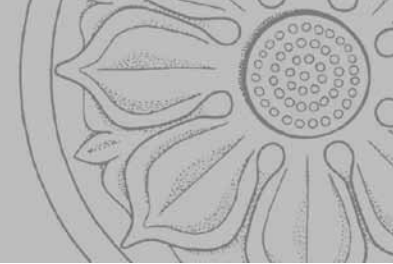


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## PREFACE

After studying and practising Buddhism for some 50 years now (I am 63), I can only say that the Buddha Dharma is simply joyful. In my writings and translation work, beautiful words and passages would often arise of itself to describe or explain the suttas. Even outside of writing and translating, especially in the silent moments of waking up, a joyful inspiration would flood my mind. It is from these precious moments that are reflected in *Simple joys*.

SIMPLE JOYS is about my family, my friends, my students and counselees, the mass media, things people tell me, situations I've noticed — it is a relook at our difficulties and struggles in the Dharma light. Such thoughts and feelings are put together in the most beautiful words

and ways I can, as simply as possible, to inspire joy and hope in us. The Dharma surely shines brightly from within us to brighten our lives and those we embrace in our hearts, and to touch even those who catch but a glimpse of this healing light.

Many people have generously donated for the printing of SIMPLE JOYS, which in turn benefits many others. People often feedback that they keep Simple Joys close to them, and in difficult times, they simply open a page or go to their favourite reflection. May all those who have given or worked for this, enjoy the merits of bring joy and healing to others.

My wife, Ratna Lim, must be thanked for her unflinching efforts in making sure that the reflections are written and emailed to our mailing list every week. She has also worked hard to compile two volumes of SIMPLE JOYS and also REVISIONING BUDDHISM (a reflection on current Buddhist issues for concerned Buddhists).

Sunanda Lim of the House of Inward Journey is one of those who have been constantly moved by SIMPLE JOY. He has joyfully volunteered to reprint, with my permission, selections from the series for free distribution so that more people are inspired to take that Inward Journey to joyful stillness.

SIMPLE JOYS reminds us that the Buddha's teaching is both simply healing and joyful. It keeps us safe and well in the eye of the storm that rages around us, so that we learn from it and occasionally stretch a hand out to help more people to come into the blissful light of the Dharma.

By all this effort and goodness, may our hearts be peaceful and our minds beautiful, so that we have the joy and will to aspire to streamwinning in this life itself.

PIYA TAN  
*Vesak 2012*

# 1 MAN, THE UNFINISH



Science and modern thinking generally regard man as a species, as an evolving member of a group. The key word here is “evolving,” that is, man (I use this word in a non-sexist way) is still unfinished, as it were. Religions, especially God-centred and book-based systems, tend to regard man as a finished product, even as “images” of the divine.

In such a religious system, man must choose his God. Often this choice entails the exclusion of everything else that is “not God” or not accepted by those who define such a God. Man, in other words, is like a glass of drink that has run over, and the liquid is all over the table. Someone (a prophet or religious teacher) tries to sweep all the spilled drink back into the glass, where it belongs, as it were.

This is a curiously absurd imagery, but it surely reflects what the God-believers often tell us: that our wisdom is mere foolishness compared to what God knows. There are the two horns of a dilemma here. If we are that foolish, surely we would make a foolish choice whether to believe or not. Or, has the choice already been made for us (fatalism); then, why bother about it at all?

As such, the scientific notion that man is still evolving, biologically and intellectually, is a better model for human learning. Early Buddhism has no problem with such a notion, except for one key point. While science generally takes this evolutionary process as being brain-based, Buddhism regards evolution as being heart-based.

Now, we need to define “evolution” and “heart” here. In early Buddhist terms, evolution is a gradual process a spiritual evolution by which we discover true reality about the world and about ourselves, resulting in liberation from suffering, that is, breaking out of the cycle and chain of biological evolution.

“Heart” here means the mind; indeed, we often hear native Asian speakers using the words “heart” and “mind” as referring to the same thing. The Buddhist commentarial tradition even regards the physical heart as the seat of the mind or consciousness, just as the eye is the “seat” or sense-base for seeing, the ear for hearing, and so on.

