns would have been publicly regarded as daughters of the Buddha, and therefore under masculine authority already, just as the monks would have been regarded as sons of the Buddha. Still, certain of these rules might have been introduced piecemeal by the Buddha as useful. Certainly he would have set up some kinds of arrangements for the very early nuns to receive instruction from the more experienced and educated monks and for nuns initially to receive ordination directly from monks. Possibly the *garudhamma* #1, requiring nuns to bow to monks, was introduced early on, since this rule was apparently directly borrowed from the Jains, has a story of subsequent modification (see above) and it is justified in the scriptures separately from the origin story of the *garudhamma*, as necessary because other sects follow this rule (already indicative of the social pressure at work here).

However at the Buddha's death his personal authority would have disappeared and at that point all the *garudhammas*, but more importantly a dramatic formulation of their contents for popular consumption, would have become neces-

sary. I suggest that the origin story we have for the *garudhammas* and the establishment of the nuns' *Saṅgha* was composed only after the Buddha's death, attributed back to the Buddha to put the "*garu-*" (weight) into "*garudhamma*," and badly bungled. It all fits.

Conclusions in a modern world

The Buddha clothed the *Saṅgha* in respectability according to the standards of the society in which he lived. This strategy gained room for the *Saṅgha* to become the ideal society within, with minimal interference from the faulty society without. In the ideal society the same opportunity for practice was secured for women as for men. In that cultural context that was a great accomplishment. Unfortunately in a modern society these clothes have a poor fit and they sometimes offend.

The monastic rules have historically always bent to changing climate, geography, technology and society. The *Saṅgha* would not have survived if this were not the case. At this point in history it is imperative that any semblance of gender inequality, symbolic or otherwise, be *removed* in a Buddhism that thrives in a modern culture. I have said nothing about the politics of how to get there from here, about untangling the force of ancient traditions, of maintaining harmony and respect among conservative and liberal elements in these traditions with regard to women's equality, about how to introduce or reintroduce full ordination for women in those traditions that lack it. It may take patience but the necessary adaptation will certainly happen.

I hope that I have shown for now that, whatever clothes we wear, the project of realizing full equality for women within Buddhism is totally in accord with the Buddha's original pure intentions, intentions which must make the most feminist in the Buddhist community smile.

Take seriously but hold loosely

faith without beliefs

Recently someone compared my writing to that of Stephen Batchelor,[1] the most prominent and perhaps most articulate proponent of the new Secular Buddhism movement. I had to think, at first, what the similarities and differences might be, because I don't identify myself as a secular Buddhist – largely because I feel the distinctions between “religious” and “secular” or “traditional” and “modern” are spuriously misapplied to Buddhism. In fact, I hope that this essay might serve as a middle way between extremes that seem to be forming within Buddhism around these distinctions. Nonetheless, I admit to sharing two fundamental premises which Batchelor has clearly articulated, and which are also, I understand, mainstays, perhaps the two most important mainstays, of Secular Buddhism. These premises are:

(1) *The Dhamma is about practice, not belief.*

The title of Batchelor's well thumbed-through and dog-eared book *Buddhism without Beliefs* reflects this premise. Buddhism is something we do, not something we believe. This is by no means to say that the Buddha did not provide a doctrinal framework: he gave us the *Dhamma*, which consists of a large system of interrelated teachings. However, the *Dhamma* falls short of being a “belief system,” and instead serves exclusively as a critical support for practice. My arguments in what follows serve to supplement Batchelor's arguments. For this reason, I will submit that the Buddha's teachings are to be taken *seriously*, because they have important practical functions, or *practice functions*, to be realized in beneficial results for the practitioner and for the world at large. At the same time, the Buddha's teachings are to be held *loosely*, as less fixed than “belief,” because a teaching needs to be *meaningful and acceptable* by the particular practitioner in support of its practice function. In fact, belief provides poor support for practice, for it is the practitioner's task to make the teaching his own.

(2) *The Dhamma will inevitably be adapted to modern sensibilities.*

The teachings are always going to be interpreted by individuals through the filter of their own culture as well as in their own idiosyncratic ways. For instance, Buddhists from an animist culture will tend to see behind the teachings intelli-

1 Among other works, Batchelor (1997, 2017).

gent but invisible underlying mechanisms, where Buddhists from a modern culture will look for verifiable physical or mental processes. Such interpretations have been necessary for cultures to keep Buddhist teachings meaningful and acceptable as Buddhism has entered new lands, and this is unlikely to cease in the West.[2] Moreover, if we hold Buddha's teachings loosely, we have *license* to interpret them in ways that are most meaningful and acceptable to us. At the same time, since we also take the teachings seriously, it is our obligation not to lose sight of their practice functions as we work to make them our own. This is how can preserve the integrity of the *Dhamma* without demanding interpretations that will never make sense to us. Fully functional organic *Dhamma* practice will make a huge difference in promoting a culture of awaking in the troubled modern world.

In short, the point of bringing Buddhism into a new culture is not to introduce yet another belief system to take its place alongside alternative understandings of science, philosophy and religion, but to produce an all-too-rare kind of human character, one that lives, acts and thinks something like a *buddha*. Buddhism has retained its functional integrity remarkably well, in my view, even as it has been repeatedly reinterpreted in different cultural environments. If we take care, it will do so in ours.[3]

I will now motivate these two mainstays of Secular Buddhism in more detail. I will develop the first premise first in terms of practice function (taking seriously), and then in terms of non-belief (holding loosely), and will show that this first premise is clearly motivated in the Buddha's teaching itself.

Taking the teachings seriously

In this section we demonstrate that the range of teachings is consistently justified as supports for practice, what we actually do in our lives and the benefits that thereby accrue. We take the teachings seriously because each has a practical function, or practice function, that makes a difference in our lives. Famously, in the *Simsapa Sutta* the Buddha, holding a handful of leaves, declares that if the leaves of the forest represent what he *might* teach, the leaves in his hand represent what he *does* teach, for he teaches only suffering and the end of suffering:

> And why have I taught these things? Because they are connected with the goal, relate to the rudiments of the holy life, and lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to nirvana. (SN 56.31)

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2 See Cintita (2014) for more on this.

3 A third similarity between my approach and Batchelor's is that both of us see primary authority in the EBT.

The Buddha was not interested in teaching speculative philosophy, or what we would not call science, nor in metaphysics, but only in the practice that leads to human benefit and ultimately to awakening. He was very practical.

“Is” and “ought.” Batchelor frequently illustrates the point that the function of *Dhamma* is in support of practice particularly with regard to the four noble truths, that most central teaching of Buddhism. He points out that the presentation of the four noble truths in the Buddha's very first discourse, known as the *Turning of the Wheel Sutta*, and elsewhere explicitly incorporates instructions for practice. The four noble truths are:

- The truth of suffering, which is to be understood,
- The truth of the origin of suffering, which is craving, and which is to be abandoned,
- The truth of the cessation of suffering, which is the cessation of craving, and which is to be realized,
- The truth of the path of practice leading to the cessation of suffering, which is right view, right intention, right action, right speech, right livelihood, right effort, right, mindfulness and right concentration, and which is to be developed. (paraphrase from SN 56.11)

A significant point about the four noble truths, aside from their highlighting of a conditional relation between suffering and craving, is that they merge fact and value, that is, “is” and “ought.” Stated in their most concise form, they appear to be four empirical propositions subject to verification, and are in fact referred to as “truths” (*sacca*) in the early discourses. Yet, we are given an explicit practice for each of the truths: understanding, abandoning, realizing and developing, respectively. The truths are justified for their practical value, that is, for their practice function. It has been pointed out that the truths are like a doctor's evaluation, in which the truths would represent, respectively, symptom, diagnosis, prognosis and cure, and we note that a doctor's evaluation also merges “is” and “ought” and is justified for *its* practice function, that of curing the patient. The path of practice referred to here is the noble eightfold path, eight bullet-points of more detailed practice to be developed.

This is hardly an obscure passage, yet Batchelor is right that at least some later traditions often highlight the propositional content, as if our primary task is to believe, not to understand, abandon, realize and develop. Not all *Dharmic* teachings make their practice function this explicit, but my experience is that a practice function is always present at least implicitly for any teaching, even if the practice function is not at first obvious. Belief by itself gives us no reason to take a teaching seriously, its practice function gives us every reason. The Buddha was very practical.

These things lead to benefit and happiness. These points about the priority of practice over belief form the topic of the *Kālāma Sutta*, which warns us against arriving at fixed viewpoints, no matter their source, but instead to verify teachings in terms of the benefits accrued through embracing them, which is to say. in terms of their practice function:

> Come, Kālāmas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing, nor upon tradition, nor upon repetition, nor upon what is in a scripture, nor as a result of thought; nor upon an axiom, nor upon careful reasoning, nor out of delight in speculation, nor upon another's seeming ability, nor upon the thought, "The monk is our venerable teacher." Kālāmas, when you yourselves know: "These things are good, these things are not blamable, these things are praised by the wise, undertaken as a whole these things lead to benefit and happiness," then enter on and abide in them. (AN 3.65)

In the passage, the ultimate criterion for evaluating a teaching is practical, that is, whether what we do on the basis of the teaching is of benefit. It is because the teachings have a practice function that we take them seriously; together they make a huge difference in our lives. We eschew intellectual achievements, whether these seem like "common sense" or result from higher scholarly reasoning and speculation, in favor of what is of benefit in our lives.

Faith. So, the four noble truths are about *practice*; they give us something to do. I should point out at the outset that they are also about *faith*. Faith is often mistakenly put in opposition to reason, but, in fact, the very reasonable four noble truths give us nothing to do, absolutely nothing, if we do not have faith that they are giving us good advice. Why would we take them seriously if we don't assume that the Buddha knew what he was talking about, that his doctrine is reliable and that our modern teachers are representing it properly? Without these assumptions the four noble truths are useless in our lives. This is not to say they are not verifiable: If we understand suffering, we will see that it is the shadow side of craving. If we follow the path of practice, we will realize the end of suffering. But we can only verify the four noble truths *after* we have practiced on the basis of them, generally for many years (if not lifetimes). Until then, our practice is based in faith, faith in the efficacy of the four noble truths for our practice. Similarly, as one of my Zen teachers, Shohaku Okumura Roshi, once said of Zen meditation, "*Zazen* takes a lot of faith. Otherwise nobody would do something so stupid."

What we accept on faith is virtually always, in Buddhism, subject to verification. This explains why the Buddha says the *Dhamma* is "to be personally experienced by the *wise*" (AN 11.11), not by everyone, but only by those who have developed wisdom through practice. This is why the Buddha invites us "to come and see" (*ibid*.) the *Dhamma*: When he says "come," he is shouting

down to us flatlanders from the mountaintop. To arrive at his vantage point we need to scramble up hills, struggle through brambles and ford creeks, with the faith that what the Buddha is up there telling us to see is worth our while. When he says "see," we need to focus our eyes intently in the right direction to barely make out what the Buddha sees with great clarity of vision, and, sure enough, we can verify it for ourselves, … in the end. Until then our effort is carried by faith.

However, this is not blind faith by a long shot, and it has little to do with belief. It is actually a commonplace faith that informs literally everything we do: cooking by following a recipe in a cookbook, following the directions for assembling a new vacuum cleaner, undertaking a course in chemistry, watching a movie on the recommendation of a friend, brushing our teeth on the recommendation of our dentist. Ultimate verifiability stands behind this kind of faith, for even though we have yet to personally verify the efficacy of the teaching we are given, we can assume that others who have preceded us have verified it over and over again. Otherwise this teaching would not have survived to be transmitted to us. With practice experience, the *Dhamma* establishes a kind of track record, and this pushes our faith even further.

The function of developing faith in Buddhism is fulfilled by the practice of *refuge*, the development of trust in the reliability of the three sources of Buddhist wisdom: the *Buddha*, the *Dhamma* and the *Saṅgha*. The Buddha is our original teacher, the *Dhamma* is the teachings themselves and the *Saṅgha* are the living teachers who are developed in understanding and in practicing the *Dhamma*. This is not faith in a set of beliefs, such as in a catechism or in a fundamentalism, not to be questioned. Refuge is itself a practice, whose practice function is to bring ourselves to take the other teachings seriously. Refuge is thereby very practical. The practice of refuge is substantially to recall the track record of these sources of wisdom, but also to develop an *emotional intimacy* with these sources of wisdom in order to open up the heart and mind to their influence, that our understanding and practice might deepen. Simple physical practices like bowing were endorsed by the Buddha from the very beginning and have always been utilized as a support for refuge ever since, much like handshaking is a support for cordiality in Western culture.[4]

The relationship of refuge to the four noble truths illustrates the way one practice function feeds into another in an integrated system of teachings. The four noble truths, when practiced, fulfill the function of ending suffering. The refuges, when practiced, fulfill the function of taking the four noble truths seriously, that is, of instilling life into the four noble truths, as well as into other teachings.

The diversity of teachings. To practice is to exercise the skill of life. It is use-

4 See Cintita (2017, ch. 6) for more on refuge.

ful to recognize the similarity between Buddhism and other skills, such as tennis, hang gliding, *haute cuisine*, ceramics, making a sales pitch, chess, bird-watching or solving non-linear equations. Each begins with teachings and faith in the teachings. For the aspiring master chef, for instance, these might be focused in a favorite cookbook, one that may have been recommended by a cook wiser than oneself, or by its strong track record acquired through repeated personal use. Each instruction in each recipe will serve a practical function, contributing something to the taste, texture or appearance of the food; if we leave anything out or make a mistake in the instruction, the result may well be disappointing. The overall functionality of the instructions is revealed in the benefit attained, the bright faces, delighted smiles, smacking of lips and positive comments of the satiated. Belief in the instructions is not the point, but rather what we do on the basis of them and what benefits thereby accrue. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. The teachings, practice and benefits in *haute cuisine* are of a different nature than those of Buddhism, or of any other kind of skill, but this analogy provides a useful perspective for understanding the function of *Dhamma.*

The four noble truths are the core teachings of Buddhism, the teachings that lead to high spiritual attainments and eventually awakening. Most of the Buddha's significant teachings are elaborations of the four noble truths. However, everything arises in some context, and refuge is a significant part of the context of the practice of the four noble truths, as we have seen. Refuge is, in this sense, *more* foundational than the four noble truths. The context of the four noble truths is even further filled out by advice on how to interpret the teachings, which is substantially our concern in this essay. The Buddha seems to leave no stone unturned in his instructions to us.

There is an even larger context than refuge. It is important to recognize that many of the teachings support not the specific individual's practice, but instead support the functions of the Buddhist community in which the individual practices. The Buddhist community itself functions to support the individual's practice by providing role models and teachers, material support for those who want to dedicate themselves to spiritual development, and, ultimately, the means of propagating and preserving the integrity of the teachings for future generations. The teachings around the Buddhist community thereby have even an historical function. Moreover, it is within the community that the individual develops faith and then goes on to practice virtue, generosity and the four noble truths, and so on. The community ideally defines a culture of awakening that both pulls and pushes the individual toward awkening, through inspiration of those further advanced in practice, and and through the encouragement of all, including those less advanced. For the Buddha,

> When a monk has admirable people as friends, companions, and colleagues, he can be expected to develop and pursue the noble eightfold

path. (SN 45.2)

In a significant sense we might say that the teachings belong to the community as a whole more than to the individual, and are preserved by the community. Individually, most of us are familiar with only a small part of the body of teachings: we might be farmers or parents with limited time for learning and putting into practice the finer points of meditation or of Buddhist psychology, or might still harbor many attachments which we don't even want to think about giving up just yet. Simply put, we do not all practice at the same level but are subject to our own aspirations or circumstances, and very few us give much thought to satisfying the highest standards of practice, a very high bar indeed. To this extent, there are many teachings whose practices we may not ever personally undertake. Nonetheless, we take even these seriously to the extend that we respect those who practice according to a wider body of teachings than ourselves, and we know that these noble ones might one day help us expand the scope of our own understanding and practice. We generally know to whom to go to learn these additional teachings when we need them. We certainly do nothing to denigrate or undermine those teachings just because we do not personally practice with them, for we wish they might become unavailable for others.

The communal basis for *Dhamma* can be compared to most other areas of knowledge. Although I enjoy birdwatching and can identify a number of species, my understanding of ornithology is quite limited. However, I know where to find additional knowledge if needed and am confident that there are working ornithologists who are continually updating that knowledge accurately, even while no one ornithologist has complete knowledge of this vast field. In this sense, ornithology belongs to a community and is sustained by that community, a core community within a wider community, to which I belong as a consumer of such knowledge and possibly as a material supporter of the core community. The Buddhist community has a similar relationship to the *Dhamma* and the *Saṅgha*.

I should point out, at this point, a dangerous tendency in Batchelor's and others' writings to focus narrowly on the central doctrinal framework of the four noble truths to the exclusion of the rest of the Buddha's nested body of teachings. In doing so, for instance, he dismisses the relevance monastic discipline (*Vinaya*) in this endeavor, the complement of doctrine (*Dhamma*) in the whole body of the Buddha's teachings (*Dhamma-vinaya*). I argue elsewhere[5] that the doctrine and discipline are related roughly the way science as theory – a system of paradigms, theories and empirical results – and science as discipline – an institutional process regulated by rules of conduct such as not falsifying data or plagiarizing others' results, standards for certifying the qualifications of

5 Cintita (2014, 42-49).

researchers, professors, etc., supported materially by the wider society – are related: Science as theory is substantially a product of science as discipline. Similarly, advanced realization of the *Dhamma* is substantially a product of monastic discipline, even for non-monastics.

By viewing all of these teachings on the basis of practice function we can begin to see how they fit together very systematically into an coherent, organic whole and to appreciate their remarkable consistency, visible in spite of many minor corruptions, additions and inconsistencies that crept into the EBT during their early transmission. The Buddha provides abundant support for our practice in every context; the same logic of practice function extends well beyond the central teachings of the four noble truths in the EBT.

Unessential teachings. When we look at the ancient EBT we are struck that some teachings are clearly highlighted as essential, while other notions appear here and there rather casually. These texts were, for the most part, delivered extemporaneously in everyday language, in a cultural context dissimilar to our own, so it is not surprising that much of their content is extraneous. In fact, much of the content may be without a practice function at all, and therefore needs not to be taken seriously by the modern practitioner. Let me suggest an example: the appearance of deities walking (or flying) through the world, who often visit the Buddha, sometimes to offer advice, but more often come to hear his teachings. I use the phrase "*suggest* an example" here deliberately because we have to take care that we not dismiss a teaching because its practice function is simply not apparent to us at the present time. We may often fail to recognize until after many years of study, the practice functions of what turn out to be very important teachings of the Buddha.

Concerning deities, we should first note that in India, now as well as in the time of the Buddha, people rather casually attribute divinity to brahmins, to famous ascetics, to cows, sometimes to trees, to the fires in people's hearths, and to aristocrats. The latter are often addressed as "deva" (deity) when spoken to by commoners in the early discourses. Therefore, it would surprising if references to them were altogether absent, or if they did not appear in the many allegories, similes or background stories to add a little color. Moreover, whereas in most religions deities function in practice as objects of worship, or as personalities that are appealed to for their power over the circumstances of people's lives, nowhere does the Buddha recommend such practices with respect to deities to his disciples. On the contrary, when the deities do appear, *they* venerate the *Buddha*, and sometimes the other monastics, bowing to his feet and sitting respectfully to one side according to Indian custom. If these references to deities have a practice function to them, it would seem to be merely rhetorical and quite minimal: they serve to illustrate the practice of refuge, illustrating its relevance for even the most exalted of beings.

In short, the examination of the practice functions of the teachings gives us a principled method of discerning what is really essential in the ancient texts and what is superfluous, what we should take seriously and what we need not. But again, we must proceed cautiously, not to dismiss an important part of the Buddha's message due to possible limitations in our current state of understanding. Doing so might otherwise just possibly end up like leaving salt out of a recipe, unless we know exactly what we are doing.

Essential teachings. In contrast to unessential teachings, essential teachings arise repeatedly in critical contexts and with a degree of conviction and detail that makes them easily recognizable. These, we can safely surmise, will have clear practice functions, which we should attempt to understand and take seriously. I mention by way of illustration two teachings in particular which are not always taken seriously in the modern context: *kamma* (Skr, *karma*) and rebirth.

Kamma is actually just another word for our practice. *Kamma* is, by definition, simply intentional action, which is exactly what our practice is. For the Buddha, every action brings potential benefit or harm to the agent of that action, depending on its skillfulness:

> Whatever I do, for good or evil, to that I will fall heir. (AN 5.57)

This is why we take the teachings seriously that make our practice skillful. Actually, why would we practice at all if this were not the case? A simple analogy can be made with almost any other skill. We take a recipe seriously in order to experience the delight of others in the products of our gastronomic efforts. The chef might well understand his practice as follows:

> Whatever I do in the kitchen, whether skillfully or unskillfully, to that I will fall heir.