However, while early Buddhism speaks of the five sense-bases, it is completely silent on the mind-base. The reason for this is simple enough: the mind, our consciousness, has no physical base. It is not located anywhere, not in any one place. However, for the sake of convenience, we could say that our mind is “located” all over our body, or better, our “being.” In other words, it is possible for us to extend our minds even beyond the physical body. We practise this in a positive way, for example, in our lovingkindness meditation.

When Buddhism says that we are “evolving,” it means that we are still unfinished processes. In other words, we are capable of learning, of growing wholesomely. For our present purpose, let us say that we learn in

two main ways: the scientific way and the spiritual way, that is, worldly learning and Dharma learning.

Scientific or worldly learning is completely sense-based, and relates only to measurable things and processes. In simple terms, such a learning helps to create, or should create, the best, even ideal, environment for living and learning. If such a learning degrades, or worse, destroys, our environment and ecology, then it is useless and harmful knowledge, and should be avoided. Worldly learning is about a healthy body, a positive person, constituting a healthy society.

Spiritual learning, especially Buddhist learning, is basically about the cultivation of a positive individual. The most vital part of this Buddhist learning is known as mental cultivation, that is, to know the mind, to shape it, and to free it.

We can only fully know the mind when we free it from the distractions of the physical senses. This is done by teaching the mind to give its full

attention to a single mental object, especially the breath or lovingkindness. This is like discovering and extracting a raw diamond from the dirt and cleaning it up before cutting it. When the mind is patiently and lovingly able to see itself, it bursts into boundless bliss. We feel joyful, as it were, to know we have a precious diamond.

Once we are familiar with the raw diamond, we are ready to work on it, cutting and polishing it so that it can give off the brightest sparkle. Meditative bliss cleanses us of all the impurities that the physical senses have projected onto them. We must take our time to enjoy the blissful mind so that we are fully familiar with it. On emerging from this wordless bliss, we begin to realize that even this profound bliss is impermanent and mind-made as is everything else we experience. But this is a powerfully joyful knowledge that empowers us with a meaningful and purposeful life.

The calm and clear mind gives us a vision of the true meaning of life: it is all impermanent and mind-made. The calm and clear heart inspires us with a true purpose in life: that of self-liberation. This special wisdom allows us to see more clearly into why people run around goaded on by their sense-desires, running after endless goals and short-lived pleasures.

We keep pushing this huge round boulder up the hill. On reaching the top, it runs downhill again. We follow it down and push it up all over again, and again. As long as we are at it, we seem to be enjoying it. One day, we realize that it is the nature of rocks, especially huge ones, to go downhill. Then we restfully sit on the hill-top enjoying the fresh air and great view.

In our joyful stillness on the hill-top, we might even wonder why Jack and Jill have been going up the hill, since our childhood days, to fetch a pail of water, and Jack falling downhill, breaking his crown, with Jill tumbling after. There is no water on a hill-top. The water is best found on low ground.



## 2 MINDING CHANGE, CHANGING MIND

As long as we see a need to know the truth, to understand things as they really are, there is a place in our lives for the Buddha's teaching. We all need to awaken to true reality, so that, untroubled by greed, hate and delusion, we are able to bring true happiness and security to others, too.

The greatest challenge to being a true Buddhist is our own ideas of ourselves. Such self-views are often conditioned by our culture (how we behave and speak as a race), childhood (family conditioning and peer influence), work (which we do most of our waking life), religion (like going to a missionary school), or simply comparing ourselves to others (like thinking that to be rich and successful are blessings from some higher power).

Despite such challenges, more and more people of different religions are finding Buddhism more meaningful and naturally feel it as a part of their lives. We often find something in Buddhism, especially its teachings of compassion and forgiveness, very healing. However, if we are very new to Buddhism, we might still be unsure of a lot of things about it. Our understanding of Buddhism might still be weak. There are a number of reasons that we might be weak Buddhists, for example,

- We may be infants in Dharma (infants are weak).
- We may be sick or diseased (by legalism).
- We may be malnourished (from lack of good Dharma).
- We may lack exercise (we need fellowship).