In short, our *kammic* actions not only shape the world for others, but also shape our personal well-being at the same time. This simple teaching has a profound influence on our ethical behavior.

Although *kamma* and its fruits generally play out in the present life, by introducing rebirth the Buddha greatly extends the scope of this teaching beyond a few decades of a single life, and therewith the scope and significance of all of Buddhist practice. The consequence of taking the teaching of rebirth seriously is that we fully take responsibility for the distant future as well as the near future. Rebirth thereby endows our practice with a meaning bigger than life (at least bigger than one life), as we see ourselves each engaged in an epic struggle with twisted karmic forces (ingrained greed, hatred and delusion) from the ancient past that will project karmic outcomes endlessly into the future … until we intervene through our practice. Our incentives become heightened, giving us the urgency that impels us to deep practice, and that fully opens up for us

the prospect of awakening.

Holding the teachings loosely

In this section I show how the teachings are intended to fall short of belief, but are rather to be held loosely or provisionally. This, in fact, is often important for a teaching to become *meaningful* and *acceptable* by a particular practitioner, who can thereby experiment with different personal interpretations to make the teaching his own.

Working assumptions. In the *Caṅki Sutta* we learn that anything accepted through faith, approval, oral tradition, reasoning or pondering may or may not turn out to be true. At this the young *brahmin* Caṅki asks how, then, is truth to be preserved, to which the Buddha replies,

> If a person has [faith], his statement, “This is my [faith],” preserves the truth. But he doesn't yet come to the definite conclusion, “Only this is true; anything else is worthless.” To this extent, Bharadvaja, there is the preservation of the truth. To this extent one preserves the truth. I describe this as the preservation of the truth. But it is not yet a discovery of the truth. (MN 95)

This same passage is repeated similarly for [approval], [oral tradition], [reasoning] and [pondering] , as for [faith] Notice that this is a similar list of conditions to those for belief that the Buddha rejected in the *Kālāma Sutta*, discussed above.

What this says is that nothing is to be simply believed unconditionally, no matter what, even if the wisest teacher swears on a stack of *Nikāyas* that it is true, it might just turn out to be false. At no point can we with certainty state, “Only this is true; anything else is worthless.” This would be belief, something fixed or timeless, something we tend to put on the shelf, not to be further questioned, a definite conclusion. Most of us have at least at least some such beliefs: about science, about politics, about religion, about football players, about fashion. The Buddha cautions us that the only thing we might be certain about is that we *assume* certain things are true given our own conditions, never that they *are* true. As far as I can discern, fixed, immutable belief has no place whatever in the Buddha's teachings.

Until a teaching is directly realized and fully understood in one's experience, it can at best be taken as *provisionally* true, as a kind of *working assumption,* as a matter of faith, approval, oral tradition, reasoning or pondering. The truth of the teaching is only later *discovered* through direct experience. At that point, the teaching itself becomes without further function, a mere propositional approximation of what one has discovered and experienced directly for oneself. Teachings, therefore, at all stages, stop short of belief. They are accepted only

conditionally and are ultimately expendable. In these senses, teachings, even while taken seriously, are to be held loosely.

This perspective is also reflected in the Buddha's use of the word “view” (*diṭṭhi*), as in “right view.” A recent book demonstrates in detail[6] that right views in the EBT are not a correction of wrong views, but are a detached order of seeing, not doctrine but *knowledge* of doctrine, to be practiced, not believed, and that holding any proposition as true is no more than a form of attachment and therefore to be reliquished. As the monk Ñāṇananda puts it, the aim of right view is “to purge the mind of all views inclusive of itself,”[7] in this way removing mental rigidity and attachment. Right views are right because they bring out the wholesome in the practitioner, not because “this is true and anything else is worthless.”

Malleability and reinterpretation. The practical advantage of taking teachings as working assumptions rather than as beliefs is, in fact, exemplified in the truths of suffering and of the cause of suffering in the four noble truths. As we have learned, the practice functions of these truths are the understanding and ultimate relinquishment of suffering and craving as factors of our own experience. It would be a mistake to try to crystallize these truths from the beginning into a belief, precisely because we do not yet understand exactly what suffering and craving are at that point; they require a lot of investigation. Any premature belief about them would have slim propositional content, and would be unlikely even to approximate the experiential understanding that ultimately arises from the practice these truths give rise to. As we investigate something like suffering or craving, we are likely to make a series of distinct intermediate working assumptions before we come to recognize, perhaps after many years of practice, what the Buddha was asking us to see directly for ourselves. If at any point we fix on a belief, we will have sacrificed the malleability required to discover the truth. We give up even our final working assumptions once these truths are understood, because there is nothing like seeing directly for ourselves. We see that working assumptions are malleable and subject to reinterpretation and modification in a way beliefs are not. This is good, because their malleability allows us to make them ours, to wrap out minds around them, to make them meaningful and acceptable in our own way. Holding teachings loosely is important for the process of discovery, which is the practice task, for instance, explicitly associated with the first noble truth.

Moreover, a particular teaching may similarly be critical at one point of practice, and lose its importance, or even its coherence, at a later stage. This explains why the Buddha always adjusted his teachings to his audience and why the early discourses are careful to clarify to whom they are spoken. Consider

6 Fuller (2005).

7 *ibid*, p. 4.

the teaching "I am the heir of my own deeds," which has to do with *kamma* and the fruits of *kamma*, whose practice function we have already discussed above. Although this teaching plays a critical role in the practice function of establishing ethical conduct at the early stages of Buddhist practice, it actually makes less and less sense at later stages of practice, in which the agent of those deeds comes to be recognized as a mere mental construct. In fact, it is taught that karma itself disappears in the fully awakened one. At the early stages of practice virtue involves a difficult process of overriding the inherent greed, hate and delusion adhereing to the agent of *kamma*, in favor of what is really of ultimate benefit for self and other. At the later stages it comes primarily from the almost complete absence of greed, hate and delusion once these are cognitively disassociated from that agent.

In summary, teachings are to be held loosely, such that they make sense to us at the right level at the right time, and produce the best results if they remain malleable, subject to individual reinterpretation and modification within the limits of their practice functions. As we hold teachings loosely, we can turn them this way and that, try to generalize them, test if they maybe apply in a more specific way than first thought, conceptualize them in different ways, all the while deepening our understanding of the various texts that present these teachings:

As we approach the concept of suffering, what exactly is meant? Is any hint of anxiety or stress an instance of suffering? Are we suffering when we are not aware that we are suffering? As we approach the teaching that we are heirs of our own deed, can we find examples in our own experience, or counterexamples? Is this principle precisely true in every instance, or is it only an approximate generalization? We may not be able to resist the urge to speculate whether it implies mysterious underlying mechanisms, or whether there is a natural explanation for why this generalization would be true.

In these ways we develop insight, relate the teachings to direct experience and make of the teachings an increasingly powerful influence in our practice. Working assumptions are a lot more work than beliefs, which is perhaps why they are called "working" assumptions, but they are much more workable.

The skeptic's choice. As we reflect on the teachings in this way, sometimes we may balk nonetheless. The Buddha gives us an example in the *Apaṇṇaka Sutta*:

> There are some contemplatives and brahmans who hold this doctrine, hold this view: "There is nothing given, nothing offered, nothing sacrificed. There is no fruit or result of good or bad actions. There is no this world, no next world, no mother, no father, no spontaneously reborn beings; no brahmins or contemplatives who, faring rightly and practicing rightly, proclaim this world and the next after having directly known and realized it for themselves." (MN 60)

These views deny what the Buddha teaches about *kamma* and rebirth, as well as about responsibilities to parents. The existence of passages like this suggest that his teachings were not without some controversy even in the Buddha's time. Significantly, the Buddha does not argue that these contrary views are factually wrong, for instance, by citing research on memories of young children of past lives, even though he elsewhere states that he has himself directly experienced the truth of *kamma* and rebirth. Instead, he argues entirely from the perspective of practice function, that is, from how these views are likely to condition favorably the behavior of such contemplatives and brahmins:

> It can be expected that … they will adopt and practice these three unskillful activities: bad bodily conduct, bad verbal conduct, bad mental conduct. Why is that? Because those venerable contemplatives and brahmins do not see, in unskillful activities, the drawbacks, the degradation, and the defilement; nor in skillful activities the benefit of renunciation, as cleansing. (MN 60)

In other words, these views would have a *negative* practice function. Here is the kicker: people of these contrary views cannot win, whether or not their contrary view turns out to be factually true in the end:

> Assume there is no other world, regardless of the true statement of those venerable contemplatives and brahmins. This good person is still criticized in the here and now by the observant as a person of bad habits and wrong view: one who holds to a doctrine of non-existence. If there really is a next world, then this venerable person has made a bad throw twice: in that he is criticized by the observant here and now, and in that with the breakup of the body, after death he will reappear in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell. Thus this incontrovertable teaching, when poorly grasped and poorly adopted by him, covers one side. He gives up the skillful option. (MN 60)

This describes a purely practical basis for accepting one of two alternative theses on the basis of a kind of cost-benefit analysis, or a means of covering one's bets that by itself justifies its acceptance as a kind of loosely held working assumption. The positive thesis should therefore be taken seriously, because it has a positive practice function; it should be taken seriously regardless of one's skepticism. Our job is to put aside our skepticism, and make the positive thesis our working assumption. The Buddha makes a similar argument at the end of the *Kālāma Sutta* (AN 3.65) with regard to realizing the fruits of *kamma* in the next life. It is clear that he recommends that the teachings of *kamma* and rebirth be taken seriously and therefore accepted as working assumptions even by the skeptical. We have already discussed the practice function of these teachings above, and will discuss their content a bit more below.

Some writers and teachers take the advice to skeptics in the *Kalama Sutta* in the wrong way. It is important to pause and reflect here, because it seems clear that the Buddha is providing us with a subtle middle way between two extremes, belief and disbelief. Batchelor, for instance, concludes correctly from the *Kālāma Sutta* that the Buddha does not require belief in rebirth. But then, at least in his earlier writing, he infers that rebirth need not be taken seriously and that it can be safely dismissed.[8] However, if the Buddha intended that conclusion, he would not have bothered making the pragmatic case for accepting rebirth on the part of the skeptic. Batchelor's detractors, on the other hand, also miss the point of this passage when they state that one *must* believe in rebirth, sometimes even adding that one is not really a Buddhist if one does not believe in rebirth! The mistake here is that both sides conflate belief with taking seriously, where the Buddha in fact opens a gaping middle way that allows taking seriously and holding loosely at the same time. One can follow the Buddha's teachings fully without believing in rebirth, but one who wants to follow the Buddha's teachings fully will take the teachings around rebirth seriously, for the loss of rebirth's practice function is likely to hinder the benefits of practice. The salty flavor of *nibbāna* just might be lost without the practice function of rebirth, just as the wonderful flavor of pesto would be lost by leaving out the basil.

This leads to a relevant question that the Buddha does not seem directly to answer: What if we balk? What if we simply cannot accept a teaching, even as a working assumption, as hard as we try, either because it conflicts with some tightly held fixed beliefs that we are not willing to give up, or because it seems otherwise nonsensical, irrational or contrary to observable experience? What if it does not, no matter which way we turn it, become meaningful or accessible to us? How can we be expected take such a teaching seriously? Actually people have a remarkable capacity for accepting inconsistent or strange assumptions; even the most rational of us do so all the time. Someone raised as a Christian may sincerely believe that after death his behavior will be judged and his soul will accordingly go either to heaven or hell, and yet may nonetheless "live like there is no tomorrow." A Skinnerian behavioral psychologist might believe in the lab or in the classroom that human mental states are not real, yet shouts out encouraging motivational words to his teenage son as he plays on the school

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8 For instance, in a 2010 Buddhist Geeks interview Batchelor stated, "I am not interested in whether or not one is reborn. I find the whole issue irrelevant, an unnecessary distraction from what is central to the *DhammaDhamma*: how to live a good life here and now. If there is rebirth and a law of *kamma*, then this would surely be the best way to prepare for a future life. But if there is not, then one has lived optimally here and now. Moreover, this very point is explicitly made by the Buddha himself in the *Kalama Sutta*."

football team, or consoles his little daughter every time the dog steals her sandwich. Many believe that the universe is entirely material, simply playing itself out mechanically and deterministically. Yet *none* of us knows how to live in such a world! As Isaac Bashevis Singer put it, “You have to believe in free will. You have no choice”[9] Most people talk to their pets, knowing full well that they do not understand. String theorists, I imagine, inhabit the same world of naive physics the rest of inhabit do when they are driving their cars, fending off an aggressive chihuahua or eating a sandwich.

Vagueness in the teachings. Many teachings do not lend themselves to a single interpretation. The Buddha made use of many rhetorical devices: myth, metaphor, allegory, symbolism, sometimes even literalism. This often leads us to entertain multiple interpretations and may leave us, and must have left the ancients as well, wondering how one is *supposed* to interpret such teachings. If we hold teachings loosely, this need not concern us, for a range of interpretations commonly fulfills the same practice function. Let's take Māra as an example.

The infamous Māra appears in the early discourses as a kind of fallen deity who is always ready to tempt, discourage, seduce and disarm, to do anything to bring the Buddhist practitioner away from what is wholesome, from what leads to *nibbāna* or supports the *Sāsana*. He shows up frequently as a physical being, but generally in disguise, with remarkable persistence given that his rate of success seems sympathetically low in the early texts. In each case, he then typically disappears as soon as he is recognized for who he is.

These accounts suggest that it is important to recognize Māra when he is trying to disrupt our practice, for when we do, he goes away and we can return to our practice. I know of no practitioner who has encountered Māra in the flesh, but I know many practitioners who apply this advice metaphorically when mental hindrances arise in their practice; they acknowledge the hindrance and let it go. The metaphor is quite apt, because often it actually seems like there is an obscure unconscious part of our mind whose interests seem to run counter to our own and who seems to be very clever in countering our interests.

In terms of practice function it does not seem to matter much whether we to interpret Māra as myth or reality, since we are unlikely to encounter him in the flesh, but he does nonetheless teach us a lesson we can put to use in our practice. Some modern scholars of religion point out that mythology has traditionally provided a means of talking about psychology. Rupert Gethin points to what he calls the *principle of the equivalence of cosmology and psychology* in early Buddhism whereby heavenly realms, etc. actually correspond to subjective states, for instance realized in meditation.[10]

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9 Quoted in Rosenblum and Kuttner (2011), p. 32.

10 Gethin (1998, 119).

In fact, alongside many passages referring to a flesh-and-blood Māra, we find this telling passage:

> Where the eye exists, Samiddhi, where visible forms, eye consciousness and *dhammas* cognizable by the eye exist, there Māra or the manifestation of Māra exists. (SN 35.65)

Here Māra clearly becomes a psychological reality, something that arises in subjective experience, not in the objective world. Notice, however, that Māra keeps his name, still giving the impression of an independent and contrary agent within the subjective domain. Even if we interpret Māra in psychological terms, we will have a strong impulse to anthropomorphize our own interpretation, to spin a myth around about that disruptive aspect of our own minds, sometimes even giving it a name as in "Little Timmy is at it again" or "Be gone, Little Timmy!"

Myth, reality, literal and metaphorical seem *cognitively* not so distant from one another, even though they may be *ontologically* quite distinct. In the end, we need not be so precise in the way we conceptualize things, as long as we preserve the proper functional response to potential disruptions of our practice. This is to hold a teaching loosely.

Misunderstanding the teachings. Individually we are likely to misunderstand many teachings at some point or another as we try to wrap our minds around them in various specific ways, and this may lead to harm as we attempt to put them into practice. We rely on our teachers and on our ongoing studies and practice to correct these misunderstandings. More worrisome is when misunderstandings become entrenched in a particular Buddhist tradition and become part of how the teachings are conveyed, even by one's own teachers, sometimes for untold generations. Alas, this is not uncommon. However, the transmission of Buddhism to the West affords a valuable opportunity for correcting many of those traditional misunderstandings, since we tend to see the Buddha's teachings with new eyes, and with a healthy degree of skepticism. Let me offer an example.

We have seen that I am the heir of my own deeds, that is, I experience harm or benefit as results of the ethical qualities of my deeds. It does *not* follow logically that *all* harm or benefit I experience results from my previous deeds, for some of these may result from non-karmic causes, like earthquakes or bacteria. Nonetheless, this inverse assumption is a common misunderstanding in many Asian traditions. For example, if lightning strikes my house and it burns down, I must have done something harmful to someone in the past, possibly in a previous life.

In fact, this inverse assumption is explicitly denied by the Buddha, in the somewhat obscure *Sīvaka Sutta* (SN 36.21). Even if we overlook the *Sīvaka Sutta*

ourselves, we nonetheless have an adequate basis for recognizing this inverse assumption as a misunderstanding, not through failing to find underlying mechanisms, nor by falsifying it in our own experience, but purely on the basis of practice function, for assuming the inverse assumption would likely result in *inhibiting* the practice of compassion. In brief, if someone else suffers a misfortune – his house burns down, for instance – it is, according to the inverse assumption, his own darn karmic fault, and, moreover, if we provide him relief, we would only postpone his inevitable payment of his karmic debt. Further, if we choose to do something harmful to him ourselves, he must have deserved it, so we are actually helping him to pay off his karmic debt by causing harm. Notice that my argument stands independently of whether or not the inverse assumption happens to be actually true. It has a practice dysfunction.

The value of an open mind

We are a belief-centered culture. Modern culture has been fractured as long as it has been modern, with many internal contradictions along many fault lines – inter-religious, religious-secular, superstitious-rational, religious-scientific, spiritual-material, inter-scientific, public-private and so on – each fault sustained by the dogmatic adherence of certain people to opposing beliefs, each holding the view "this is true and anything else is worthless." We are at the same time a modernity in crisis, a modernity remarkable for its aggressiveness and acquisitiveness, a modernity suffering from a loss of human dignity, from meaninglessness and spiritual malaise, a society in which appearance trumps substance, in which greed and fear are dominant themes and in which substance abuse, mental illness, suicide and violent crime are endemic.

Modernity has greeted Buddhism for the most part with a sense of relief, as kind, rational, unbiased, consistent with science, mystical, profoundly wise, virtuous serene, even aesthetic. For some of us the entry of Buddhism into the modern space has felt like there is suddenly an adult in a room full of squabbling children. I don't want to be unfair: there have been all along many adults in the room, but their voices had long been eclipsed by the persistent squabbling all around them. Buddhism has entered as something apart, and many have been attracted to this charismatic new visitor. The voice of the Buddha tells us of an alternative way of being in the world, one rooted in kindness, harmony, simplicity, virtue and wisdom, a message that, if taken seriously, promises relief from the modern pathology. It is a radical voice, a voice that remains a challenge to most people even in traditionally Buddhist countries, and all the more challenge to those in modern societies.

Unfortunately, these old fault lines continue to infect the thinking of many of us modern people even after we have embraced Buddhism, such that Buddhism itself is in danger, with time, of fracturing along these same fault lines, after

which also the voice of the Buddha might also end up eclipsed by the squabbling of children. We "convert" Buddhists – on the forefront of this epic encounter between an ancient tradition that has been transmitted through unfamiliar cultures, and modernity – must make wise decisions to get this encounter off on the right foot. "Off on the right foot" would mean that Buddhist teachings are made meaningful and accessible to moderns, while at the same time little of the transformative function of Buddhist practice, which has the potential to bring sanity to the world, is lost in the process.

The space between practice and belief. There is a commodious space between practice function and belief. Practice function is the role of a teaching in upholding Buddhist practice; it is the reason we take it seriously. The space itself represents the open mind, willing to take the teaching seriously, but holding loosely many possibilities of interpretation without insisting on a fixed view. The space comprises our wiggle room as we adapt Buddhism to modernity without compromising the wisdom of the ancient teachings, as we make the teachings meaningful and accessible, as we make them our own. Belief, where it arises, collapses that space into a fixed view. Belief, the bad guy in this equation, comes from two significant sources: It may come from within a Buddhist tradition itself in which, over time, a fixed standard interpretation for any particular teaching may have been calcified. Or – and this is what we tend to overlook – it may come from within modernity itself as an unquestioned presupposition, often at one side of many of the fault lines running through modernity.

Unfortunately we are generally barely aware of our unexamined presuppositions, for they tend to manifest as "common sense." Einstein is said to have stated that, "common sense is nothing more than a deposit of prejudices laid down in the mind before age eighteen."[11] Presuppositions here are tacit assumptions, most commonly instilled at a young age before our faculty of discrimination has fully developed, or so widely accepted in our society that we too have accepted them without ever having examined or questioned them. They are, in other words, *beliefs*; they are, in fact, instances of unexamined belief, which is to say, *blind faith*. This does not necessarily make them false, but certainly makes them, for the wise, subject to examination.

The weight of unexamined presuppositions in the modern understanding of *Dhamma* is reflected in the popularity of the following quote, erroneously attributed to the *Kālama Sutta*, which we discussed above.

> Believe nothing, no matter where you read it, or who said it, no matter if I have said it, unless it agrees with your own reason and your own common sense. (Fake Buddha quote)

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11 Reported in Lincoln Barnett, 1949, *The Universe and Dr. Einstein*, Victor Gollancz Ltd., pp.6, 49. Einstein wrote the preface for this book.

It should be underscored that, at a minimum, Buddhism *should* challenge the presuppositions of modernity; otherwise why would we undertake the monumental task of bringing it here? It is fitting that we take each of the essential teachings of the Buddha seriously by default, at least until such time as we have a very good understanding of what its practice function might be. This functional approach to the teachings asks first, "What is its practice function?" then asks "How do I make sense if it?" This requires that we understand both the teachings and our own presuppositions.[12]

The alternative is to pare Buddhism down to the point of modern comfort when faced with a teaching we do not understand. This alternative challenges neither calcification in traditional Buddhism, nor modernity, and leaves us with a voice barely audible in the midst of the squabble over traditional fault lines. Unfortunately, this alternative has been chosen far too often by many of us "convert" Buddhists in recent years.

Modern presuppositions. The modern presuppositions that influence our understanding of Buddhism and sometimes collapse our ability to hold teachings loosely, range at least over science, society, religion, and commerce. Included is *materialism*, that all of reality is physical and that what we consider mental or spiritual is a byproduct of physical processes. Included is disbelief in the relevance of religious institutions, rites and authority to personal spiritual development. Included is the view that there is a deeper, individual truth that is the site of a personal spirituality and creativity, that exists independent of society, and that tends, in fact, to be disrupted by social convention.

I find it helpful to keep in mind that such presuppositions, although seemly natural and common-sensible to us, are products of a complex European history of ideas, without which many these presuppositions might have seemed quite far-fetched. Here is this history as I understand it in a nutshell, starting in the European Middle Ages, certainly glossing over many details and matters of contention as well as over my own limited understanding, but hopefully conveying the highly contingent nature of some of our most established presuppositions:

In the middle ages the vast hierarchical institution of Catholic church was the center of civil power as well as divine authority. A great turning points was the Protestant Reformation, a response to the corruption in the social hierarchy of the Catholic church, but encouraged by ambitious regional landed aristocrats who sought to wrest political power away from the church for personal gain. This process was dramatized by years of social turmoil and thirty years of devastating warfare in Europe as landed aristocracy exploited the situation to "secularize" the power vacuum left in many regions by the disempowered

12 Heuman (2015) discusses in more detail the importance of understanding our own presuppositions while we make sense of the *Dhamma.*

church. [13] The Reformers promoted the view that each individual could have personal access to God unmediated by clergy sacred places or artifacts, or rituals. “Sacredness began to withdraw from things – relics, pilgrimage places, the sacraments – and to be pushed to two poles: God himself, beyond the world, and the individual in his or her own faith.”[14] Not only did this represent a radical departure from the traditional model of spirituality, but supported the regional aristocrats' ambitions by separating off civil society as a secular domain not subject to the authority of the church.

Meanwhile, natural philosophy or science had begun to develop in part based on the conviction that God was rational and therefore the universe, his creation, was rational and therefore potentially within the scope of human comprehension. A certain amount of friction arose between the discoveries of early natural philosophers and those who sought knowledge of the physical world in the Bible. Decartes' Mind-Body Dualism served to separate out the legitimate concerns of the spirit from the concerns of science. This tended to desacralize the world further, pushing the two spiritual poles further apart. In the minds of many (particularly John Locke), religion became purely a private concern and the public sphere became purely secular.

Perhaps because of the enormous success of science in understanding the physical world, the view of *materialism* arose, that all of reality is physical; that what we consider mental, if it exists at all, is a byproduct of physical activity, an epiphenomenon, generally specifically attributed to brain function. It should be noted that materialism has always remained a metaphysical assumption, not an empirically refutable theory. Science seemed to be headed toward a view of the universe as rather mechanical and meaningless, and this seemed also to be reflected in the industrial revolution.

These conditions lead to disenchantment and malaise in the minds of many. In response, the cultural movement of Romanticism developed. Romanticism emphasized the individual self as a source of emotion, creativity, virtue and spirituality (that which stands, for instance, in relation to God), that ideally arises spontaneously, uncorrupted by norms of society. Romanticism perhaps began the emphasis of modernity on the individual and personal experience, an obscuring of our interrelatedness in society.[15]

The modern consumer culture has found ample material here to tweak to its own purposes. It is interesting to note that use of the word “spirituality” in lieu of “religion,” as in “I'm spiritual but not religious,” grew in the 1950's coinciding with the rise of the consumer lifestyle, grounded as it is more in individual

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13 Cavenaugh (2009).

14 McMahan (2008, 220).

15 … which Margaret Thatcher would famously declare does not exist.

experience than social relations.[16] Spirituality or personal religion also conforms to the self-help model that produces a productive corporate workforce, rather than providing a corrective to what ails society.

What has emerged historically is a set of categories that come with a degree of emotional charge, as if we are still fighting the Thirty-Years War. What does this have to do with Buddhism? Absolutely nothing, and that is the point. Matching these categories to the history, culture and teachings of Buddhism is like trying to fit an octopus into a business suit. Yet we project these various categories – including religious-secular, mentality-physicality, spiritual-religious, science-religion – onto the Buddhist situation – which doesn't even have names for most of these categories – and call it "common sense."[17] As we attempt to understand Buddha's teaching and to make them our own, we must attempt to understand our presuppositions as well, and often to make them someone else's.

Personal and community *Dhamma*. There is much in Buddhism to challenge us in many ways. If you find it hard to wrap your mind around rebirth, around bowing, around renunciation, around bald heads and robes, this does not mean you are a failure at Buddhism, or don't get to call yourself a Buddhist. In fact, it will probably have little impact on your practice for the short-term: We are each, at any giving time, working with a subset of the Buddha's teachings while many others are likely to be unfamiliar or obscure for many years before we succeed in making them our own. We each, at a given time, have our own private *Dhamma*, larger or smaller than another's, overlapping in some ways and distinct in others. Our own *Dhamma* tends to become more comprehensive with time, as more and more teachings come to inform our practice.

But there is also an even larger *Dhamma*, one that belongs not to any individual, but to the Buddhist community writ large. This larger *Dhamma* is accessible to us as the need arises through books, through teachers, through Web searches and most importantly through admirable friends who exhibit the *Dhamma* successfully in their lives. I want to close with an admonition: *Don't try to reduce the larger Dhamma down to your private Dhamma.* Rather, respect and support the practice and understanding of those whose *Dhamma* might differ from your own. Never try to diminish the (hopefully loose) hold of others on teachings that you have yet to internalize. Someday – and this will surprise you – your understanding may comprehend what at one time seemed nonsensical. This is how we preserve the integrity of the whole body of the teachings, even while we adapt them to modern sensibilities.

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16 Carrette and King (2004, 41-42).

17 McMahan (2008) presents a particularly thorough investigation of how Western presuppositions has produced some uniquely Western understandings of Buddhism.

The Buddha as biologist

true to practice

The Buddha taught suffering and the ending of suffering. His teachings were stringently parsimonious and practical. It made sense that he would teach us about craving the origin of suffering, because understanding those factors and internalizing their understanding through practice makes a difference in how we deal with everyday experience: we see the dangers in craving, we become dispassionate about craving, experience revulsion with regard to craving and abandon craving, and suffering ends. These are factors of phenomenal experience that we can learn to respond to directly as they arise, in more skillful ways.[1]

So, why would the Buddha teach biology? It appears that he had important things to say about the nature of conception in the womb, and about the composition of the psychophysical organism, and that he gave these things prominent roles at key junctures in his teachings. Or did he? Biology lies within the processes of the natural world that are largely beyond immediate experience but that generally continue to play out, at least within this life, regardless of our practice or how we might respond to them. Such things, if they are valuable at all, belong to theory and not praxis.

I don't think the Buddha was a biologist, and hope to show this in this brief essay.

Conception in the womb and in the *suttas*

The conception of the psychophysical organism, also known as "body and mind" or "materiality and mentality," are traditionally accorded a prominent place in the twelve links of dependent co-arising. Recall that here ignorance gives rise to (volitional) formations, formations to consciousness, conscious-

1 The phenomenal world is the world as we experience it, and phenomena are the observable factors that arise in that world. Some authors call such phenomena "mental factors," but this is misleading since much, perhaps most, of the phenomenal world is quite physical. Ronkin (2011, 3-4) points out that the Buddha's concern was primarily with *epistemology*, how we come to know what we think we do in the phenomenal world, rather than in *ontology*, what actually exists in some objective world out there.

ness to name-and-form and name-and-form to the six sense bases, which unleashes contact, feeling, craving and the rest of the human pathology:

> ignorance → formations→ consciousness →
> name-and-form → six-sense-bases → contact →…

An important scriptural source for the biological interpretation of this is the following passage in the *Mahānidāna Sutta*:

> “If consciousness were not to descend into the mother's womb, would name-and-form take shape in the womb?” “No, Lord.”
> …
> “If the consciousness of a young boy or girl were to be cut off, would name-and-form grow up, develop and reach maturity?” “No, Lord.” (DN 15, ii62)

The most common traditional interpretation of this is that at conception consciousness travels into the womb – carrying the yet-to-be-realized results of *kammic* activity (formations) from the previous life – to unite with the fetus (name-and-form) and thereby to produce a viable psycho-physical organism. The six sense bases – eye, ear, etc. – then grow in the fetus to produce a capability for contact with the things of the world in the present life.[2] This interpretation is the basis of the “three lives” model of dependent co-arising, in which a *second* birth then occurs in the penultimate of the twelve links.[3]

Although this account provides a compelling interpretation of the passage above, two issues should give us pause, which arise in light of a broader understanding of *Dhamma*. The first issue is that consciousness in this biological in-

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2 I should caution that the sutta (DN 15), in which this passage is found, presents an abbreviated version of the links of dependent co-arising, which is missing the six-sense-bases, as well as ignorance and formations. However, the details of this interpretation can be inferred from the many occurrences in the *Nikāyas* of the full twelve links.

3 The biological, “three lives” account is historically hugely important in various traditions, as Bodhi (1998, 3) points out. It has been dominant in the Theravāda school, where it is found in the *Abhidhamma Vibhaṅga* as well as in Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* (chapter 17). It is also represented in the early Sarvastivādin and Mahāsanghika schools and even in Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Chapter 26). Still, it has many modern critics. Buddhadāsa has called the “three lives” account “a cancer an incurable tumor of Buddhist scholarship” (Jones, 2009, 245). On the other hand, Payutta (1994), Buddhadāsa (1992) and Thanissaro (2011) offer more modern variations of a biological interpretation of “descent of consciousnes,” not as conception of the fetus but as an ongoing interaction between consciousness and the psychophysical organism.

terpretation seems to have little to do with how consciousness is described virtually everywhere else in the *suttas*. The second issue is that the biological interpretation seems to be theoretical speculation with little direct relevance to practice.

Will the real consciousness please stand up? The first issue is that this biological account attributes to consciousness, properties that are dissimilar from the common descriptions of consciousness found in the *suttas*. Presumably the formations, which represent karmic activities from the previous life, are somehow carried in a package of consciousness that then descends into the womb to consummate the conception of the psychophysical organism. The consciousness commonly mentioned in the *suttas*, in contrast, simply arises and disappears opportunistically contingent on the arising and falling of other phenomenal factors. No mention is made of a the capacity for *kammic* storage, nor for the endurance or spatial presence necessary to travel to and to enter a womb. Each instance of consciousness in the suttas is rather "*lightweight*," arising contingently in an instant within one of the sense spheres, on top of whatever other experientially phenomena are happening, and then disappearing in an instant.

Accordingly, the later Theravāda tradition[4] distinguishes the special consciousness involved in biological processes from the normal consciousness, calling the special "*heavyweight*" consciousness *paṭisandhi viññāṇa*, "(rebirth-)connecting consciousness," a term unknown in the *suttas*. This naturally raises the question, does this heavyweight consciousness appear only once, at the moment of conception, or is it carried along throughout life? The second part of the passage, about the young boy or girl, would indicate that it is carried far beyond conception, unless at this point we have reverted to referring to lightweight consciousness. The impression we easily get, from a biological perspective, is of a heavyweight consciousness serving as a kind of life-force necessary to sustain the viability of the psychophysical organism throughout life.

Now, here is where things get particularly puzzling: In a well-known passage in the *Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya Sutta* the Buddha chastises a monk, Sāti, in no uncertain terms for holding a "pernicious" view very similar to the biological interpretation just described above. His view is:

> "As I understand the *Dhamma* taught by the Blessed One, it is the very same consciousness which transmigrates, and not another."
> (MN38, i258)

This view is roundly condemned by the other monks and by the Buddha. The

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4 The *Visuddhimagga*. is the primary example of this. Chapter 17 discusses the rebirth process in detail, but the ideas developed there apparently have an earlier origin.

Buddha asks Sāti to explain what he thinks this transmigrating consciousness is:

> "It is that which speaks, feels and experiences the result of good and bad kamma, here and there." (MN38, i258)

Consciousness had become reified into a self for Sāti. The Buddha accordingly clarifies that he has only taught a consciousness that is contingent, is dependently arisen, and arises in one or another of the sense spheres, that is, he has only taught light-weight consciousness. It is clear that the biological account is easily subject to this kind of reification, if not of consciousness then of name-and-form, which is commonly treated as the rather stable psychophysical organism carried throughout this particular life.

The sutta about the wayward monk Sāti is quite long and complex, showing evidence of compilation from various sources,[5] but further on it presents a surprising, more detailed and more obviously biological discussion of conception in the womb:

> Monks, the descent of the embryo occurs with the union of three things. … when there is a union of the mother and father, the mother is in her season, and a *gandhabba* is present, then with this union of three things the descent of the embryo occurs. (MN 38, i265-6)

It is important to note that this passage shares none of the significant vocabulary of the "descent of consciousness" passage, other than the equivocal word "descent," but in this case as descent of the embryo (*gabbhassa avakkanti*).[6] In this last account, there is no mention of consciousness nor of name-and-form. The occurrence of the *gandhabba* is obscure in this context, but presumably in the folk culture of the Buddha's time was understood as the heavyweight entity involved in conveying the *kammic* continuity of a former life.

This relationship of the "descent of embryo" passage to the earlier account of Sāti is not explicitly stated, and its purpose is obscured by the intervening material in this *sutta*. However, I dare guess that its function is not to speculate anew on biological processes – after all, the material is certainly not original to the Buddha, and not particularly clever – but rather to acknowledge that there

5 Wynne (2018)

6 The Pali verb is *avakkamati*, whose base meaning is indeed "descend," but it also frequently used in the figurative sense "appear" or "manifest." For instance, elsewhere happiness or sluggishness is found to "descend." See the entry for *avakkamati* in the Pali Text Society Dictionary. Hamilton also (1996, 39 n133, 85, 115 n14) provides further discussion. In fact, elsewhere (SN 12.59) we find reference to the "descent" of consciousness (*viññāṇassa avakkanti*) occurring in the context of examining the allure of phenomena, a clear reference to lightweight consciousness.

exists outside of the *Dhamma* an account of the underlying mechanisms of birth, and then to make clear that that is not what consciousness is about. This biological "descent of embryo" account, by not implicating consciousness in the process, will hopefully facilitate the relinquishing of Sāti's pernicious view. It has no further function.

Why a biological account of consciousness? The second issue with this biological account of the "descent of consciousness" passage that should give us pause in terms of a broader understanding of *Dhamma* has to do with the possible purpose of such a teaching, given the Buddha's poor regard for philosophical speculation. Even as a (natural-) philosophical theory it is no more imaginative than the "descent of embryo" account. It provides no material for contemplative practice, that is, teachings that can be observed in moment-to-moment examination of experiential phenomena, nor therefore for the development of knowledge and vision of things as they really are. It may be useful for the practitioner to understand that there is a life-to-life continuity in practice, but that is already quite clearly expressed in the final links of dependent co-arising and in many other texts.

Moreover, the three-lives model nearly trivializes dependent co-arising. Dependent co-arising is intended to be a comprehensive account of the human pathology arising within the phenomenal world and equated with the entirety of the *Dhamma* itself (MN28, i191). It is alleged to be profound and difficult to understand (DN15, ii55). Yet, within the three-lives model we come across material useful in the present life for examination of experientially verifiable phenomena only at the sixth link (contact) of just twelve links.[7] If dependent co-arising is so succinct and profound, why would the Buddha clutter it with an unobservable biological account of the conception of the human fetus? How does this account help us end suffering if we cannot observe it in day-to-day or meditative experience and if we can do nothing to disrupt the links, in this life, involved in this biological process?

What's more, the three-lives model encourages reification of a self or a person, for it produces a fixed substantial and substantiated psychophysical organism, which may be conditionally determined and impermanent, but which remains fixed for the duration of this life with no way to remove it. On the other hand, if these early links of dependent co-arising are not intended to substantiate the psychophysical organism, what unacknowledged profound teachings do they bear, obscured by the three-lives model?

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7 We can, of course, examine the rise and fall of formations at the second link, but in relative isolation, for its conditional implications are lost in the unobservable notion that these will eventually give rise to a life-connecting consciousness.

In short, it is hard to fathom why the Buddha would teach the mechanism for conception in the womb, and the interpretation under which he allegedly does this is difficult to reconcile with the rest of *Dhamma*. So, what did the Buddha mean in the relevant passage? We will attempt to answer this question below.

The psychophysical organism in the suttas

The biological account described in the last section and its critique focused on the role of consciousness. I want to extend our attention to look more closely at the psychophysical organism represented in the biological account by name-and-form, or rather the union of consciousness with name-and-form, within the chain of dependent co-arising. Although the discussion of name-and-form is limited in the suttas, we find additional material for our exploration when we follow the lead of a long tradition that equates the five aggregates (*khandhas*) with name-and-form, based on the recognition of a close isomorphism between the two. The composition of each is as follows:

name-and-form	five aggregates
form	form
name	
feeling	feeling
perception	perception
volition	(volitional) formations
contact	consciousness
attention	

Consciousness is modeled in dependent co-arising as standing outside of name-and-form proper, but is nonetheless closely engaged with it, as we have seen. I assume that the real difference between name-and-form and the five aggregates is pedagogical: the former occurs when the particularly active role of consciousness is to be highlighted. Significantly, the two factors missing from the aggregates – contact and attention – are traces of the active role of consciousness, particularly its capacities to refer to something outside of itself and to focus on a particular aspect of the experiential world, much as a pair of sandals might denote the presence of the Buddha in early Buddhist art.

In general, however, we expect that whatever we can say about the aggregates will carry over to name-and-form and vice versa.[8] Let's at least explore where this leads us. The aggregates, for their part, have in Buddhist tradition been alternatively equated with the phenomenal world and with the psychophysical organism.[9] Let's consider each of these aspects in turn, and hopefully be able to

8 Cintita (2016) takes up name-and-form per se as reflected in the suttas in more detail.

9 Hamilton (1996), Cintita (2018). In this case, Thanissaro (2010) points out

connect what seem to be divergent understandings.

The phenomenal world. There are many alternative ways we might array the phenomenal world, the world of what we know or think we know. One might focus on content: people, cars, cows, buildings, encounters, accidents properties like green or angry and relationships like parent-child or whole-part – all existing in time and space. But the Buddha provided a couple of alternative ways which instead reflect better the fabricated and illusory nature of the phenomenal world; he was really interested in how this content gets there more than what the content is. One model he provided arrays the world according to sense spheres, thereby high-lighting the channels – eye, ear, etc. – through which sense data arrives. The model we are focusing on here organizes the world according to cognitive and affective capacities, as forms, feelings, perceptions, formations and instances of consciousness, five simple aggregates, heaps or streams of phenomena.[10] Similarly, name-and-form, isomorphic to the aggregates, has been called[11] the structure of the cognitive system.

Our job, as contemplatives, is to examine the phenomena so categorized with a critical eye:

> Whatever kinds of form there is, whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far and near, a *bhikkhu* inspects it, investigates it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. Whatever kinds of feeling there is … Whatever kinds of perception there is, … Whatever kinds of formations there are, … Whatever kinds of consciousness there is, … (SN 22.95)

The five categories of aggregates represent different facets of the world of increasing depth or abstractness; we can think of these as building up layers of physical reality, unfolding progressively, starting with colors and shapes, then affective tones, then things and qualities, then structural relations among things and finally complex configurations of things and relations, as they arise in our experience interdependently. The categories are not discrete, but rather roughly nested, with consciousness at one end encompassing the four other aggregates, etc. This nesting is evident in our meditation, since, as our stillness sets in, the special qualities of consciousness, in all their complexity, will be the first to disappear, followed by the composite qualities of the formations, the percep-

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that the abstract interpretation is found only long after the early Buddhist period.