We might be new to the Buddha's teaching, like newly arrived in a strange foreign place. Since we are not sure of our directions, we simply follow what others tell us. Even then, we often do not hear the directions clearly, or we often misunderstand them. We might keep on going in circles, or move farther away from our true destination.

However, if we are true to ourselves, we will realize that we are lost. But if we keep on moving, we would somehow reach our goal, even if this takes some time. We must go on asking questions about our motives in being religious, and be courageous to question others, especially the preachers and teachers.

Infants are also very self-centred or narcissistic: they need to be, because they are helpless, and need to cry for attention to themselves for their own survival. We sometimes find Buddhism a good way of getting attention from others. Yet we are not always infants. We can grow out of the craving for self-attention, by really caring for others, which means showing lovingkindness, especially to those close to us and those whom we work with.

To best way to grow spiritually, is to be willing and able let go of our old views and past conditionings, even temporarily, and listen to our hearts. There is always something to learn from listening. That is why the Buddha's saints are called "listeners."

“Sick or diseased” here means that as Buddhists or truth-seekers, we might be too careful so as not make any mistakes in our practice. Or, we fear that we might break any of the precepts. For example, we feel that being a vegetarian is the best way of keeping the first precept, which is actually true in some ways. However, we need to carefully examine the Suttas and related learning for the real reasons and purposes for such conduct.

Or, we could be taking the Dharma too literally, word for word, without examining the proper context and meaning behind the words. The problem with taking Buddhism, or any religion, at its mere word, is that different people understand the word differently. That is why even in the same religion, there are many sects and groups.

This is also true of Buddhism, which is 2600 years old. It has spread into various countries, and changed into many new Buddhisms. We might mistake what are cultural or ethnic to be more important than the actual teaching itself. Or, we are simply shopping for something that suits our pet

views or plans. Or, we merely want to be part of a group and be accepted by others. The best reason for learning Buddhism is for our own inner peace and true happiness.

We might begin learning about Buddhism from books, the internet, or from well known speakers. Everyone has their opinion on Buddhism. Yet Buddhism, like our breath, is a very personal thing. First, it is about keeping our *body and speech* wholesome: we begin by respecting our body and being harmonious in our communication with others.

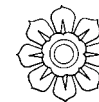
Next, we should spend some time examining and reflecting on *the true teaching* of the Buddha himself. This is the best place to begin because it goes right to the point, without the squint of later biases, strange rituals and cultural baggages. These early teachings or the Suttas also give us very clear and simple teachings on mental cultivation. When we are well informed on the Buddha’s Dharma, we are better prepared to recognize helpful teachings and teachers, and recognize our own weaknesses before it is too late.



As Buddhists, we are our own best teachers. We need to do three basic things for ourselves, and only *we* can do this ourselves.

1. We need to **know** our own mind for what it really is: this is the beginning of self-knowing. Notice how quickly our mind thinks and changes its ideas and feelings. Views are change, and meant to change.
2. We need to **train** our mind to be less lustful, less hateful, less fearful and less deluded. A good way to do this is to constantly reflect that our mind and body are *impermanent*. Occasionally, simply clear the mind of all ideas and views, and notice how peaceful it is.
3. We need to **free** our mind by less believing, to more knowing, to most feeling. To simply *believe* is to walk in the dark. To *know* is to turn on the light and look around. Then, to *feel*; to know what is just right to do next. This is called directly knowing.

When we emerge from such a personal training, we can think better. This means that our ideas no more control us, but we decide what to do with our ideas. This is a very vital early training that we need. If we neglect this, then our thoughts would seem to take lives of their own, and we begin to believe they are actually real and out there. This is called dementia.



## 3 YOUR MIND: USE IT OR LOSE IT [PREVENTING DEMENTIA]



According to early Buddhism, the mind is the most important faculty we have. In fact, it is the most precious thing we have: it is the vehicle to awakening and true liberation. Buddhism has a lot to teach about the mind:

### *Buddhism IS about our mind.*

Experts say that if we really want to ward off dementia, we need to start taking care of our brain in your 30s and 40s, or even earlier. More than that, the Buddha teaches us that we need to take care of our mind. This is something no scientific machine can yet measure very accurately, if ever. (How do we really measure love or happiness?)