10 Hamilton (2000, 70) points out that he five *khaṅdhas*, as a doctrinal category, appear to have no precedent in any pre-Buddhist tradition. This perhaps suggestive of the peculiarity of dividing up the phenomenal world in terms of cognitive rather than natural categories.

11 Hamilton (2000, 150).

tion of things and so on.

A form is a shape or appearance and has to do with the most immediate physical world as it arises in experience.[12] Perception manifests as specific colors, recognizable shapes and other features of physical objects, at the level of words or concepts: a face, for instance, or as a tree or as a dog, or as *my* dog. Formations are composites, things made out of pieces; from the parts, the whole emerges, for instance, from eyes and mouth, a face emerges, from conditions and goal a plan emerges. An instance of consciousness can be far reaching in its discernment, insight, imagination and abstraction, generally pointing to something complex far beyond itself (notice that we are always conscious *of* something). The Buddha compares consciousness to a magic show.[13] It can see entire objects when only a tail or a tail fin is visible to perception, or tell us that objects observed at different times from different angles are the same object.

The Buddha describes the process of fabricating our experiential world on this basis with a metaphor:

> "Suppose, bhikkhus, an artist or a painter, using dye or lac or turmeric or indigo or crimson, would create the figure of a man or a woman complete in all its features on a well-polished plank or wall or canvas. So too, when the uninstructed worldling produces anything, it is only form that he produces, only feeling that he produces, only perception that he produces, only fabrications that he produces, only consciousness that he produces." (SN 22.100)

The contents of our experiential worlds are build up in this way, including all of the things we crave, attach to and identify with.

A primary role of the aggregates in Buddhist doctrine is specifically in examining our attachments to the elements of each aggregate in turn. Name-and-form, on the other hand, is confined primarily to the context of dependent co-arising that we have described. In the *Khandhasamyutta* (SN 35) we find a large section of reflections that serve to weaken our tendency to identify with these elements. The following are recurring refrains:

> "This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self."

> "He does not consider form as self, or self as possessing form, or form as in self, or self as in form. He does not consider feeling as self, or self as possessing feeling, or feeling as in self, or self as in feeling. … "

The phenomenal world is the entirety of human experience. It is not only the

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12 Gethin (1986, 36).

13 Ñāṇānanda (1974), based on the *Kālakārāma Sutta* (SN 22.95), explores this metaphor.

locus of what we know or think we know, it is – because it is of our own making and therefore remaking – the locus of human intellectual or cognitive, and emotional development, of human flourishing and pathology, of suffering, of happiness, of greed, hatred and delusion and their opposites, of aspiration and dreams, of attachment, of renunciation, of spiritual development, of careful examination with a still mind, of knowledge and vision of things as they are, and of awakening.[14] We live twice, in that we imagine ourselves in an "objective" world beyond the phenomenal world (even though such imagining is but another phenomenal experience) and try to define our aspirations and dreams in that world. It was the great genius of the Buddha that comprehended the composition and the plasticity of the phenomenal world, and how to shape the phenomenal world through practice. This is what dependent co-arising describes, with barely any reference to underlying mechanisms that are not subject to phenomenal examination.[15]

The psychophysical organism. The aggregates are commonly and alternatively taken in later tradition as constituting the person or human personality. Many modern authors and scholars refer to them as "personality factors." This may seem odd and somewhat ironic at this juncture since, since we have just seen that the aggregates are most commonly presented in the suttas as a realm in which the practitioner will *not* find me, mine, my self or anything that pertains to myself. What gives?

The most explicit early scriptural basis for the identification of the aggregates with the person in the suttas seems to found not in the words of the Buddha, but in those of the awakened nun Vajirā Bhikkhunī. One day, Vajirā, having returned from Savatthi with her daily alms, having eaten and having settled down in the Blind Men's Grove for the day's abiding, was confronted by the infamous Māra, who tried to disrupt her *samādhi* by raising a thorny theoretical question: What is a living being (*satta*)? Her famous answer surprised and frustrated the Evil One:

> Just as, with an assemblage of parts,
> The word "chariot" is used,
> So, when aggregates are present,
> There's the convention "a living being." (SN 5.10)

The point here, I hope the reader will agree, is that the chariot and the person are both insubstantial, simply conceptual categories imposed to make sense of

14 Awakening itself is often described as the end of the phenomenal world, for at that point its fabricated nature ends.

15 This is not to say that there are no underlying mechanisms, nor an "objective world," only that as a matter of practice methodology it is best to stay within the phenomenal world, the observable world rather than the theoretical realm.

some function within a fluid, interactive and highly contingent world, and not fixed “things.” To be caught by Māra trying to turn a person into an ontological commitment would be to fall into squarely into trap he had deliberately set. Ayya Vajirā was too clever for him. So, what was she talking about?

The following statement gives us some insight into this:

> It is in this fathom-long body endowed with perception and mind that I proclaim the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world and the way leading to the cessation of the world. (AN 4.45)

The Buddha is here talking about the person as body endowed with mind, but additionally as the locus of an individuated phenomenal world. Actually, this is a very conventional common-sensical way of viewing persons – putting aside the part about the origin, cessation and way leading to the cessation. In English we refer to “sentient beings,” because we know that certain entities are not just physical bodies but are endowed, like us, with senses and thinking minds. And we know that when we look at a policeman, as a sentient being that has entered into our world of experience, he is looking back and we are in *his* world of experience, such that we must take care not to do anything to arouse any suspicion as he scrutinizes us. Each of us is a walking, talking, individuated phenomenal world.

Likewise, the phrase *saviññāṇaka kāya,* “body with consciousness” is common in Pali.[16] The equivalence of the person and the world of experience is also sometimes presupposed in discussions of the views of eternalism and annihilationism, in which, rather than simply the self being alternatively eternal or annihilated, both the self and the world together are alternatively eternal or annihilated.[17] The following passage indicates that the experiential world opens up as a kind of epiphenomenon of the functioning conscious body.

> … when this body has life, heat and consciousness, then it goes and comes back, stands and sits and lies down, sees things with its eyes, hears with its ears, smells with its nose, tastes with its tongue, feels with its body and knows phenomena with its mind. (DN 23, ii338)

The experiences described are absent without life, heat and consciousness, even if the physical sense organs are otherwise intact. A metaphor is presented of a trumpet accompanied by a man, by effort and by wind producing a sound, otherwise not found in the trumpet by itself.[18]

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16 The phrase “body endowed with perception and mind” in the quoted passage is *kaḷevare sasaññimhi samanake*, where *kaḷevara* commonly refers to a *dead* body.

17 See, for instance, *Vibhaṅga* 17.10.2.

18 Nonetheless, within the sentient being the distinction we make in Western thought between body and mind seems not to be so clear cut in early India

So what does Vajirā's reply mean? Although we might summarize the above by saying that conventionally a living being involves body endowed with mind *plus* an individuated experiential world, Vajirā makes no reference to a body endowed with mind, and then also sidesteps direct reference to the individuated phenomenal world, instead referring to the five aggregates that provide one of the alternative schemes for dividing up the phenomenal world, masterfully avoiding the remotest suggestion of anything Māra could take as an ontological claim and use as a basis for a follow-up question.

Subsequent Buddhist understanding, being what it is, has not treated Vajirā's analysis of the unsubstantiality of "living being," nor of "chariot," well. It came to be understood *not* as laying bare the unsubstantiality of concepts, but as an attempt to pin down these very concepts.[19] In many ways much of Buddhism turned in its early centuries in many sects increasingly toward metaphysical speculation,[20] in which the Pudgalavāda school would even made explicit a full ontological commitment to the existence of the "person" (S: *pudgala*, P: *puggala*). And so, the aggregates came to be called "personality factors." We should note that there is no mention in the suttas of reflections for decomposing the "person" into component factors, in analogy, for instance, to practices that decompose the body into its constituents.[21] Certainly the aggregates are used quite differently from this. The failure to recognize the phenomenal perspective is responsible for many common misunderstandings of the *Dhamma*.[22]

The real innovation of the aggregates/name-and-form is in providing a break-

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(Harvey, 1993). In the first *jhāna*, for instance, "a bhikkhu makes the rapture and pleasure born of seclusion drench, steep, fill and pervade this body ..." (MN 39, i276).

19 Thanissaro (2010) points out that early Buddhism never attempted to define "living being" or "person," and that it was only centuries later that Vajirā's analysis was taken as a definition.

20 Hamilton (2000, 140) also warns that we often forget the the focus of early Buddhism is the world of experience, and when that happens we begin to misunderstand Buddhism. Ronkin (2011, 8) writes of a tension between the rational/systematic and experiential/practical dimensions, and holds that early Buddhism presented human experience as not held together by any underlying substrate (p. 14). Her book overall illustrates the way in which the various *Abhidharma* traditions tended historically toward theoretical elaboration. Kalupahana (1992, 23) maintains that the Buddha laid down a "non-metaphysical" (non-theoretical) explanation of experience.

21 For instance, decomposing the body thirty-two parts found in many suttas, such as the *satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (MN 10, i57).

22 Hamilton (2000, 140).

down of the experiential world into a small number of basic categories that can be used to orient and structure our closer examination of phenomena to gain knowledge and vision of things as they are, particularly that there is nothing in our experience that can be attributed to a substantial self. It is not a description of the person except insofar as an individuated phenomenal world is, in conventional understanding, what puts sentience in sentient being. I see no deeper exploration of the psychophysical organism in the Buddha's teaching than this, and no innovative ideas about biology.

The Buddha was not a biologist

Let's return to the passage at the beginning of this essay, which seems to describe a biological process of conception and subsequent flourishing of a psychophysical organism. I repeat it here:

> "If consciousness were not to descend into the mother's womb, would name-and-form take shape in the womb?" "No, Lord."
> …
> "If the consciousness of a young boy or girl were to be cut off, would name-and-form grow up, develop and reach maturity?" "No, Lord." (DN 15, ii62)

What was the Buddha trying to communicate here? The context of this passage is not one in which we would expect an exposition on biology or conception. It is rather in the midst of a walk through the links of dependent co-arising in reverse order. For each adjacent pair in the chain the Buddha has been arguing,

> $\text{link}^x \rightarrow \text{link}^y$,

by establishing that in any situation, the following holds,

> if there were no link^x, no link^y would appear,

and keeping the following in reserve,

> if link^x ceases, link^y will cease.

This is consistent throughout the text and these two formulas are well-understood formulas for the conditionality (*idappaccayatā*) at work in dependent co-arising. For instance, "birth → sickness, old age and death" because in any situation "if there were no birth, then sickness, old age and death would not arise," and "feeling → craving" because in any situation "if there were no feeling, no craving would arise."

The more immediate context in which the passage above occurs is that in which the causal relation,

consciousness → name-and-form

has just come up for examination. Now, as we have already seen, the relationship between consciousness and name-and-form is subtle, because consciousness and name-and-form are so tightly intertwined; it is hard to tease them apart. And in fact, the sutta will go on to argue for the simultaneous reciprocal causal relation,

name-and-form → consciousness.

We therefore fully expect, in accordance with the exposition of the links previously discussed, that the Buddha will want next to establish,

if there were no consciousness, no name-and-form would appear,

… and this is exactly what he does. But in order to do this, he has to consider a situation in which there is no *prior* consciousness, nor *prior* name-and-form, an unusual circumstance for two factors that are in constant orbit around each other. To do *this*, the Buddha imagines the individuated phenomenal world of a particular person, and the point at which sentience first arises in that person's life, which naturally places that person in the womb. He then asks, if there were no consciousness in that situation, could name-and-form appear? The answer is "no." That suffices to establish causality. But the Buddha does not stop there: he also chooses to establish the second formula,

if consciousness ceases, name-and-form will cease.

To do this he asks us to consider a later point, when this individual is a boy or girl, at which point sentience is well established, and asks, if consciousness were to cease, would name-and-form continue to mature? The answer is again "no." His argument is complete.

This is the simple logic of the Buddha's argument. It says nothing interesting about biology, other than to presuppose that sentience first arises during the period of gestation in the womb (not necessarily, it will be noticed, at biological conception!).

I don't think the Buddha was a biologist.

Having argued that the Buddha did not teach biology, I wish, in conclusion, to draw back from an entirely dogged position on this matter, by pointing out that the phenomenal world itself is some-thing rather organic, as well as something conventionally associated with "the person." These aspects may be partly responsible for the persistence biological interpretations of *Dhamma*. The world is, for the Buddha, something that arises, grows or develops cognitively and ethically, that flourishes or becomes afflicted, that responds to our practice and that eventually can come to an end. Within the phenomenal world the two orbiting factors of consciousness and name-and-form are at the conceptual heart

and determine the limits of *saṃsāra*:

> In so far only, Ānanda, can one be born, or grow old, or die, or pass away, or reappear, in so far only is there any pathway for verbal expression, in so far only is there any pathway for terminology, in so far only is there any pathway for designation, in so far only is the range of wisdom, in so far only is the round kept going for there to be a designation as the thisness, that is to say: name-and-form together with consciousness. (DN 15, ii63-4)

Sati really does mean memory

the Buddha's take on mindfulness

"Mindfulness" as we now understand it is the result a history of semantic change. This began in ancient times with the Pali word *sati*, which in origin means 'memory', and has somehow given rise to the modern term 'mindfulness', which the Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines as "the practice of maintaining a nonjudgmental state of heightened or complete awareness of one's thoughts, emotions, or experiences on a moment-to-moment basis." Moreover, modern scholars have perhaps been far too hasty to dismiss 'memory' as its central meaning in the EBT.[1] I hope to show here that *sati* barely strayed in the early times far afield from this central meaning.

Sati as memory of *Dhamma*

The word *sati* is a derivation of a root meaning 'memory' or 'recollection' and corresponds to the verb *sarati* 'remember' or 'recollect'. The cognate word in Sanskrit *smṛti* has a similar meaning and is commonly used specifically in reference to memory of the sacred Brahmanic texts, including the *Vedas*, or even to the body of sacred texts itself, which for many centuries were preserved in rote memory before they were committed to palm leaf. Similarly, the Buddha's teachings were preserved during the Buddha's lifetime and for centuries thereafter by rote memory, then taught, pondered upon and meditated on by drawing on and refining that memory. The Brahmins and the Buddhists are the two groups that best succeeded in preserving their scriptures in this way.

Accordingly, the Buddha offers us the following explicit definition of *sati*:[2]

> And what is the faculty of *sati*? Here, monks, the noble disciple is recollective, possessing utmost recollection and discernment, recalling

1 Bodhi (2011, 2-3) states that *sati* no longer means memory, but something like "lucid awareness of the phenomenal field." Anālayo (2014, 30-31) dismisses treating *sati* as memory on the grounds that virtually all perception is a matter of remembering patterns learned long ago, that all of us must therefore be mindful, in this sense, virtually all the time. Most authors catalog several distinct definitions of *sati*, generally with "awareness" as the only common factor, e.g., Kuan (2008, 41-56).

2 A similar passage is found at MN 53 i 356.

> and bearing in mind even things that were done and said long ago. This is called the faculty of *sati*.[3] (SN 48.9)

Stages of memory acquisition and development are described in the *Vimuttāy-atana Sutta* (Bases of Liberation).[4]

Bases of liberation

1. The Teacher or a fellow monk in the position of a teacher teaches the *Dhamma* to a *bhikkhu* …
2. He himself teaches the *Dhamma* to others in detail as he has heard it and learned it …
3. He recites the *Dhamma* in detail as he has heard it and learned it …
4. He ponders, examines, and mentally inspects the *Dhamma* as he has heard it and learned it …
5. He has grasped well a certain object of concentration,[5] attended to it well, sustained it well, and penetrated it well with wisdom … (AN 5.26)

In the early centuries of Buddhism, in the absence of orthography, the first three stages would have required long hours of rote memorization of literal texts through public and private recitation. This is at least partly because monastics had an obligation to preserve the *Dhamma* orally for future generations. While modern pedagogy tends to discount rote learning, rote memory is still evident in many Asian lands, perhaps particularly in Myanmar, and even in modern circles we recite literal texts often in mettā practice:

> "May they be free from danger, free from mental suffering, free from physical suffering, …"

… or particularly in the recollection of the Buddha, recollection of the *Dhamma* and recollection of the *Saṅgha*:[6]

> *Iti pi so bhagavā arahaṃ sammāmbuddho* …

These five stages result in successively stronger impressions in memory. Stage 4. represents a significant turning over of memory since it typically adds significant conceptual content that will be integrated into a wide fabric of pre-

3 *Katamañca, bhikkhave, sat'indriyaṃ? Idha, bhikkhave, ariya-sāvako satimā hoti paramena sati-nepakkena samannāgato cira katam pi cira bhāsitam pi saritā anussaritā. idaṃ vuccati, bhikkhave, sat'indriyaṃ.*

4 DN 33 iii 241-2 provides a similar passage.

5 *samādhi-nimittaṃ.*

6 *buddha-anussati, dhamma-anussati, saṅghaSaṅgha-anussati.* Notice the derivative of *sati* in the sense of 'recollection'.

viously learned conceptual content. Stage 5. refines memory even further by bringing it into the meditative context, where it is paired with our clearly observable phenomenal experience for closer examination and internalization, to the point that we effectively learn to perceive through the eyes of the Buddha.[7] In this way, a simple arc integrates *Dhamma*, memory and meditation.

There are multiple aspects of memory brought out in the bases of liberation: *learning* is the creation of new memory, "*memory*" by itself suggests retention, and *recollection* is the retrieval of existing memory. *Rehearsal* strengthens memories through repeated recollection. *Development* recollects and relearns, with processing in between that changes the content of what is remembered. Finally *internalization* achieves a strong integration of memory into perception. Below I will prefer to translate *sati* 'recollection' to 'memory' insofar as it is common to most of the dynamic aspects of memory.

The following passage affords a closer look at the final two stages of the bases of liberation:[8]

> Because when one has heard the *Dhamma* from such *bhikkhus* one dwells withdrawn by way of two kinds of withdrawal—withdrawal of body and withdrawal of mind. Dwelling thus withdrawn, one recollects that *Dhamma* and thinks it over. Whenever, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* dwelling thus withdrawn recollects that *Dhamma* and thinks it over, on that occasion the awakening factor of recollection[9] is aroused by the *bhikkhu* . The bhikkhu develops the awakening factor of recollection at that time. The bhikkhu perfects the awakening factor of recollection at that time.
>
> Whenever, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu dwelling thus recollective[10] discriminates that *Dhamma* with wisdom, examines it, makes an investigation of it, on that occasion the awakening factor of investigation of phenomena[11] is aroused by the bhikkhu; on that occasion the bhikkhu develops the awakening factor of investigation of phenomena; on that occasion the enlightenment factor of investigation of phenomena comes to fulfillment by development in the *bhikkhu*. (SN 46.3)

This is a description of the first two of the seven factors of awakening: recollection and investigation of phenomena. This passage is followed by descrip-

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7 See "Seeing through the eyes of the Buddha in this volume. Shulman (2014, 106-112) argues, mediation effectively turns *Dhamma* into a mode of perception.

8 See also SN 46.3, 46.38.

9 *sati-sambojjhana.*

10 *sato.*

11 *dhammaDhamma-vicaya-sambojjhaṅga.*

tions of the remaining five factors: energy, delight, calm, *samādhi* and equanimity. The first two, which kick off this causal chain, are of primary interest here.[12] The fulfillment of the entire chain sets the context for knowledge and vision and ultimately liberation.

This passage helps us make sense of the word *satipaṭṭhāna*, which can be translated as 'attendance of recollection',[13] for it pairs recollection of *Dhamma* with the investigation of phenomenal experience. In this sense the recollection is attending to or serving the examination of phenomena so that it can be examined and investigated and "penetrated with wisdom." On the basis of our direct experience our understanding of the *Dhamma* and therefore our memory of the *Dhamma* can be refined and internalized to become part of how we perceive. We will look more at *satipaṭṭhāna* below.[14]

Moreover, each of our five bases of liberation, not only the last, is a basis for meditation, which is to say, leads to *samādhi*. as stated in the following pericope which concludes the description of each of these five processes:

> In whatever way [he teaches the *Dhamma* to a bhikkhu] [or each of the other five bases of liberation], he experiences inspiration in the meaning and inspiration in the *Dhamma*. As he does so, joy arises in him. When he is joyful, rapture arises. For one with a rapturous mind, the body becomes tranquil. One tranquil in body feels pleasure. For one feeling pleasure, the mind becomes concentrated. This is the [first] [second/third/fourth/fifth] base of liberation, by means of which, if a bhikkhu dwells heedful, ardent, and resolute, his unliberated mind is liberated, his undestroyed taints are utterly destroyed, and he reaches the as-yet-unreached unsurpassed security from bondage.
> (AN 5.26)

12 "Seeing through the eyes of the Buddha" in this volume provides more details of this process, including the critical role of *samādhi*.

13 *Sati* 'memory' + *upa* 'near' + *ṭhāna* 'standing'. The compound *upaṭṭhāna* is thereby generally used in the sense of attending to, looking after or serving. Most modern scholars today analyze *satipaṭṭhāna* as *sati* + *upaṭṭhāna* rather than the obsolete alternative *sati* + *paṭṭhāna*., e.g., Anālayo (2006, 29-30), Bodhi (2000, p. 1504). Similarly, the verb *upaṭṭhahati*, related to *upaṭṭhāna*, is often used in connection with *sati*.

14 Interestingly, the term *satipaṭṭhāna* is also used in one place in reference to the second liberation, that of teaching the *DhammaDhamma* (MN 137, iii 221-2). Here recollection of the *Dhamma* seems to attend to the education of students rather than to phenomenal experiences, for rather than the usual four attendances (body, feeling, mind and phenomena), we find three: good students, a mix of good and bad, and bad students. The translation 'attendance of recollection' holds up for this quite distinct case.

This description also roughly follows the arc of the seven factors of awakening. It often goes unacknowledged in modern circles that recitation is an integral part of meditation practice.[15]

In general, the *Buddhadhamma* is not aloof, abstract or speculative, but rather speaks to the needs of practitioners in real time situations, whether in making behavioral choices or in understanding their phenomenal experience. We can say that it is *situated* in that it brings *Dhamma* to mind in a manner appropriate to the current situation. It is in situated recollection that memory hits the road of practice. Situated recollection thereby informs (1) our behavioral choices, or (2) our observation of phenomena. Let's call (1) *regulatory recollection*, and (2) *framing recollection*. For instance, in making an ethical choice or settling into meditation we bring precepts or specific instructions to mind to direct our practice. This is regulatory recollection. In investigating craving as it arises we bring teachings to mind about craving, for instance, as a condition for suffering, to understand our experience. This is framing recollection.

Regulatory and framing recollection are not different kinds of memory per se, but reflect different kinds of *Dhammic* content. Nonetheless, they do manifest somewhat differently in practice, as we will see below. Also, not all recollection of *Dhamma* is situated, for example, recollecting the qualities of the Buddha, the *Dhamma* and the *Saṅgha*. Although these recollections can fulfill the development of refuge, an essential prerequisite for the success of this practice, the content of recollection is independent of the current situation.[16]

When *sati* regulates behavior

Parents often tell their wicked children, “Remember your manners,” in the vain hope that they will constrain their impulses to throw food at the elderly, to humiliate the young and to make hideous slurping sounds. The hope is for situated recollection as a way of informing their behavioral choices.

Prominent in our Buddhist practice are our ethical choices, to which we apply the guidance of *Dhamma* as we remember it. We find this aspect of practice described in the following simile:

> Just as the gatekeeper in the king's frontier fortress is wise, competent,

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15 In modern terms it would likely be classified as “*samatha*” practice, that is, leading to *jhāna* but not to significant insight or deep internalization.

16 Gethin (2011, 270) points out that, while we are remembering to keep the breath in mind, this practice is backed up by a nested set of recollections, for instance about the importance of meditation, the need to root out greed, hatred and delusion, and refuge itself, which, in my terms, support the situated practice.

> and intelligent, one who keeps out strangers and admits acquaintances, for protecting its inhabitants and for warding off outsiders, so too a noble disciple is recollective,[17] possessing supreme recollection and discrimination,[18] one who remembers and recollects what was done and said long ago. With *sati* as his gate-keeper, the noble disciple abandons the unwholesome and develops the wholesome, abandons what is blameworthy and develops what is blameless, and maintains himself in purity. (AN 7.67, iv 110-111)

Notice that this passage once again describes *sati* as above in terms of remembering “what was done and said long ago,” but it also pairs the relevant recollection with the current situation. The pairing is reflected in the phrase 'recollection and discrimination' (*sati-nepakkena*), for the present situation is discriminated on the basis of recollection of what is wholesome, blameless, etc. or their opposites.

For example, *sati* might act as the gatekeeper when the impulse arises – “Yikes! A twiddle bug!” [WHAP] – to assault a living being, such that the first of the five precepts is called to mind to provide guidance in the current situation. Just as recollection of *Dhamma* plays a role in discriminating our skillful (*kusala*) from our unskillful (*akusala*) thoughts, it also points out the need to guard our sense faculties lest lust arise. In each case the parameters set by *Dhamma* are recalled then adhered to, often in opposition to contrary impulses and distractions. In fully functional practice, the appropriate recollection is evoked to distinguish what is proper (*sammā*) from what is improper (*micchā*), for example, for each of the steps of the noble eightfold path.

Sati will also apply to instructions for various practices, such as proper wearing of one's robes or details of *satipaṭṭhāna* or *ānāpānasati* meditation. Such practice instructions belong to *Dhamma* (or to *Vinaya*) and are recalled and borne in mind as we practice. *Sati* is responsible, for instance, for ensuring that our *satipaṭṭhāna* practice remains within the parameters of *satipaṭṭhāna* instruction.

In brief, we see that *sati* serves as the regulator of our practice choices. While *sati* makes the necessary discriminations, right effort secures adherence to the parameters noticed through memory of *Dhamma.* If practice is optimal, *sati* will bring to mind right action, for instance, and will always notice that when our choices are in danger of falling outside of the parameters of right action. This point is made with respect to each of the early steps of the noble eightfold path in the following pericope, selected with respect to right intention:

> When one understand wrong [intention] as wrong [intention] and right [intention] as right [intention], that’s your *right view*. … One makes an

17 *satimā.*

18 *sati-nepakkena.*

> effort to abandon wrong ⸢intention⸣ and to enter upon right ⸢intention⸣. This is one's *right effort*. Recollecting,[19] one abandons wrong ⸢intention⸣, recollecting one enters upon and abides in right ⸢intention⸣: this is one's *right recollection*.[20] Thus these three things run and circle around right ⸢intention⸣, that is, right view, right effort and right recollection. [similarly for ⸢view⸣, ⸢speech⸣, ⸢action⸣, ⸢livelihood⸣, as for ⸢intention⸣.] (MN 117)

Sati, as the regulator of practice choice, typically demands continual attention, and deliberation, a consistent johnny-on-the-spot discriminating awareness of the present situation, alongside immediate recall of the relevant *Dhamma* to guide our choices. Presence of mind and deliberation, in turn, demand non-distraction. In fact, *sati* can and must be trained in these qualities, as we will see below. This gives *sati*, at least as situated recollection, a noteworthy quality that is often described in modern literature as “being in the present moment.”

A modern simile might help to understand the regulatory role of sati in making choices according to *Dhamma*: *Sati* in this role is like a thermostat. The heater or air conditioner is like right effort. The setting of the thermostat is like right view, carrying the age-old wisdom of climatic comfort, say, 70° F (21° C). The room temperature is the relevant feature of current situation. The thermostat pairs the recollection of setting with the discernment of room temperature, and does this perfectly without distraction. Would that we were all so reliable. If the room temperature goes beyond, say, a 1° tolerance, the thermostat (*sati*) notifies the heater or air conditioner to turn on or off as appropriate.

Regulatory recollection plays an important role in *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation, in which, as we will see, framing recollection also plays an important role. The *satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* presents four contemplations, and many subsidiary contemplations, based on different fields of experience. The following pericope states the regulatory role for all of the contemplations:

> He dwells observing the ⸢body⸣ in the ⸢body⸣, ardent, clearly comprehending and *recollecting*, having put away covetousness and grief concerning the world. [similarly for ⸢feeling⸣, ⸢mind⸣, ⸢phenomena⸣, as for ⸢body⸣] (DN 22, MN 10)

The central task for each contemplation is observation (*anupassanā*) of the particular field, while recollecting any *Dhamma* relevant to that field; this thus involves framing recollection as well, which we will return to below. We are also asked to maintain a sense of ardency or alertness and actively investigate what we observe. We are also asked to put away worldly distractions, a most chal-

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19 *sato.*
20 *sammā-sati.*

lenging aspect of this process. Elsewhere[21] the distractions are described in terms of the five hindrances that tend to impinge on contemplative practice: lust, ill-will, sloth-torpor, restlessness-remorse and doubt.

It is *sati* in its regulatory role, recollecting these instructions (right view) while attending to the current situations, that notes when we deviate from the parameters set forth. Right effort makes corrections. We find right view, right effort and right recollection here circling around the *satipaṭṭhāna*, as these do around any similarly defined practice.

When *sati* frames experience

A birdwatcher brings her cumulative memory of all things bird to her understanding and appreciation of the activities on feeder and in bush. Moreover, the more she engages in her hobby, the more her knowledge, which is to say her memory, is refined, eventually to develop into the very way she perceives the feathery realm, with an intuitive sensibility beyond the invaluable sketches and descriptions her *Peterson Field Guide* provides.

As we engage in *satipaṭṭhāna*, our knowledge is similarly honed, polished, fine-tuned and distilled, until we begin to behold the phenomenal world through the very eyes of the Buddha. Although sati in its regulatory role is very active in *satipaṭṭhāna*, it must be *sati* in its framing role that puts the *sati-* in *satipaṭṭhāna*, since the regulatory role is common to all practice.

The fourth contemplation of the *satipaṭṭhāna* , observation of phenomena (*dhammānupassanā*), provides a particularly relevant illustration because its explicit task is open-ended: to observe *dhammā* (phenomenal experiences) in general through the lens of *Dhamma.*

> He dwells observing phenomena[22] in phenomena, ardent, clearly comprehending and *recollecting*,[23] having put away covetousness and grief concerning the world. (DN 22, MN 10)

In *dhammānupassanā*, we begin by selecting a topic of *Dhamma* and *Dhamma* drives our interpretation of phenomena arising in experience. Listed[24] as *dhammic* themes to guide observation are: the five hindrances, the seven factors of awakening, the five aggregates, the sixfold sphere (aka the six sense bases) and the four noble truths. The Pali *Ānāpānasati Sutta* (MN 118) also lists four qualities to be examined with respect to the breath, said to satisfy the fourth establishment of mindfulness: impermanence, dispassion, cessation and relin-

21 For instance, SN 47.5.
22 *dhammānupassī.*
23 *satimā.*
24 MN 10.

quishment. It is clear that the scope of the fourth establishment of mindfulness is quite extensive, potentially including any teachings that can be related to phenomenal experience in this way.[25]

In *dhammānupassanā* we pair memory (*sati*) with observation of phenomena, bringing in clear comprehension (*sampajañña*) to effectively test and amend our understanding empirically by matching it against experience as we deepen our ability to fully comprehend that experience. The first two factors of the seven factors of awakening similarly pair *sati* and analysis of phenomena (*Dhamma-vicaya*) to frame the same process, in which analysis of phenomena can be equated with observation of phenomena with clear comprehension.

As we have seen, the term *satipaṭṭhāna* suggests recollection as serving the analysis of phenomena, but in fact while recollection of *Dhamma* gives insight into phenomena, the observation of phenomena gives insight into *Dhamma*, as our understanding and thereby our memory is corrected and elaborated. Shulman suggests that the two processes will eventually merge so that there is no difference between our understanding and the way we see things as recollection and observation become increasingly refined.[26] He calls *sati* "a method by which philosophy [i.e., *Dhamma*] is turned into an active way of seeing."[27] Kuan sees *sati* as directing perception (*saññā*) to conform to *Dhamma* such that wisdom (*paññā*) results.[28] In fact, it would seem that perception is the farthest extent of situated recollection, since it involves bringing past experience to bear on the interpretation of present phenomena in an almost instinctive way. As recollection and interpretation merge, we begin, as Gombrich puts it, to think *with* the teachings rather than *about* them, or "to see with the Buddha's spectacles."[29]

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25 Kuan (2008, 128) states, "Therefore dhamma*Dhamma*s in the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna* can cover virtually whatever phenomena become the objects of consciousness, which are contemplated from the Buddhist point of view." This is indeed a wide swath of *DhammaDhamma*, but Shulman (2014, 31) also argues that it is wider than we often acknowledge, for much of what we understand in *Dhamma* as abstract, philosophical or otherwise difficult to relate to the current situation, in fact first arose in "particular, concrete meditative moments." He points to, as an extended example, the four noble truths, which historically has become an abstraction, but which he points out in most texts is worded with reference to phenomenal experience.

26 Shulman (2014, 12).

27 Shulman (2014, 111).

28 Kuan (2008, 58-59).

29 Gombrich (1997, 36).

When sati does not seem to mean memory

The Buddha gives us a telling simile, of an occasion in which the most beautiful girl of the land will dance and sing and accordingly draws a large assembly of people. In the midst of the hubbub, a man is given an unusual task:

> "Good man, you must carry around this bowl of oil filled to the brim between the crowd and the most beautiful girl of the land. A man with a drawn sword will be following right behind you, and wherever you spill even a little of it, right there he will fell your head." (SN 47.20)

The Buddha then explains,

> The bowl of oil filled to the brim: this is a designation for recollection directed to the body.[30] (SN 47.20)

If *sati* is situated recollection of the *Dhamma* (in either a framing or regulatory role), spilling a drop of oil must represent forgetting the *Dhamma* when it is needed, even for an instant. Well and good. Overcoming distraction is the dominant challenge in this passage, and the sword, of course, represents the urgency of practice. It is the oil that "bears in mind," for its spillage represents overstepping the parameters of the task. In this simile *sati* indeed means 'recollection'.

Nonetheless, a reaching beyond the strict role of *sati* is found in the EBT: The seventh step of the noble eightfold path *sammā-sati* (right recollection, right mindfulness) is identified not with *sati* itself but explicitly with the whole of the *satipaṭṭhāna*, in which *sati* is properly just one of a configuration of elements:

> And what, bhikkhus, is right recollection? Here, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu dwells observing the body in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending, *recollecting*, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world. He dwells observing feelings in feelings, … mind in mind … phenomena in phenomena … This is right recollection. (SN 45.8)

Now, the *satipaṭṭhāna* is a process of observation (*anupassanā*) and *sati* per se is but one element of that process, one that brings the guidance of *Dhamma* optimally into our investigation. Linguistically, using the term for one element of a complex or whole to signify the whole is *synecdoche*, which is a common figure of speech, as when we say 'hired hand' but assume we are hiring the body parts attached to the hand as well, or '9/11' to refer to a particular event that happened on that date in a particular year. Clearly *sati* is, indeed, accorded a prominent role in this process of observation, for we can regard the overall

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30 *kāyagatā sati.*

function of the process of *satipaṭṭhāna*, as one of extending memory through learning and deep internalization of *Dhamma.*, but *sati* is not, strictly speaking, the entirety of the *satipaṭṭhāna. Sati* here stands for something larger than *sati* per se. This is *synecdoche*

Moreover, within *satipaṭṭhāna* the role of *sati* per se is not as constant as the discussion so far would mislead one into thinking. If we consider the first section of the *satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, on observation of body (*kāyānupassanā*), we find passages like the following:

> Again, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* is one who acts with clear comprehension[31] when going forward and returning; who acts with clear comprehension when wearing his robes and carrying his outer robe and bowl; who acts with clear comprehension when eating, drinking, consuming food, and tasting; who acts with clear comprehension when defecating and urinating; who acts with clear comprehension when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking and keeping silent.
>
> In this way he abides observing the body[32] in a body internally, externally, and both internally and externally. Or else he abides observing in the body its nature of arising, or he abides contemplating in the body its nature of vanishing, or he abides contemplating in the body its nature of both arising and vanishing. Or else the recollection[33] "there is a body" is in attendance in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and recollection. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. (MN 10, i 57)

The practice here is clearly open-ended, extensible to a wide swath of additional physical activities, such as cutting potatoes or feeding the dog, chopping wood or carrying water. In fact, one can practice in this way almost all day in the midst of one's everyday activities off the cushion. Nonetheless, the framing *Dhammic* content with which *sati* attends, is quite thin; it requires no study of *Dhamma* for us to keep in mind that there is a body. I suggest this is a kind of place holder for the role of *sati* among the configuration of other factors. The passage does, however, also bring in recollection of impermanence, a teaching that is profound, but is also universally applicable to the observation of all phenomena and mentioned throughout the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta.*

With the sidelining of framing recollection in this passage, what remains are the other factors of *satipaṭṭhāna*: observation, clear comprehension, seclusion from distractions, stripping down of extra conceptual content. This practice comes close to being *satipaṭṭhāna* without the *sati*, much like a suitcase is still a

31 *sampajānakārī.*

32 *kāyānupassī.*

33 *sati.*

suitcase even when it has never actually held a suit. This is, in short, not a practice for internalizing *Dhamma*, but for training and mastering a very portable *satipaṭṭhāna* abstracted from *Dhammic* content as a kind of multifacited mental faculty.

Gethin, in his study of the meanings of *sati* in the EBT describes one of them as follows:

> "… if we have mindfulness then we will remember what it is that we should be doing in a given moment."[34]

In this sense, "mindfulness" is keeping firmly in mind what our present task is, along with its parameters, then staying on that task and not being distracted from that task. In fact, the English word "mindfulness" captures this, as when we are mindful to have our tires rotated, or mindful not to allow the miso soup to boil. This definition actually highlights the regulatory function of *sati*, but sets aside the framing function. The regulatory function, it will be recalled, has been there all the time, as it is found in all Buddhist practices.

The identification of right recollection with *satipaṭṭhāna*, along with the dispensability of framing recollection of *Dhamma* within the *satipaṭṭhāna* has opening up to a widening of the meaning of *sati*

Sati really does mean memory

Sati, in the EBT, seems never to wander far afield of its original meaning, 'memory'.[35] The particular application of *sati* that characterizes the *satipaṭṭhāna* is to provide a *Dhammic* basis for examination of phenomena. From a different perspective, *satipaṭṭhāna* supports the internalization of *Dhamma*, ultimately integrating *Dhamma* into perception. *Sati*, once identified with the full *satipaṭṭhāna* process of which it is properly an element, may become disassociated from memory in some contexts, insofar as some applications of *satipaṭṭhāna* minimize the role of recollection of the *Dhamma*. This may anticipate aspects of the modern definitions.[36]

I think an important thing we can take away from this study is an appreciation of the tight integration of *Dhamma* study and *satipaṭṭhāna* or factors-of-awakening practice in the EBT, as we move from *Dhamma* study to a deep internal-

34 Gethin (2011, 272).

35 After writing the first edition of this essay, I discovered that Thanissaro's (2012, e.g., 9-14) account of mindfulness also sticks close to its early definition as memory.

36 I follow up with an account of the modern meaning of the term in the essay "How did mindfulness become 'Bare, non-judgmental, present-moment awareness'?" in this volume.

ization of the *Dhamma*, thereby learning to see with the eyes of the Buddha.

> When, *bhikkhus*, a noble disciple listens to the *Dhamma* with eager ears, attending to it as a matter of vital concern, directing his whole mind to it, on that occasion the seven factors of awakening go to fulfillment and development. (SN 46.38)

It is important that we appreciate this because this integration seems to have frayed in many of the later traditions.[37]

In fact, a return to the root meaning of *sati* entails far-reaching implications for our day-to-day practice off of the cushion, for to be recollective (*satima*) – as monks or nuns are said to be as they walk on alms round – is not simply to enjoy a certain state of mind, it is to walk in the *Dhamma* (*dhammacariyā*), bearing in mind our norms of behavior, our intentions, our refuges moment by moment. This is to live meaningfully.

37 See Shulman (2014), as well as “Seeing through the eyes of the Buddha” in this volume for more on the weakening of this integration.

Seeing through the eyes of the Buddha

samādhi and right view

Samādhi (concentration) is the immediate cause of the knowledge and vision that leads to liberation. Surprisingly, this is not clearly understood in the Theravāda tradition, in spite of passages like the following:

> Bhikkhus, develop concentration. A monk with concentration understands in accordance with reality. (SN 22.5)

… or this:

> Bhikkhus, develop *samādhi*. A bhikkhu who has *samādhi* understands things as they really are. And what does he understand as it really is? He understands as it really is: “This is suffering.” He understands as it really is: “This is the origin of suffering.” He understands as it really is: “This is the cessation of suffering.” He understands as it really is: “This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.” Bhikkhus, develop *samādhi*. A bhikkhu who has *samādhi* understands things as they really are. (SN 56.1, *Samādhi Sutta*)

The term *samādhi* can be aptly translated as “collectedness,” “composure” or “unification,” as well as the most conventional “concentration.” The word *jhāna* (*meditation*) is then used in the EBT most often to refer to four successively deeper stages of *samādhi*. I will prefer the Pali terms *samādhi* and *jhāna* for clarity.