## YOUR MIND: USE IT OR LOSE IT

Various mental health experts have suggested some useful advice in living a full useful and happy life. Here are some tips in the light of Buddhist teachings on mental health, teaching us how to burn our candles right to the last drip of wax.

1. **Eat as you need.** If we really feel our body, it will tell us what kinds of food is good for us. The Buddha's early saints ate frugally, stopping to eat just before they felt full. To prevent taking more food, they would drink some water. In other words, eat to live. Those who live to eat, generally do not live long or healthy lives.
2. **Being vegetarian** is great if we are up to it. Experts tell us that the antioxidants in fruits and vegetables clear up some of the damages caused by free radicals, one of the leading killers of brain cells. The point is eat more vegetables and fruits than we do meat as far as we can. Diet alone does not make us a good or happy person.
3. **Commensal eating**, to the early Buddhists, is a happy and social event. This is still a common event in Buddhist communities. Try

eating at least one meal a day with family and friends. This helps us slow down our eating, and to socialize. Even if we must eat alone, the rule is to really enjoy our meal. Savour the taste and feel of every mouthful. That's mindful eating.

4. **Join a club or organization** that need volunteers. Buddhist centres often need volunteers from doing something as simple as wiping the Buddha image or ushering people during weekly puja to helping in running their activities. Start volunteering right now, and we will have friends and feel needed even after we retire.
5. **Enjoy the great outdoors**, especially spacious gardens, the sea-side and hills. When we find such a spot that we like, just sit for a while in complete silence, observing and absorbing the spaciousness and beauty all around. Close our eyes, imagine what we have seen. Repeat this until we can visualize that spaciousness. This is a meditation known as the perception of space.

6. **Enjoy bright spacious nature**, especially during the morning hours. You might like to try watching the sun rising, and the horizon brightening up, or simply watch the spacious brightness all round. Observe the brightness, then close our eyes and visualize it. Repeat this until we can visualize the light in our mind's eye. This is a meditation known as the perception of light.
7. **Walk**. The Buddha walked all his life and lived to a ripe 80 years. The early saints too were regular walkers, walking for thousands of kilometres every year all over the Gangetic plain of northern central India, teaching and meeting people, or simply meditating in beautiful nature. Daily walking helps reduce the risk of dementia by making the heart pump blood to the brain. None of the saints ever had dementia.
8. **Travel**. When we travel, we work our brains to navigate new and complex environment. Experienced taxi drivers have been found to have larger brains because they have to store much information about locations and how to get there. The ancient wandering forest monks

had no maps, and had to memorize their routes. They were regularly wandering, but never lost.

9. **Read and write daily** or whenever you can. Reading stimulates many different brain areas that process and store information. Likewise, creative writing, even writing letters, stimulates many areas of the brain as well. What we read and write, too, should be wholesome and have a positive outlook of life.
10. **Use both hands.** Using both hands works both sides of our brain. Knitting, for example, demands the dexterity of both hands. So do some computer games, but such games should not be violent or unwholesome. Practise writing with our other hand for a few minutes daily or whenever you like. This will exercise the other side of our brain and fire up those neurons before they die out like unwatered plants.

11. **Have a hobby or a few.** Bird-watching, for example, gives us a gentle exercise in nature, while getting to know it better. Hobbies liven up the mind because we are trying something new and complex. The Buddha was born under a tree, awakened as Buddha under another, taught under many different trees, and passed away under two of them. He was truly a man of nature.
12. **Listen to classical music.** Good music seems to work on both sides of the brain, linking the two. Listen with both body and mind. Sit comfortably and feel the flow of the music. Learning to play a musical instrument is even better. This might be harder as we age, but still it helps to develop a dormant part of our brain. Music also helps us in the perception of impermanence.
13. **Play board games.** Chess, Scrabble, Cluedo and such games not only live up your brain, but also helps us socialize. Even playing solo games, such as solitaire or online computer brain games can be helpful, although the social aspect is missing.