The attainment of wisdom attributed to *samādhi* is generally called *knowledge and vision* (*ñāṇa-dassana*) or *knowing and seeing* or simply *insight*. The Pali word *ñāṇa* (knowledge), built on the same root as *paññā* (wisdom), generally identified with the first step on the noble eightfold path, *right view* (*sammā-diṭṭhi*), for instance, of the four noble truths mentioned in a passage above, a kind of working description of things as they are. Knowledge is most generally understood as as a kind of intuitive wisdom, and “vision” or “seeing,” an internalization of right view through direct experience.

> Those phenomena which were previously only heard by me, I now dwell having experienced them with my own body, having penetrated them by wisdom, I see them. (SN 48.50)

These two words often are found together in the compound *knowledge and vi-*

sion of things as they are (*yathā-bhūta-ñāṇa-dassana*), insight that is one step away from liberation.

> When right *samādhi* does not exist, for one failing right *samādhi*, the proximate cause is destroyed for knowledge and vision of things as they really are. (AN 10.3)

The difficulty in recognizing the proper role of *samādhi* in attaining knowledge and vision of things as they are is that *samādhi*, at least in the Theravāda tradition, is generally regarded as an extremely still state of mind, a state in which cognition is greatly attenuated, if not altogether suppressed. There is, in this understanding, little room for right view in *samādhi*, certainly no capacity for examining and seeing and knowing the four noble truths as they are. This task of gaining knowledge and vision is instead traditionally allocated to *vipassanā* meditation, distinguished rather sharply from *samatha*, under which *samādhi* falls.

This essay advances an account of how all this works, an account that integrates *samādhi* and right view with liberating insight. This integration requires a proper understanding of the role of *samādhi* in the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*, the establishment of mindfulness. It is *samādhi* that provides the incubator for that liberating knowledge that allows us to see through the eyes of the Buddha.

The traditional quandary

The key question arises at this point: How can the conceptually often complex understandings of right view persist through the cognitively attenuated, deep states of *samādhi* to become liberating knowledge? Right view is often quite subtle and complex and difficult to explain and would, it seems, carry what I will call a substantial *cognitive load*.

This assumption that the cognitive load carried by contemplation of right view must overwhelm our *samādhi*, admits of two options: (1) that right view has little to do with the content of liberating knowledge, or (2) that liberating knowledge is not a product of *samādhi* after all. Both options seem unacceptable: If (1), what is right view for? If (2), why do the EBT explicitly and repeatedly attribute liberating knowledge specifically to *samādhi*?

Shulman[1] points out that much modern scholarship tends, nonetheless, to accord with one or other other of these options: Wynne and Brokhorst, he points out, seem to view liberating knowledge as some (presumably mystical) form of the experience of *jhāna* itself, but without, or with unknown, conceptual content. Gombrich, Conze, Rahula, Collins and Hamilton, on the other hand, seem to downgrade the role of *samādhi*, and to attribute liberating knowledge to a

1 Shulman (2014, 7-12).

primarily intellectual effort. Moreover, the seminal *Visuddhimagga* accords *samādhi* a marginal role, attributing liberating knowledge to a distinct meditative technique, *vipassanā*. Historically these options have probably alternatively resulted in either the prioritizing of abstract theory in Buddhism[2] or the prioritizing of deep states of meditative absorption.[3]

However, the EBT show that there is a lot more going on in *samādhi* than these proposals assume. It seems that *samādhi* is reported in the EBT to be a space of relatively open awareness that admits of a significant degree of conceptual content rare in absorption. For example,

> A monk in each *jhāna* regards whatever phenomena connected with form, feelings, perceptions, fabrications and consciousness as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a disintegration, a void, non-self … (AN 9.36)
>
> But there comes a time when his mind becomes inwardly steadied, composed, unified and concentrated. That *samādhi* is then calm and refined; it has attained to full tranquility and achieved mental unification; it is not maintained by strenuous suppression of the defilements. Then, to whatever mental state realizable by direct knowledge he directs his mind, he achieves the capacity of realizing that state by direct knowledge, whenever the necessary conditions obtain. (AN 3.100)

Also,

> That one could fulfill the wisdom group without having fulfilled the *samādhi* group that is not possible. (DN 18)

The wisdom group here includes right view, which ranges over all the most difficult points of *Dhamma*, while the *samādhi* group includes right *samādhi* along with mindfulness and right effort. The nun Dhammadinnā, moreover, explicitly asserts the connection between the phenomenal topics of examination in the *satipaṭṭhāna*, generally identified with *vipassanā*, and the concerns of *samādhi*.

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2 Ronkin (2005) describes the gradual conceptual reframing of the *Dhamma* from what began as a description of the array of transitory phenomena to a metaphysics and ontology, particularly in the *Abhidharma* movement which held sway in many Buddhist traditions for many centuries. Indeed, abstract theoretical *Dhamma* is harder to to bring into *samādhi* and therefore encourages the separation of right view from *samādhi*.

3 Polak (2011) argues that Buddhists began historically to embrace absorption largely under the influence of yogic traditions. The unhinging of *samādhi* from conceptual concerns would provide perhaps a critical enabling factor in that development.

> Unification of mind is *samādhi*, the four establishments of mindfulness are its themes, the four right efforts are its requisites, and any cultivation, development and pursuit of these qualities are its development. (MN 44)

The key question is therefore, How can liberating knowledge, dependent on *Dhamma*, arise in the still space of *samādhi*? To answer this we must look at the conceptual load carried by *Dhamma* along with the capacity of *samādhi* to admit such a cognitive load. Can *samādhi* handle what is carried forth into *samādhi*? It may, we hope, turn out that what is carried forth is less cognitively laden than we think, and that *samādhi* is more cognitively accommodating than we think.

The wider context of *samādhi*

First, we will establish that *samādhi* is closely linked to right view in the teachings of the Buddha, in spite of what some authors and much of tradition maintains.

The awakening factors. The comprehensive overview of meditation in all its aspects is afforded by the teaching on the seven *factors of awakening* (*bojjhaṅga*), a serial chain in which one factor provides a condition for the arising of the next (MN 118, SN 46):

factors of awakening

1. mindfulness (*sati*)
2. examination of phenomena (*dhamma-vicaya*)
3. energy (*viriya*)
4. delight (*pīti*)
5. calm (*passaddhi*)
6. *samādhi*
7. equanimity (*upekkhā*)

One's mind is “well developed” if the factors of enlightenment line up in direct order.[4] The *Satipaṭṭhāna* sutta and many related suttas focus on the early links, and the many suttas on the *jhānas* focus on the later links. Many, but not all, of these suttas fail to mention the other end of this chain, perhaps leading to the impression of two distinct kinds of meditation,[5] but the suttas on the factors of

4 Ñāṇanada (2009, 2).

5 The primary mindfulness discourse, *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (MN10, DN 22), makes no direct mention of the *jhānas* or *samādhi*, excepts as objects of in-

awakening make quite clear how mindfulness and examination integrate with *samādhi*.

The heart of all Buddhist meditation is the interaction of the first two factors, mindfulness and examination: Mindfulness is the entry point of right view. What we translate as "mindfulness," namely *sati*, is best translated as "recollection," particularly recollection, or keeping in mind, of right view (as well as, in another context, *Vinaya*). This is discussed in the essay "Sati really does mean memory," in this volume.

Examination is the entry point of phenomenal experience. Bringing the two together is the beginning of seeing through the eyes of the Buddha, for examination proceeds as we keep the Buddha's percepts and interpretations, i.e., right view, in mind. Right view drives our interpretation of phenomena. In doing so we are engaging our recollection of right view in an active way, effectively testing and amending our understanding empirically by matching it against experience as we deepen our ability to fully comprehend that experience. All the while, we are intent on stabilizing the mind on that task.

It will be appreciated that something like the process of examining phenomena must begin analytically with *study* of the teachings. Wide-eyed with faith in the *Dhamma*, we begin to learn right view conceptually or intellectually by giving ear, by reading or committing texts to memory, by analyzing the meanings of these texts and by discussing the meanings with admirable friends, all in an attempt to develop *right view*. We may initially take these teachings as theoretical abstractions, but at some point we will begin to wonder what the heck these terms "suffering," "craving," "delight," "*jhāna*," "collectedness," etc. might really mean in our experience, and we begin to examine their correlates, even as we try to get a conceptual handle on what these doctrines are getting at. We carry this process forward on the cushion, as we will see, where we can bring it into *samādhi*.

All of the remaining factors of awakening fall out as a consequence of this task, including *samādhi*. Thereby, we have a direct causal link between right view and *samādhi*. Liberating knowledge itself is not mentioned among the seven factors of awakening, but is rather a product the entire process,[6] consummated in *samādhi*:

> The knowledges are for one with *samādhi*, not for one without

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vestigation, but the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* (MN 118), the second most significant mindfulness discourse, explicitly describes the *satipaṭṭhāna* as fulfilling all of the seven awakening factors (iii 82).

6 The *Ānāpānasati Sutta* goes on to describe the seven awakening factors and the seven awakening factors as fulfilling knowledge and liberation (iii 82)

> *samādhi.* (AN 6.64)

The eightfold noble path. Although its functions are sometimes marginalized by later authors, we can get an idea of why *samādhi* in fact plays a powerful role in achieving the final goals of practice: It folds in the combined energies of all of the previous seven path factors into a unified whole:

> There are right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort and right mindfulness. The unification of mind equipped with these seven factors is called noble right concentration with its supports and accessories. (SN 45.28)

Since right *samādhi* depends on all the previous steps of the path, the mind, as it enters *samādhi*, already inclines toward wisdom and virtue, toward viewing reality in terms of impermanence, suffering and non-self, toward renunciation, kindness and harmlessness, toward purification of the mind from unwholesome factors and toward appropriate attention and mindfulness. Right *samādhi* consolidates all of the path practices, into a crystal clear state in which repeated practice toward thoroughly internalizing right view really starts to cook, to produce the delectable odors of wisdom. Right *samādhi*, in effect, transforms right view into knowledge and vision.

> When his mind is thus collected in *samādhi*, is purified, bright, rid of blemishes, free of taints, soft, workable, steady and attained to imperturbability, he bends and inclines his mind toward knowledge and vision. He understands “this my body is material, made of four elements. … Just as if a man with good sight were to examine a beryl gem in his hand, saying 'this beryl gem is beautiful, well made, clear and transparent, and through it is strung a blue, yellow, red, white or brown string.” In just the same way he inclines his mind to knowledge and vision … to potency … understands the four noble truths. (DN 2)

The *satipaṭṭhāna.*

According the *satipaṭṭhāna* (“establishment of mindfulness”) *Sutta*,[7] the Buddha recommends attending to four specific topic areas of examination, most of which promote insight into the nature of our experience and can thereby turn right view into seeing things as they are. This is the passage that introduces the four establishments of mindfulness.

> And what, monks, is right mindfulness? Herein:

7 *Satipaṭṭhāna* is traditionally translated as “foundations.” However, Bodhi (2000, 1504), Gethin (2001, 31) and others argue that the word derives from *sati* + *upaṭṭhāna* (stand near, serve), rather than the traditionally assumed *sati* + *paṭṭhāna*, so a better translation is “establishing” or even “attending to.”

1. a monk dwells watching the body [*kāya-anupassī*] in the body , ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief concerning the world.
2. He dwells watching feelings [*vedanā-anupassī*] in feelings, ardent …
3. He dwells watching mind [*citta-anupassī*] in mind, ardent …
4. He dwells watching phenomena [*dhamma-anupassī*] in phenomena, ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief concerning the world. (DN 22, MN 10)

Satipaṭṭhāna thereby begins by choosing a topic of contemplation within one of the four categories of body, feelings, mind and phenomena. Watching body, for instance, we might attend to bodily postures and movement, or attend to the breath, or attend to the decay of a body at death. In watching feeling we attend to what pleases us and what irks us (but not complex emotional states), most typically bodily sensations of comfort and discomfort. In watching mind we attend to the present general quality of mind, for instance, whether it is calm or agitated, sharp or dull, etc. The last category, phenomena (*dhamma*), is the most broad and targets individual experiential factors specifically elucidated categorically in right view.[8] The consummation of wisdom entails insight into all the factors of *Dhamma*, so mindfulness of phenomena should be taken very broadly indeed. We will see that it is this last category that most firmly integrates right view with mindfulness, *samādhi* and liberating knowledge.

In this passage, *watching the body in the body*, *watching feelings in feelings*, etc. is to see directly, without conceptual proliferation, the object directly as it presents itself without wrapping ideas or preconceptions around it, and so without distraction. *Ardent* refers to the energy we commonly associate with mindfulness as something we do. *Clearly comprehending* suggests examination or evaluation of experience within the topic of contemplation. This is, in fact, the locus of insight, where liberating knowledge develops. *Mindful* is to recollect, or hold in mind, right view, in particular concerning the topic of contemplation. Finally, *putting away covetousness and grief concerning the world* admonishes us to avoid worldly distractions.

We see that the *satipaṭṭhāna* focuses on the initial factors of awakening, with *mindful – clearly comprehending – ardent* corresponding to *mindfulness – investigation – energy*. The remaining details, *watching body in body*, … and *putting away covetousness and grief* … tend to keep the mind undistracted, that

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8 I am not aware that this fourth establishment is ever defined specifically this way in the EBT, but the many examples in the literature confirm this definition without exception, and it is widely recognized as such in modern scholarship, e.g., by Ñānamoli and Bodhi (1995, 1194), Gombrich (1997, 36-37), Ronkin (2005, 27), etc.

is, intensely on task. In fact, the last corresponds to abandoning the five hindrances, which is how entering the first *jhāna* is often described.[9] In this way, the role of *samādhi* and, in fact, that of all of the factors of awakening are implicit in *satipaṭṭhāna*:

> [Sāriputta speaking:] Whatever *arahants*, perfectly enlightened ones arose in the past, all those blessed ones had first abandoned the five hindrances, corruptions of the mind and weaknesses of wisdom; and then, with their minds well established in the four establishments of mindfulness, they had developed correctly the seven awakening factors; and thereby they had achieved the unsurpassed perfect awakening. (SN 47.12)

Although modern meditation practice tends to chose topics within body, feelings or mind for contemplation, rather than within the broad category of phenomena,[10] it can be argued that the first three foundations of mindfulness are but warm-ups for the fourth, for it is in the fourth that the whole of right view comes fully alive in direct experience. It is *watching phenomena* that floods our meditation with right view to evoke liberating knowledge. This is where we get at the heart of, and internalize and develop, liberating knowledge of impermanence, suffering and non-self, of the five aggregates and the six sense spheres, of the twelve links of dependent co-arising, and so on. Among the many *satipaṭṭhāna* discourses, including correspondents in the Chinese and Tibetan collections, we find a large variance in the specific phenomena actually listed, suggesting the open-endedness of this category.[11]

It should come as no surprise that some of the important factors of right view are supplemented by detailed, exhaustive instructions in the EBT for how to go about examining the corresponding phenomena. Let's call these *examination*

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9 See Gethin (2001, 53, 162-3). MN 125 (iii 136) also describes how one abandons the hindrances, then "abides contemplating body as body," etc., then enters into the second *jhāna*, implying that *satipaṭṭhāna* practice has already begun in the first *jhāna*.

10 Among the most popular *vipassanā* methods, Mahāsi centers on mindfulness of bodily postures, Goenka on feelings and Pa Auk on elements.

11 I should note that Anālayo (2014) comes to the opposite conclusion. In the introduction of this book he declares, by way of methodology, that he will take what is common to parallel texts as most reliably authentic (p. 4), which seems reasonable. Finding only the hindrances and the awakening factors themselves common to all *satipaṭṭhāna* parallels, he concludes that only those are original, and that therefore the function of watching phenomena is only to monitor the mind with regard to meditation (p. 176). In short, he intersects the variant lists, where I take their union. However, the open-endedness provides a more natural explanation for the variance.

trainings. The *Saṃyutta Nikāya* is a particularly valuable resource for examination trainings.[12] For instance, the *Khandasaṃyutta*, constituting 131 pages and 159 suttas in the Wisdom edition, look at the aggregates from every angle, asking us repeatedly to notice their impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and selflessness, as well as their allure, their danger and the escape from them. The *Saḷāyatanasaṃyutta*, 127 pages and 248 suttas, does something similar for the sixfold-sphere ("sense spheres"). This raises an very interesting thought: Were the suttas that convey such examination trainings delivered by the Buddha initially as *guided* meditations?

Internalizing *Dhamma*.

So far, all indications are that *samādhi* receives and processes right view. From every angle in the EBT the context of *samādhi* seems to suggest or explicitly state that. Shulman, in a very important study, views the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* as one in which "philosophy" is internalized to become "perception," in which the right view becomes woven into the very structure of our perception, as an active way of seeing.[13] This is how we come to see through the eyes of the Buddha.[14] This is a perspective that directly integrates *Dhamma* and liberating knowledge. However, only in *samādhi* will phenomena be penetrated.[15]

At issue at hand is how in the heck the stillness of *samādhi* can take on the cognitive load of right view. The answer, in a nutshell, is that familiarity and habit reduce the cognitive load to a manageable level. Internalization of the kind required is, in fact, a natural and ubiquitous process found throughout our cognitive lives as part of learning through familiarization with our conceptual and physical world. At one time a particular concept or task may be very difficult to manage; a year or two later it might call for a mere gesture of mind or body.

For instance, recall how difficult driving a motor vehicle was at first, that is, how many complex variables you needed to keep track of: from the assessment of possible trajectories of many moving objects, including your own vehicle, to the many decisions required every minute that were made annoyingly slowly from the perspective of the driver behind you. Now, however, you are able to

12 Shulman (2014, 85) points out that the repetitive, highly redundant nature of these texts, which from a theoretical point of view could be reduced to precise general statements, reveals their function as meditative exercises with many subtle variations on common themes.

13 Shulman (2014, 106, 111).

14 Gombrich (1997, 36) similarly describes the task of the fourth establishment as learning to think with the teachings, rather than about them, or to learn to see with the Buddha's spectacles.

15 Ñāṇananda (2009, 3).

drive down the free-way, ready to respond to any contingency in a heartbeat (more or less successfully) even while you are at once singing along with the radio, drinking a Starbucks and replaying a football game in your head, barely conscious of the steering wheel under your fingers. Familiarity and habit has intervened to make the same task much less cognitively laden.

Many years ago, I discovered that my teenage daughter could read an analog (circular, with sweeping hands) clock only with much difficulty. It occurred to me that that is, in fact, a conceptually difficult process, one that I had internalized in the 50's, while she had grown up in the digital age. The difference between her and me was familiarity and habit. Similarly, consider that a dentist who moves a probe or drill around that he can often only see in his little mirror must, at first, have reasoned through each move logically based on the premise that the mirror reverses the direction of everything. He will fortunately in the meantime have learned through practice to move his instrument quite readily and without thought or error, to his patients' great relief. Familiarity and habit.

Malcolm Gladwell's book *Blink: the power of thinking without thinking*[16] provides many examples of the human expert's capacity for reliably assessing enormously complex content in the blink of an eye, as hunch or as intuition, with no idea of how they do it: basketball players that have “court sense,” generals who have the power of a glance in their tactical planning, birdwatchers who see the slightest movement in a tree, art dealers who find something “just not right” about some supposedly rare artifact. Familiarity and habit make make these complex tasks cognitively featherweight.

The capacity for processing complex conceptual content with the slightest gesture of the mind is often attained through focused training. Consider the musician.[17] Beginning with some basic theory, she develops musical sensitivities through years of practice and training guided by instruction and tradition. Never having undergone such training, I tend to picture such people endlessly practicing scales to the annoyance of neighbors and pets:

The upshot, with time, is that her experience of music becomes highly refined and sensitive, and no longer requires any thought or analysis whatever, that her perception and production becomes intuitive rather than conceptual, in her fingers and quite spontaneous, completely integrated into her perception and production.

This commonplace kind of learning process is also in play as we train to see our experiential worlds in accordance with right view, to see through the Bud-

16 2005, Little, Brown and Company.

17 Shulman (2014, 108).

dha's eyes. We begin with study. We have to learn a concept like suffering (*dukkha*) as something we can recognize in experience. We are told it arises with sickness, with old age, with separation from what we love and from proximity to what we hate, and that its origin is craving. We put our book down and think about it real hard, read a bit more, think a bit more.

Then we take our suffering onto the cushion, much as a musician picks up the cello. We begin to discover what suffering looks like in our experiential world, generalize the concept to additional factors, and become alarmed to discover the ubiquity and depth of our suffering, even in situations where we once thought were having "fun." Through continued and repeated contemplation these factors become increasingly familiar parts of the fabric of our experience, and less and less cognitively laden. Eventually we requiring virtually no effort to perceive or to respond to what began as extremely complex conceptual content. We begin to see with crystal clarity that suffering is always accompanied by craving, a sense that something in the experiential situation demands change, and we learn to see suffering as the shadow of craving, always accompanying craving, but disappearing as soon as craving disappears.

The point is that unladen internalization of complex conceptual content requires *samādhi*, just as internalization of musical skill requires deep and wholehearted immersion for long hours in the experience of melodies, harmonies and rhythms. On the other hand, *samādhi* requires a light cognitive load, and the higher *jhānas*, in particular, require a featherlight cognitive load. This is a spiraling practice in which we have some choice in the cognitive load we undertake during a particular sit, through choice of topic or subtopic, or in the depth of *samādhi* we would like to reach for that sit. A more familiar, less laden topic can be brought more quickly and deeper into *samādhi*, a less familiar, more laden topic must be handled in shallow *samādhi*, or else with book in one hand and chin in the other, until it becomes familiar enough to bring into the first *jhāna*. We routinely face a choice about balancing load and depth.

Theory is difficult to internalize. Abstract theory does not internalize well through mindfulness and *samādhi*, just as musical theory is probably, I daresay, not internalized as readily scales are. A theory is less likely to be descriptive of phenomena as they arise in experience, but rather to be descriptive of broad principles or hidden mechanisms unobservable behind phenomenal experience. We would expect that, for theory, the examination of phenomena breaks down in *samādhi*. In my years of study and practice I have become increasingly aware of how nuts-and-bolts the *Dhamma* is, how applicable to real experiential situations. Nonetheless, historically, the *Dhamma* seems to have turned from being largely a support for practice with clear soteriological goals, to being more significantly an intellectual plaything, an object of speculative

philosophy pursued for its own sake.[18]

For instance, we often find a particular teaching, such as the four noble truths, with two alternate interpretations: (1) an *observable* one and (2) a *theoretical* one. The observable one is the one that we have been considering here, phrased as "this is suffering," etc. descriptive of direct experience.[19] Alongside this in the EBT is a less common, yet more prominently displayed formulation, found, for instance, in the Buddha's first discourse,[20] in which the second truth is described like this:

> The noble truth of the origin of suffering is this: It is the craving which produces rebirth accompanied by passionate greed, and finding fresh delight now here, and now there, namely craving for sense pleasure, craving for existence and craving for non-existence.
> (SN 56.11).

This is so broad and sweeping that it leaves us with little sense of how to go about observing this in moment by moment experience.[21] This is not, however, to say that the theoretical formulation is wrong, for it takes a useful and more panoramic perspective of how craving and suffering play out that may serve to contextualize and inspire our nuts-and-bolts practice. Some aspects of the *Dhamma* have possibly always been theoretical, but it is important to distinguish theory from the observable requirements of our practice, and also to guard against the allure of theory in trying to attain knowledge and vision.[22]

Samādhi's cognitive load capacity

We have seen that the cognitive load we take into *samādhi* turns out to be much

18 We might also say that the Buddha gave us a religion and it later became a philosophy, to turn a common secularist sentiment on its head.

19 Shulman (2009, 139, 190).

20 *The Turning-of-the-Wheel*, *Dhammacakkappavattana*, *Sutta*, SN 56.11.

21 Shulman (2009, ix, 139-146, 188) suggests that the observable formulation is original and that the theoretical formulation is a later development that arose through later theoretical elaboration, less integral in the EBT.

22 Hamilton (2000, 140) also warns that we often forget the the focus of early Buddhism is the world of experience, and when that happens we begin to misunderstand Buddhism. Ronkin (2005, 8) writes of a tension between the rational/systematic and experiential/practical dimensions, and holds that early Buddhism presented human experience as not held together by any underlying substrate (p. 14). Her book overall illustrates the way in which the various *Abhidharma* traditions tended historically toward theoretical elaboration. Kalupahana (1992, 23) maintains that the Buddha laid down a "non-metaphysical" (non-theoretical) explanation of experience.

lighter than we initially thought. It remains to show how *samādhi* is cognitively more accommodating to such cognitive load than we might think and to conclude that *samādhi* indeed provides the context in which examination of phenomena turns to liberating wisdom. *Samādhi* is a space beyond normal human cognition and reasoning that can nonetheless sustain stark conceptual content effortlessly and clearly for arbitrarily long periods, developing further the development of familiarity and intimacy with topics of examination. This is the ideal incubator for the compete internalization of the Buddha's wisdom. This is why:

> There is no *jhāna* for one with no wisdom, no wisdom for one without *jhāna*. But one with both *jhāna* and wisdom, he's on the verge of *nibbāna*. (Dhp 372)

Characterizing *samādhi*. Two different kinds of mental state described in the modern literature can potentially be identified with *samādhi* ; there is some controversy about this. The first of these is often called *absorption* and is,

> … about focusing the mind to a single point, unifying it, and placing it upon a particular object. … If this process of steadying the mind on a single object is allowed to mature, it will eventually reach a stage called absorption …. In this state the mind is so thoroughly attending to a particular object that it is no longer aware of other objects that might present themselves at a sense door.[23]

On the face of it, absorption does not seem suitable for investigating phenomena while keeping right view in mind, for it will cut off investigation of the dynamics and conditionality of phenomena. It is also unlikely to be the *samādhi* that arises among the awakening factors, for it is grounded not in examination of phenomena but in one-pointed attention to a single object, although it may be useful to consider one-pointed attention to be a special case at the limit of examination of phenomena, one at which the topic is carefully chosen to minimize cognitive load.[24] Considered this way, absorption itself is a special form at the margin of the space of *samādhi.*

The second kind of mental state sometimes identified with *samādhi* is wide-open awareness. In “How did mindfulness become 'Bare, non-judgmental, present-moment awareness'?” in this volume, I argue that the modern (mid-20th century) use of the word “mindfulness” in fact corresponds more closely to

23 Olendzki (2009).

24 However, this is rather marginal in the EBT. For instance, *satipaṭṭhāna seems* seems consistently to spread attention, for example to maintain body awareness when the breath is taken as the topic. The claim of one-pointed attention to breath at the nose is unlikely. See Shankman (2008, 183-186) on this.

samādhi in the EBT than to *sati*. Here is a description:

> … unlike one-pointedness and absorption, mindfulness tends to open to a broader range of phenomena rather than restricting the focus to a singular object. Like a floodlight rather than a spotlight, mindfulness illuminates a more fluid phenomenological field of ever-changing experience … mindfulness practice is more about investigating a process than about examining an object. … the concentrated mind is then directed to a moving target—the flowing stream of consciousness—rather than being allowed to stabilize on a single point. … mindfulness practice allows the mind to follow whatever is arising in experience. There is less a sense of controlling what the awareness is resting upon and more care given to how awareness is manifesting.[25]

This sounds like exactly what we would expect to arise on the basis of investigation of phenomena. Various descriptions of *samādhi* found in the EBT seem to correspond to this characterization.

> Just as if there were a pool of water in a mountain glen – clear, limpid, and unsullied – where a man with good eyesight standing on the bank could see shells, gravel, and pebbles, and also shoals of fish swimming about and resting, … In the same way – with his mind thus in *samādhi*, purified, and bright, unblemished, free from defects, pliant, malleable, steady, and attained to imperturbability – the monk directs and inclines it to the knowledge of the ending of the mental fermentations. (MN 39)

This is a state unlike what is generally found in yogic methods of meditation – which seem to prioritize absorption – and may have been unknown prior to the Buddha.[26] However, I should point out, the Theravāda tradition generally disagrees with this characterization,[27] largely due to the great influence of the seminal *Visuddhimagga (Path of Purification)*, a fifth-century work within the Sri Lankan commentary tradition.[28] On the other hand, other Buddhist schools

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25 Olendzki (2009).

26 Significantly, the term *samādhi* may well have originated with the Buddha himself (Walsh 1996, 556), possibly suggesting a desire on his part to distinguish *samādhi* as what arises from investigation from the space that ensues from existing absorption techniques. *Jhāna* was a much older term.

27 Shankman (2008) discusses in detail the different ways *samādhi* is interpreted in modern Theravāda traditions.

28 *Visuddhimagga* effectively breaks the sequence of awakening factors, even though they play such a prominent role in the EBT. In its stead, it produces into two distinct meditation techniques, which it calls "*vipassanā*" and "*samatha*." "*Vipassanā*" begins with mindfulness and examination but never reaches *samādhi*. "*Samatha*" begins with mindfulness and one-

see things differently. The centuries-old Zen technique of *shikantaza* (Japanese, just sitting), or Ch'an silent illumination involves just sitting in stillness and observing the experiential world unfold, attaching to nothing.[29]

Matching cognitive load to *jhāna*. The *jhānas* grade *samādhi* in terms of increasingly attenuated cognitive faculties in which to continue our process of examination. In fact, prior to the first *jhāna* we might include study of and reflection on right view as the point at which examination begins, thereby spanning contemplation both at desk and on cushion. We anticipate that we will be able to sustain heavier cognitive loads only at desk or possibly in the first *jhāna*, whereas lighter cognitive loads might succeed in the higher *jhānas*. There is a kind of balance to be brokered between depth of *jhāna* and weight of cognitive load; the meditator can at any point choose pursue deep *jhāna* with a topic of light cognitive load, or shallow *jhāna* with a topic of heavy cognitive load. *Vipassanā* (introspection) and *samatha* (settling) are terms sometimes used in the EBT for these contrasting qualities in the meditator's tool kit.[30] As a topic become more familiar, it can be carried deeper into *samādhi*. This is where *vipassanā* and *samatha* are evenly in conjunction.[31]

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pointed attention and reaches absorption, which it calls "*samādhi*," with the claim that *samādhi* is not necessary for awakening. Some have argued that the *Visuddhimagga* had come under the influence of non-Buddhist yogic techniques to produce these results (Polak, 2011). Incidentally, a commonly cited argument that *samādhi/jhāna* is absorption is the occurrence of the term *ekagga* in the description of the *jhānas*, which is sometimes translated as "one-pointed." This argument is not compelling since *ekagga* (*eka* 'one' + *agga* 'highest/best/furthest extent'), although it can refer to the tip of, say, a knife, is more generally and better translated as "having a single theme," or "uniform," just as *samagga* (*sam* 'together' + *agga*) is generally translated as "harmonious," not "co-pointed." See Shankman (2008, 42-43) on this.

29 Sometimes called objectless meditation, it manages to produce a flood-light-like condition of *samādhi* without even a fixed theme, but rather loosely centered in awareness of the body. Although it examines phenomena, what it seems to lack in contrast *dhammānupassanā* is consistent reference to *DhammaDhamma* in its examination.

30 Notice that later Theravāda tradition of the *Visuddhimagga* treats *vipassanā* and *samatha* as distinct *techniques* of meditation; see Shankman, 2008, 84). This has no support in the EBT – see Shankman (2008, 123) – where these terms, in their rare occurrences, clearly describe a continuum in the space of options available in selecting topics of examination in the single, coherent *satipaṭṭhāna*/awakening factors framework. See, for instance, AN 4.170.

31 See AN 4.170.

The role of the first *jhāna* is particularly notable in this respect because it still permits thought and deliberation (*vitakka-vicāra*), factors missing in the second, third and fourth *jhānas*, yet is included in the stillness of *samādhi*. In fact, the first *jhāna* is discursive in nature:

> Thought and evaluation are the verbal formation, one breaks into speech. (MN 44)

The first *jhāna* therefore provides a kind of workshop in which contemplation at one's desk turns to concentrated effort, while still permitting a degree of reasoning and reflection, though in a purposeful and controlled form focused on the topic of examination, where the possibility of a significant cognitive load is still supported.

Once the cognitive load is light enough, due to familiarity and habit born of practice, we can proceed to the higher *jhānas*, in which some degree of conceptual gesturing and understanding are still possible.[32] Note that *satipaṭṭhāna* is referred to as *samādhi-nimitta* in many texts, indicating that the topics of *satipaṭṭhāna* continue in *samādhi*.[33] The Buddha praises Sāriputta for his talents for examination of these topics in all *jhānas*:

> Whatever qualities there are in the first *jhāna* … he ferrets them out one by one. Known to him they remain, known to him they subside... (MN 111)

He then makes exactly the same statement but with regard to second *jhāna*. third *jhāna* and fourth *jhāna*.

Seeing through the eyes of the Buddha

We learn to see through the eyes of the Buddha by holding two things before our own eyes at the same time, our own observable phenomenal experience and right view as explained by the Buddha. We do this through examination and mindfulness. We consummate this process when we bring it into the clear stillness and undistractedness of *samādhi*. In this way we familiarize ourselves with, and habituate, the Buddha's way of seeing and finally completely internalize it, make it our own. This is a process that integrates experience, right view, mindfulness and *samādhi* to produce knowledge and vision of how things are and bring us close to awakening.

In the higher *jhānas*, examined phenomena might seem suspended unmoving in space; for instance, suffering, standing with craving right alongside, crystal-clear as can be, as if we were looking at our topics of contemplation through a

32 Shulman (2014, 25).
33 Shulman (2014, 131).

microscope. This represents a particularly intense, penetrating, sustained, personal and potentially transformative engagement with right view, something like intense study, but going beyond the limits of normal human perception.[34] In this way we learn to see through the Buddha's eyes, which are quite a bit sharper than ours were to begin with, and so to see things as they really are.

34 Shulman (2014, 50, 83, 105).

How did mindfulness become "Bare, non-judgmental, present-moment awareness"?

"Mindfulness" in modern discourse – whether among meditation teachers or clinicians – is defined in various ways, but generally circles around "bare, non-judgmental, present-moment awareness." Nonetheless, although mindfulness (in Pali, *sati*) is one of the most fundamental concepts in the Early Buddhists Texts (EBT), one would be hard-pressed to find a definition or description of mindfulness there that remotely resembles such circulations. In this essay I will try to account for our modern definitions of mindfulness and how they might be reconciled with the EBT.

My intention is not to delegitimize these modern definitions; words come to be used differently with time and, hey, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose, By any other word would smell as sweet!" The modern definitions have clearly proved useful and resonate with modern meditative and clinical experience. My intention is to explore what the shift in the meaning of mindfulness tells us about the shift from early Buddhist concerns to modern concerns as we pursue "mindfulness," and then to ask the critical question, What might we have left behind?

Modern definitions of mindfulness

The benefits attributed to mindfulness in modern literature range broadly. They encompass therapy, such as stress reduction, improved memory, creativity and productivity, less emotional reactivity and better relationships. Many are spiritual, such as greater insight into the human condition and the nature of reality. Generally mindfulness is described as promoting happiness and well-being, a kind of going along with the flow of life.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines mindfulness as,

> "The practice of maintaining a nonjudgmental state of heightened or complete awareness of one's thoughts, emotions, or experiences on a moment-to-moment basis."

Meditation teacher Sylvia Boorstein defines it as,

> "Mindfulness is the aware, balanced acceptance of the present experience. It isn't more complicated than that. It is opening to or receiving the present moment, pleasant or unpleasant, just as it is, without either clinging to it or rejecting it."

Professor of medicine and innovator of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as,

> "Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally."

The great Sri Lankan-American monk, meditation teacher and scholar Bhante Gunaratana writes,

> "Mindfulness is nonconceptual awareness. Another English term for *Sati* is 'bare attention'."[1]

Broadly speaking, we can identify four qualities that recurrently appear in such definitions:

- **Heightened awareness.** This awareness, attention or consciousness is described as very alert and receptive. Descriptors applied are: intense, active, curious, vigilant and watchful, paying attention, but also calm, open, with balance and equanimity, choiceless, lucid and spacious. Bhikkhu Bodhi describes mindfulness as a kind of "mental pose."[2] Generally implicit is that it is a state that can be sustained over extended periods of time.
- **Present moment awareness.** This is variously described as meeting each moment as it presents itself, or as opening to and receiving the present moment just as it is, as not thinking about past and future, or simply as being present.
- **Bare awareness.** This is sometimes described as wordless or without interpretation, as seeing things as they are. Sometimes bare awareness is assumed to be non-conceptual or intuitive.[3]
- **Non-judgmental awareness.** This is variously described as acceptance, as without criticism, as without reactivity, as without labeling "good" or "bad," or as being compassionate with oneself.

It should be noticed that the modern definitions of mindfulness are generally framed in terms of sustained states or qualities of mind, independent of the

1 Gunaratana (2011, 140).
2 Bodhi (2011, 26).
3 Gunaratana (2011, 138) calls mindfulness also a "fleeting instance of pure awareness before conceptualization."

specific practices that produce these results. That is, mindfulness is not something we do, but rather it is a kind of mental condition that might result from something we do, that is, from application of a technique.

Mindfulness in early Buddhism

In 2006, two great American scholar-practitioners B. Alan Wallace and Bhikkhu Bodhi, began a correspondence which began with Wallace posing the following question about *sati*, the ancient Pali word for mindfulness:[4]

> "As you well know, in the current *Vipassanā* tradition as it has been widely propagated in the West, *sati* is more or less defined as "bare attention," or the moment-to-moment, nonjudgmental awareness of whatever arises in the present moment. There is no doubt that the cultivation of such mindfulness is very helpful, but, strangely enough, I have found no evidence in traditional Pāli, Sanskrit, or Tibetan sources to support this definition of *sati* (*smṛti*, *dranpa*)."

In fact, the word *sati* means, quite literally in Pali, 'memory' or 'recollection'. Wallace goes on to point to such a definition provided a number of times by the Buddha:

> And what is the faculty of *sati*? Here, monks, the noble disciple is recollective, possessing utmost recollection and discernment, recalling and bearing in mind even things that were done and said long ago. This is called the faculty of *sati*.
> (SN 48.9, similarly at MN 53 i 356, etc.)

In "*Sati* really does mean'memory" in this volume,[5] I take this definition very seriously and show how it almost entirely accounts for the use of *sati* in the EBT. I will summarize this account very briefly here.[6]

Sati means 'recollection' but is used in the EBT particularly as recollection of the *Dhamma*. Because the *Dhamma* functions primarily to undergird practice, recollection is most typically *situated*, that is, it is evoked as it bears on particular practice situations. This entails being *recollective*, that is, having the teaching at our fingertips that is relevant to the current situation, and having *discernment*, that is, evaluating the current situation in terms of that teaching to guide behavior or understanding. *Sati* is thereby largely equivalent to *dhamma-cariyā*, conduct in accordance with the *Dhamma*, or, more literally, moving about in the *Dhamma*. From another perspective, we can say that *sati* is what

4 Wallace and Bodhi (2006).

5 This was spun off of the current essay when I failed to write the section "Mindfulness in early Buddhism" as concisely as hoped.

6 Thanissaro (2012, 9-14) describes mindfulness in the EBT in similar terms.

turns Buddhist theory into practice as it is borne in mind moment by moment.

Mindfulness thereby involves keeping in mind throughout our practice day such things as our trust and appreciation of the triple gem, our vows, precepts, conditions for guarding the senses, standards for evaluating what is wholesome and unwholesome, social responsibilities, conditions for making merit, values, worldview, and knowledge useful in interpreting phenomenal experience.[7] It reminds monks not to tiptoe or walk on their heels in a householders home,[8] a participant in an altercation that the anger of one's interlocutor hurts him more that it hurts oneself, the bug-infested not to assault living beings and the introspector that there is suffering in this craving.

When brought into meditation, we find *sati* in a dual role:

- ***sati's* regulatory function.** *Sati* keeps in mind what we are supposed to be doing, it regulates our behavior. It serves this function in right speech and right action, for instance, in following precepts. It also keeps in mind the *satipaṭṭhāna* instructions.
- ***sati's* framing function.** *Sati* keeps in mind our knowledge of the *Dhamma*, particularly right view, as we examine and interpret our experiential world.

The *satipaṭṭhāna* (literally, attendance of recollection, but aka foundations of mindfulness), involves both the regulatory and framing functions of the situated recollection of *Dhamma*. The overall practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* is a task of *observation* (*anupassanā*) that begins by picking a theme within one of four categories (body, feeling, mind and general phenomena) for observation. For instance, we might take craving as a theme. Observation typically proceeds by coordinating two processes:

- clear comprehension (*sampajañña*). This examines and interprets the direct experience of craving as it arises in the present situation.
- *sati*. This recalls and bears in mind what is known about craving, for

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7 I should point out that our recollection of the *DhammaDhamma* is more than a reflection of hearing or reading the *DhammaDhamma*. It also evolves through our practice as we ponder on the *DhammaDhamma*, verify the *DhammaDhamma* in our own experience, bring the *DhammaDhamma* it into our meditation, internalize the *DhammaDhamma* and habituate our conduct and understanding according to the *Dhamma*.. Our situated recollection may become so habituated that it becomes more intuitive than conceptual, much like the habituation of any skill. See “Seeing through the eyes of the Buddha” in this volume..

8 This really is one of the 227 monks' rules, this one intended to preserve the dignity of the *SaṅghaSaṅgha*.

instance, its relationship to feeling and to suffering. This is *sati* in its framing role.