14. **Learn a new language.** Whether it's a foreign language or sign language, we are working our brain back and forth between one language and another. One of the easiest languages to learn (other than English) is Pāḷi, the scriptural language of early Buddhism. It has a fixed vocabulary and a simple grammar. It is also a more direct way of learning some of the earliest Buddhist teachings.
15. **Take lifelong classes.** Learning apparently helps us live longer because it causes physical and chemical changes in our brain. After all, the true purpose of life is to learn and grow. The body ages, but the mind goes on, life after life, and needs to keep on learning until it is really free.
16. **Silent prayer.** Daily prayer with positive words and wishes empowers us. The best prayer is that of lovingkindness, which begins with wishing ourselves well and happy, and then extending this to others, until we boundlessly include everyone, even animals, without any exception. When our joy becomes truly unconditional, or peaceful enough, we simply and silently enjoy the moment.

17. **Meditate.** More people, whether religious or not, are discovering the benefits and joy of meditation. Not just any meditation, but especially the Buddha's early mindfulness methods. Meditation not only helps us deal with stress, but also opens our minds up to greater focus and creativity and a long healthy, useful and peaceful life, heading for awakening. The Buddha declares that those who do breath meditation regularly will have a calm and clear mind right to the end.<sup>1</sup>
18. **Get enough rest.** Rest firstly means taking time away from what we do for money or for others. We need to regularly spend some quiet time just being our wholesome selves. Secondly, our body needs rest from its daily toil. If we respect our body, we will know when it needs a break. Our body will tell us how much uninterrupted sleep we need.

*May our minds become clearer  
even as our bodies age.*

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1 Maha Rahulovada Sutta (M 62 = SD 3.11)

# 4 LIVING BUDDHISM



Buddhism is like good healthy food. It has to be tasted, eaten, fully enjoyed and digested. Only that way, we can really benefit from it. For maximum benefit, it is best self-prepared and taken fresh.

Avoid the canned import: they lack nutrients that locals need. Avoid the fast food version: they are badly unbalanced. Avoid the beautifully labelled large containers which are really empty. Avoid those foods peddled by suave well-dressed executives with easy promises: they are the same as fast-food but cost exorbitantly more.

Buddhism is a DIY (do-it-yourself) kit that anyone can use with proper initial instructions. But first we must know how to read, and to read properly. This is what keeping to the precepts is about: we try our

best to act and speak in a way helpful to us and others, and to simplify our lives.

An uncluttered life is a good preparation for uncluttering the mind. Keeping to the precepts simplifies our lives so that we easily and effectively engage ourselves in mental cultivation or meditation. This is not about hours of seat-warming, but about quality time that we spend with our selves.

Buddhist meditation is knowing our own minds so that we know ourselves better. The more patient and non-judgemental we are with what goes on in our minds, the closer we are to knowing our selves. Simply watch the breath in a relaxed but sustained manner (we are, after all, admiring a life-long loyal friend). Whenever the mind wanders off, patiently bring it back to the breath: it's like training your pet.

As we each befriend our mind, it returns the compliment. It listens more to us. One amazing thing we will notice is that much of those

thoughts that crowd our minds are really unnecessary, even unreal. They mostly come from the past, and should remain there.

An uncluttered life (being healthy in body, action and speech) and an uncluttered mind (letting go of the past and turning the corner when you come to it) is an excellent way to cultivate great insight to further self-understanding. This is the miracle of the present moment.

The inner peace we gain through the breath meditation allows us to look deep into the present moment where our mind really is. The closer we look, the more we see of our true nature and personality. We can see that deep in our peaceful hearts there is so much good. It is because we have been looking outside of ourselves too much and looking at others too often, that we forget how happy we really are deep inside.

One very important advice to becoming truly happy: avoid negative talk of sin, guilt and bad karma (they only cause trouble). We are all we've got, and if we do not forgive ourselves, no one will. Then, we should learn

to love ourselves and accept ourselves unconditionally: "I forgive myself. I'm OK; I'm well and happy."

Meditation helps us to realize that we are capable of change: that it we can change our minds; that we need to change our minds. And if we change our minds for the better, we also help to change the people around us and our ambience.

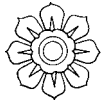
When bad things happen, we begin to understand that there is no one to be blamed. Not God, nor karma, nor bad luck, nor the boss, nor the other person, definitely not us. Things happen when the conditions are right (or wrong): it takes a lot of conditions to come together for it to happen, and we are only one of the conditions. So we should not take all the blame.

The cultivated mind and happy heart allow us to see all such conditions in a helpful way, so that we really know what has gone wrong. A scientist would not curse his experiments if he fails to find an answer.

He would look out for patterns of behaviour and events that conduce to such problems and avoid them, and work on those conditions that allow him to move on in a positive way.

Our sufferings and inabilities are not punishment for things we have done in the past. They are telling us that some parts of our lives are still not yet strengthened, and some skills that we still need to learn. When our head is clear and our heart cool, we will know just what to do.

The next time you think you cannot solve your problem, try observing a toddler who is learning to walk. He or she stands, tries to take a step, falls flat, stands again, falls again, and so on. But the toddler never gives up, and he or she is now able to walk very well. That toddler was you!



## 5 EVEN A DONKEY CAN BE WISE<sup>2</sup>



One day, a farmer's old donkey (or ass) fell down into a well. He brayed loudly and piteously as the farmer tried to figure out what to do. Finally, he decided that the animal was old and useless, and the well needed to be covered up anyway.

The farmer called out to his workers and neighbours to help him. With shovels and hoes, they began to throw dirt into the well to fill it up. At first, the donkey panicked and brayed even more loudly.

Then, to everyone's amazement, he stopped braying. Thinking it was dead, the people shovelled and pushed the dirt harder and faster into the

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<sup>2</sup> The modern fable is found in a number of places on the Internet, but is here retold as a problem-solver.



wall, to make sure that the carcass is well covered up. Moreover, it was getting dark, and they hurried up to finish the task.

Finally, the farmer and his workers could hear that the dirt level was well near the top, so that they were close to covering up the well. When he stopped work for a moment to look at the well, he was shocked to see a dark shape standing where the well was. It was the donkey!

He had been shaking off all the dirt as it fell on his back, and stepping on it. As the level of dirt quickly rose, so too did the donkey reach nearer the top of the well. Finally, when he was near enough to the opening, he exerted all his strength, despite his age. His will to live did the rest. As soon as he came out of the well, he happily trotted off into the dark, heehawing happily away into the silent distance, never to return.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> A humorous version of this story adds that the donkey, angry at the farmer's unkindness, bit him as soon as he got out of the well. Moral: When you've done a wrong and try to cover up your ass, it might come back to bite you!

This story may mean different things to different people. The basic idea is that in a difficult situation, if we examine it carefully, we would find a way out. Don't fight it, but work with it, as it were. A problem is simply an opinion about a difficulty before us. The solution begins with thinking rightly about it. Since it is an opinion, we can any time change it, and re-look at the whole situation again, and again, until we know just what to do.

While a problem might seem to involve an external situation that seems to be beyond our control, we can decide how to think about it. Here are four guidelines on how to do this:

### 1. **When People Need Help — Give**

People always need some kind of help, whether they know it or not. The best help we can give others is by being kind to them, at least to communicate happily with them. Very often, it is not *what* help we give, but *how* we give it that counts. Material gifts have a limited lifespan, but when we touch the lives of others, it is forever, as it were.

The best gift we can give here is perhaps by listening wisely. Carefully listen to what the person has to say. At the right time, we can apply “the four-step problem-solving” method:

- a. ask him to clearly **define** how he feels;
- b. ask **why** he feels that way;
- c. invite him to look at all the possible scenarios or **alternatives** available to him;
- d. help him to work out a clear **guideline** for action.

## 2. When We Fail — Forgive

Often enough, we feel that **we** have failed, or that we are not good enough. We should apply the same “four-step problem-solving” method here. Ask ourselves what exactly is troubling us. Define the problem, the “enemy” is clearly seen: what is seen is easier to deal with.

Next, we should ask why we feel this way. Is it because we are comparing ourselves to someone else (or perhaps because of something someone said to us)? If we take someone else as our standard of happiness, we are looking away from our own hearts wherein lies the roots of our problems and their solutions.