Additional factors are mentioned in the *satipaṭṭhāna*:

- ardency.
- observing “body in body,” “feeling in feeling,” etc.
- “putting aside covetousness and dejection with regard to the world.”

This array of factors, broadly speaking, extends even to the arising of *samādhi*, intimately related to the *satipaṭṭhāna*.[9]

Sati here is explicitly mentioned in its framing role as a support for examination of phenomena, but it is also implicitly present in its regulatory role, holding all of the involved factors together. However, since mindfulness in its regulator role is present in all practice, what puts *sati* in the word *satipaṭṭhāna* must be this distinguished framing role. *Sati* here might be described as the portal through which our meditation is infused with right view, ultimately to be internalized so that we learn to see with the eyes of the Buddha.

So, *sati* is recollection. This would be well and good, but the Buddha also equates right mindfulness (*sammā-sati*), the penultimate factor of the noble eightfold path, with the *satipaṭṭhāna* as a whole:

> And what, bhikkhus, is right mindfulness? Here, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* dwells observing the body in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending, recollective, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world. He dwells observing feelings in feelings, ... mind in mind … phenomena in phenomena ... This is right recollection.
> (SN 45.8)

In short, *sati* serves as the name for one particular factor, framing recollection of the *Dhamma*, within a larger configuration of factors. I will call this *sati*, or recollection, *per se*. But it also serves as the name of the entire configuration of factors present in *satipaṭṭhāna*. This opens up the scope of the word mindfulness to take on the qualities of the various factors of the *satipaṭṭhāna*, not just of *sati* per se.[10] This, I will maintain, justifies, at least to some degree, the mod-

9 Be aware that the Theravada school historically introduced a strict dichotomy between “*vipassanā*” and “*samatha*” meditations, unfounded in the EBT. Accordingly, the meanings of *samādhi* and *jhāna* shifted so that they were no longer compatible with *satipaṭṭhāna*. This shift might obscure the validity of this statement made here about *samādhi* in the EBT for some readers. See Cintita (2017, 192-199) and Shankman (2008) for more on this.

10 This kind of extension of the meaning of a word from part to whole is

ern definitions of mindfulness.

How modern definitions reflect *satipaṭṭhāna*

Notice that mindfulness (either *sati* or *satipaṭṭhāna)* is something that we *do* in the EBT; it is an active *process*. This is in contrast to modern definitions, in which mindfulness is a relatively passive, receptive sustained *state* of awareness. Many of the qualities attributed to *sati* in modern descriptions, in fact, seem to apply not to *sati* per se, but to other factors of the *satipaṭṭhāna* complex. Let's try to locate the four qualities that recur in modern definitions in terms of the complex of factors found in *satipaṭṭhāna.*

Heightened awareness. We mentioned that this quality comprehends alertness, intensity, activity, curiosity, vigilance, watchfulness and attention. These are qualities that arise in *satipaṭṭhāna*, but are best attributed to clear comprehension (*sampajañña*), not to mindfulness per se. We also mentioned that this quality is a kind of "mental pose" that comprehends receptivity, calm, openness, balance, equanimity, choiceless awareness, lucidity and spaciousness. These are also qualities not of *sati* per se, but of concentration (*samādhi*) or *jhāna.* This is a state that arises immediately dependent on *satipaṭṭhāna*, largely through suppression of distractions or hindrances, and that we train ourselves to sustain over long periods of time.[11]

Present moment awareness. There are significant exceptions to this quality within the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna.* For instance, within the charnal ground contemplations there is an exercise in imagining oneself as a *future* corpse. Moreover, a number of practices involve visualizations rather than attendance to what the present moment presents, such as recollection of the Buddha, *Dhamma* and *Saṅgha* (*Buddhānussati*, etc.), kindness (*mettā*) contemplation or even contemplation of parts of the body in *satipaṭṭhāna* that cannot be directly discerned in the moment.

Nevertheless, most *satipaṭṭhāna* exercises are indeed observations of the arising and disappearance phenomena as they are experienced, and in this sense involve awareness of the present moment. Recall that *sati* per se is generally situated recollection that tracks the process of clear comprehension of whatever is being observed. Moreover, mindfulness in its regulatory function requires

known as synecdoche.

11 See "Seeing through the eyes of the Buddha" in this volume for more on *samādhi.* Indeed, modern mindfulness might just as well be identified with *samādhi* as with *sati.* The reason this identity is never stated is likely the strict dichotomy between "*vipassanā*" and "*samatha*" meditations in the later Theravada school mentioned in an earlier footnote, which implies that *samādhi* cannot arise in *satipaṭṭhāna.*

attending choices as they present themselves.

Bare awareness. Recall that this is sometimes described as wordless or without interpretation, as seeing things as they are, sometimes as non-conceptual or intuitive.[12] This quality seems also to have exceptions. *Sati* per se is *specifically* discriminating in EBT, as it is used to interpret or regulate present circumstances in terms of *Dhamma.* As Bodhi (2011, 26) points out, *sati* guarantees correct practice of other path factors. This makes problematic the notion of *sati* as devoid of discrimination or evaluation.[13]

Nonetheless, the various factors of *satipaṭṭhāna* do tend toward a stripped down conceptual content: We are asked to observe the body in the body, etc., which entails control of excess elaboration. Moreover, as we remove covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world, distractions are subdued. Furthermore, with the arising of the *jhānas* the mind is brought to a very quiet state. It is even possible that, with the habituation and internalization of the themes of *satipaṭṭhāna* /*samādhi,* conceptual content might give way to a more intuitive “feel” for the themes of *samādhi.*[14]

Non-judgmental awareness. Bhikkhu Bodhi recounts attending a *vipassanā* retreat at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachussets as young monk after having lived for a number of years in Sri Lanka. He recalls being alarmed that a sign in corridor read, “Allow Whatever Arises.”[15] One of the primary functions of *sati* per se in the EBT is to put what is observed in relation to values, to recognize what is skillful, blameless, pure or refined, and what is unskillfull, blamable, impure or inferior, according to ethical standards, and in fact the amoral implications of neglecting ethical judgment are a recurrent criticism of modern mindfulness.[16]

It might therefore therefore seem that the quality of non-judgmental awareness – entailing acceptance, lack of criticism or reactivity, refraining from labeling “good” or “bad” and compassion toward oneself – has been created out of

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12 The phrase “bare attention” to refer to mindfulness is due to the great German monk Nyanaponika Thera. Bhikkhu Bodhi (2011, 29), who was Nyanaponika's student for many years states that bare awareness was never intended to define mindfulness overall, just highlight initial phase of *satipaṭṭhāna*, yet became quite influential.

13 Curiously, Gunaratana (2011, 190) writes specifically of mindfulness, “It just observes everthing as if it was occurring for the first time. It is not analysis that is based on reflection and memory.”

14 See “Sati really does mean 'memory'” and references there for more on this.

15 Wallace and Bodhi (2006).

16 Sharf (2014, 943-944), Purser (2019).

whole cloth. However, what we can say in its defense is that, both in the *sati-paṭṭhāna* or in modern mindfulness practice, we do become less *reactive* than we might otherwise be, as we observe what is pure or defiled with relative detachment. This follows from the heightened awareness and *samādhi* we develop in these practices.

In summary, the recurrent qualities of modern mindfulness can be mapped, with varying degrees of success, onto various factors within the *satipaṭṭhāna* complex. What is perhaps most troubling in the modern definitions is that one factor, in particular, plays remarkably little role in this mapping: *sati* per se. I will attempt to show that this can be traced back to the neglect of right view and ethics among the concerns of modern mindfulness practice. Consequently, there is very little left of mindfulness in mindfulness.

The origin of the modern definitions

I will suggest that the modern definitions arose in the twentieth century as the West appropriated an incomplete Buddhism from the East, typically weakening, and often stripping entirely, right view, as well as the system of ethics and virtue that forms the heart of the Buddha's teaching. Meditation became, to varying degrees, a stand-alone practice more easily exportable to the West, dissociated from its traditional context. With the neglect of right view, the role of *sati* in *satipaṭṭhāna* as the portal through which right view enters into our meditation came to be misunderstood.

Four meditation techniques seem to have been particularly influential in the formation of Buddhism in the West. It is significant that all of them seem to have already achieved a degree of portability in Asia as attempts at popularization. These are general Chan/Zen meditation, the Sambōkyōdan Zen tradition from Japan, Goenka-style *vipassanā* and Mahāsī-style *vipassanā*. Berkeley scholar Robert Sharf has studied the the effects of popularization movements in Buddhism, particularly with respect to meditation practices in East Asia,[17] and points out that the overall tendency of any such popularization movements seems to be the promotion of one particular aspect, of what is otherwise a broad array of integrated practices and understandings, above and sometimes to the exclusion of all others. It is easy to see why this might be so, given the vast breadth and depth of the *Dhamma* and the limited time available to most adherents for Buddhist practice.

Non-meditation movements. Outside of meditation, we consider *nembutsu*, the devotional chanting of the name of Amitabha Buddha in East Asian Pure Land Buddhism, and the devotional recitation, study and display of the Lotus

17 Sharf (2014, 2018, etc.).

Sutra in Japanese Nichiren Buddhism. Such promotion of a single practice is often accompanied by the claim of completeness, that all other practices are unnecessary or ineffective for spiritual attainment. This encourages the dislodging of the practice from its full traditional context and makes it easily portable to new cultural and religious contexts.

General Chan/Zen. In the eighth century, Sharf reports, Buddhist masters in the Chinese capitol popularized meditation practice, in response to the demand of lay devotees, by making it simple and accessible to those without doctrinal training nor ascetic lifestyle and by promising quick results. This became the meditation (*Chan*/*Zen*) school, in which meditation became a matter of setting aside distinctions and conceptualizations, and letting mind rest in the flow of here and now. The almost exclusive focus on meditation is foundational, probably not so much for the actual practice of Zen historically, but certainly for the way Zen views itself. In any case, the neglect of doctrinal training found its way into, and is to this day very much part of, the American Soto Zen experience.[18]

Sambōkyōdan. Sambōkyōdan Zen is a twentieth century largely lay popularization movement that began in Japan and focuses single-mindedly on meditation in the form of koan introspection.[19] It consideres virtually all other practices, even monastic practice, to be ineffective, but promises quick results to its adherents in terms of *kensho*, awakening experiences. It has achieved little success in Japan, where it is widely disparaged, but has achieved a great following abroad, where even many Christian clergy people have become authorized Sambōkyōdan masters.

***Vipassanā* movement.** The modern *vipassanā* movement began as part of a very broad movement that began before 1900 to revitalize Buddhism in Burma, largely driven by the threat to Buddhism by British colonization, involving renewed commitment to ethics and virtue, to *Dhamma* study and to meditation. By and large, the ethical and doctrinal foundations of meditation have been broadly upheld in Burma as prerequisites of meditation practice. For instance, meditation master Mohnyin Sayadaw required learning *Abhidhamma* before learning meditation,[20] and Mogok Sayadaw required extensive study of dependent co-arising before undertaking meditation practice.[21] Of interest to us are the meditation schools that found success in non-Buddhist lands, particularly the schools promoted by S.N. Goenka and Mahāsī Sayadaw.

Goenka method. U Ba Khin was one of few non-monastic meditation teachers, a government minister quite engaged in lay life. He promoted a rigid medi-

18 This is an assessment based on the author's personal observations.

19 Sharf (2018).

20 Braun (2013, 156).

21 *Ibid.* (160).

tation schedule and 10-day meditation retreats, downplayed study and aspired to spread his method throughout world independent of any particular religious context. His student S.N. Goenka further minimized the role of doctrine, and declared meditation itself to be the fundamental teaching of the Buddha. He, after moving to non-Buddhist India (his ancestral home), achieved spectacularly his teacher's wish to internationalize *vipassanā* meditation, making it very self-contained and portable.[22]

Mahāsī method. The monk Mahāsī Sayadaw was a prominent scholar-monk in Burma before he took up serious meditation practice and developing and teaching his own technique. He would have begun his own practice steeped in doctrine as well as virtue, and indeed the importance of right view and ethics is stressed in his teachings. Yet he appears to have developed the expedient of making spare reference to doctrine at least in the introductory stages of his method,[23] in contrast to some of his peers in Burma. In this way, his technique could be taken up quite readily by anyone at any stage of practice in Burma, and would be easily exported to foreign lands.[24] He also made use of the intensive retreat format and, like many popularizes, claimed that one could acquire advanced stages of the path in very short time.[25]

In the West. In coming to the West, Buddhist meditation was entering a rather unusual religious culture, one that had undergone a “subjective turn,” in which greater attention was given to personal experience and away from institutions and external authority.[26] It asked that one “find one's authentic voice, one's own inner truth.”[27] Moreover, “spirituality” was being increasingly commodified, a kind of spiritual marketplace arising in a pluralistic context in which free agents need no longer accept the authority of family traditions. The term “spirituality” itself, as in, “I'm spiritual but not religious,” apparently came into vogue in the 1950's with the rise of the consumerist lifestyle,[28] with decidedly mix-and-match, plug-and-play, build-your-own tendencies.

It is therefore not surprising that meditation methods that were modular, led

22 *Ibid.* (157-160).
23 Braun (2013, 161), Sharf (2014, 952).
24 Sharf (2014, 942).
25 *Ibid.* (944).
26 McMahan (2008, 58, 188). See also “Take seriously but hold loosely” in this volume.
27 McMahan (2008, 189). The essence of Buddhism became an inner experience (McMahan, 2008, 42-43).
28 Carrette and King (2004, 42, 128). It is also argued there that this led to a substantial corporate take-over of the cultural space of spirituality by the 1980's, probably beginning with the way Christmas is celebrated, some decades earlier.

quickly to intense personal experiences and did not appeal to doctrine would have great appeal in this religious environment. For instance, Jack Kornfield, Josephy Goldstein and Sharon Salzburg, who would have an enormous influence on American *vipassanā*, founded the Insight Meditation Society in the mind-1970's, after each had spent much time in Asia, studying with Mahasi and Goenka, among others. Their vision was of bare practice with almost no rituals nor non-meditation activities. For them, authority came from practice itself, the “*Saṅgha*” was a lay community and meditation was the heart of Buddha's teachings.[29] Western Zen has followed a similar, but at the same time distinct path. It also tends to diminish ethics and right view,[30] yet is typically slathered in ritual, apparently through the insistence of early Japanese Zen masters active in the West.[31]

Although this seems to have been a founding principle, interest and implementation of a wider scope of Buddhist teachings has nonetheless tended to develop over time, I should also note that the scope of western scholarship is growing steadily and many meditation teachers have become quite knowledgeable in *Dhamma*. Many western teachers, particularly monks and nuns, advocate a much broader, integrated and holistic view of Buddhism.[32] Nonetheless, in the West mindfulness has often become further abstracted from anything like its Buddhist context, most noticeably in clinical applications like Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and in corporations and other organizations, including the military. “Business savy consultants pushing mindfulness training promise that it will improve work efficiency, reduce absenteeism, and enhance the 'soft skills' that are crucial to career success.”[33]

The main point here is that the modern environment and concerns in meditation practice are generally different than they had been in early Buddhism and in most existing traditions – which demand a tight integration of meditation with ethics and right view – and that this shift in concerns are reflected in a

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29 Braun (2013, 163) .

30 DT Suzuki, who had a profound influence on the development of American Zen, insisted that the enlightened person transcends social conventions and prescribed morality (McMahan, 2008, 133).

31 This might rightly be called “cultural baggage,” for during my first sesshin many years ago I can testify to experiencing a week of intense silent culture shock. In the subsequent years I become quite comfortable with these ritual forms and appreciated them as a training in mindfulness, that is, in recalling what the heck it was I was supposed to do next.

32 This is one of the primary purposes of my book *Buddhist Life/Buddhist Path* (Cintita, 2017), to provide an introduction to Buddhism that reflects this holistic view.

33 Purser and Loy (2013).

shift in the technical vocabulary of meditation, by which *sati* per se lost its doctrinal and ethical functions. A similar loss of function undoubtedly effected the meaning of *Saṅgha* in the modern context, which in Asia refers to the monastic community (and sometimes adepts, whether lay or monastic). If you can practice meditation without leaving home, why be concerned about monks and nuns? If you can practice meditation on the basis of a simple technique, why be concerned about ethics and doctrine? The modern definitions of mindfulness serve those modern concerns adequately, but the shift is symptomatic of something lost that we do well to be aware of. Bhikkhu Bodhi points out that contemporary teachers seldom emphasize right view and right intention, in favor of merely being present, and that *Dhamma* is often regarded as "clap-trap" or "mumbo-jumbo," while meditation is "unconstrained by dogma." Meanwhile, Alan Wallace is concerned that *vipassanā* had become a radically simplified teaching for the general lay public, "dumbed down" and overlooking the richness of *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta.*[34]

Nonetheless, the shift in vocabulary does not itself keep us locked into a deficient understanding of meditation: there are knowledgeable modern teachers – and I believe their numbers are increasing – who seem to practice *satipaṭṭhāna* as it was intended, but who accept a modern definition of mindfulness and simply bring in recollection of right view into the process of observation implicitly, through the back door, apparently unaware that the *sati* in *satipaṭṭhāna* was originally the front door, the first of the seven factors of awakening, explicitly held open for right view to enter.

Restoring the full *Dhamma*

The teachings of the Buddha are radical. They are radical ethically. They are radical psychologically. They are radical socially. They are meant to upturn our lives, to challenge prevailing norms, to challenge human nature as normally understood. Their goal is to turn away from the ancient twisted patterns of thought and behavior that have kept us locked in suffering for untold eons, and to trigger a radical restructuring of our cognitive faculties and driving impulses. The Buddha even instituted an enduring counterculture within the Buddhist community that embodies his radical message and gave it the social status effectively to challenge the norms and notions under which most of the rest of community lives.[35] This is the Buddhism that produces awakening.

Modern definitions of mindfulness are appropriate to less far-reaching concerns. Instead of moving about in the *Dhamma* we are asked to cultivate a certain state of mind with scant reference to the *Dhamma.* Of course, harvesting

34 Wallace and Bodhi (2006).

35 Imagine what would have happened if bohemians, beatniks, and hippies had been endowed with the social respectability of the *Saṅgha.*

some part of the Buddha's teachings is fine if the product is put to good use, although I might suggest the Buddha's teaching of kindness (*mettā*) or social harmony would be more immediately useful than that of mindfulness. Nonetheless, Buddhist meditation techniques do provide the experience and immediate gratification that many seek in the modern spiritual marketplace.[36]

I agree with the assertion that "the most troubling aspect of many modern spiritualities is precisely that they are not troubling enough."[37] My hope has been for many years that the radicalism of Buddhism would be an exception to that. Sharf worries that the ethical perspective of modern mindfulness, in spite of its root in a a critique of mainstream values and social norms, nonetheless resembles mainstream consumer culture, requiring, for instance, no change in how we live our lives.[38] Bhikkhu Bodhi fears, "Buddhist practices could easily be used to justify and stabilize the status quo, becoming a reinforcement of consumer capitalism."[39]

I worry about the integrity of Buddhism as a whole, when a single practice is elevated and identified with all of Buddhism or is called the heart of Buddhism. Calling meditation or mindfulness the heart of Buddhism is like calling the roof the heart of the house. It is true that the roof serves the highest purpose of the house – protection from rain, sleet and snow –, but the roof itself depends on so much that is underneath it, where most of the work in building the house and subsequently most of the life within the house takes place. I worry that, after a honeymoon period of mindfulness in that house, many single-minded practitioners make little further developmental progress and then either to give up meditation practice, or to develop an increasing and more desperate obsession with mindfulness in the hopes of some breakthrough. Such practitioners have failed to attend to the virtue and the right view, and, before that, refuge and renunciation, upon which right mindfulness and right concentration rest.

36 Sharf in various writings is quite critical of the almost unprecedented obsession with attainment of experiences rather than of skills through Buddhist practice.

37 Carrette and King (2004, 4).

38 Sharf (2015, 478).

39 Quoted by Purser and Loy (2013).

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Forthcoming books

Living in Dharma: mindfulness in early Buddhism.

The Parittas: Burmese versions in Pali with English translations.

Paṭicca-amuppāda: the twelve links of dependent co-arising in Early Bud-dhism.

Printed copies can be obtained from Lulu.com.
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This volume presents a set of essays, each of which is intended to put a few stitches in what the author regards as a common traditional or modern misunderstanding of an important point of Dhamma, or (in the case of the first essay) Vinaya. In each case it advances an alternative interpretation, at least as a way of encouraging further discussion. Of the six essays in this volume, the first concerns the role of women in the Buddhist community, the second concerns issues of faith and belief, the third a seemingly small doctrinal point that has led, I maintain, to great misunderstanding of a significant portion of early Dhamma, and the final three with aspects of meditation: mindfulness (sati) and concentration (samadhi).

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