Even when we feel that we have really failed, things are never as bad as we make them to be. To admit failure, even privately, is to begin to work out of it. We need to carefully reflect on these four questions. *Where did we really fail? Why did we fail? What should we have done? What have learned from this failure?*

Spend quiet time alone in a peaceful place that you like. Sit quietly and recall a very happy moment in your life (such as a very happy event, or a beautiful place you have been to). Once you feel some level of joy, let go of the images. Now tell yourself, “I forgive myself completely. I accept myself unconditionally.” Go on repeating this until it becomes natural to you. In time, you will see the value of this unconditional self-acceptance.

### 3. **When Others Fail Us — Forget**

No matter how kind others may be to us, they cannot always help us in every way. They have their lives, their inclinations, and limited resources. Just as we are, so are they. As we know people better, this understanding deepens

Sometimes some people can be really nasty to us, or are very uncaring. Again, we cannot always know all the true reasons for this. Even if we do know the reasons, but cannot do anything about it (at least for the moment), we must forget such negative aspects of others. The rule is simple: just as we want others not to remember our failures, so too we should not remember theirs.

Make extra effort to remember the goodness of others. When we have a chance to chat with them, we can then do so positively. Our relationships with people, even the worst of them, can change for the better — if we allow time to heal. Once the event is over, it should be

left in the past. Notice how our views of the past change with time. The secret is to look at it with lovingkindness, no matter what.

### 4. **When the Situation Seems Bad — Forbear**

We all at some point want to change the world, or see it change. Yet we would change our minds in time. Imagine if everyone's prayers were answered! The world would simply be devastated. The point is that we might not be able to change the world, but we can change our **view** of it. Or better, we can change our selves: for, **we are the real world.**<sup>4</sup>

*So we need to give, forgive, forget, and forbear,  
each in its own time.*

*Meantime, when life shovels dirt upon us,  
let us plant flowers and fruits.*

<sup>4</sup> See “**Worlds of our own**”: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/091216-Worlds-of-Our-Own-rev3.pdf> & “**We are the world**”: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/48-We-are-the-world-110629.pdf>

# 6 DRIVING MEDITATION



As I do not drive, kind friends would often ferry me around to classes and talks, and back. This reflection recalls such journeys and some wise words from another friend. This reflection is also a gesture of deep joyful appreciation for you who have offered me the gift of being transported in comfort for the sake for inner peace.

A car has **four wheels**, but they all work together to go in one direction. The true wheels in our lives are the four noble truths: the true model for ultimate problem solving. First, we identify and define what is really troubling us. Second, we look for the conditions that bring it about. Third, we envision a problem-free situation. And fourth, we apply ourselves to attaining that problem free goal. Whenever we fail, or are not sure, we ask: What do we do next?

## DRIVING MEDITATION

**Prayer** should not merely be a “spare tyre” that we pull out when we have a puncture. It should be a “steering wheel” with which we carefully keep ourselves on the right path as we move through life. The best prayer is a silent one filling our body and mind with lovingkindness so that others feel it, too. Such a prayer asks for nothing, yet gives every goodness without any conditions.

**Worrying** about tomorrow only takes away today’s peace. Regretting about the past only turns us away from this moment’s opportunity. If we keep thinking that someone who has hurt or harmed us, we are only carrying him around in our lives: what a burden! People can only hurt what we *have*; they can never hurt what we *are*. If our pride is hurt, it is because we have it. It is the pride that is hurting; so let the pride go; let us accept ourselves unconditionally, just as we are. To move on is to let go of the past.

Notice how large a car’s **windshield** is, and how small a *rear-mirror* is. We need to spend as much time as possible looking ahead and keep

moving on. Occasionally, we might look back into the rear-mirror of the past, but only if this helps up to move safely on. Sometimes, we might have to stop, even let others move ahead of us so that the path is clear and safe for us. Sometimes, we might need to stop, but as long as we keep moving on, even slowly, we will reach our goal.

Everything in life is **impermanent**. Even people we love, and friends, come and go, and cannot always be the way we want them to be. They are like the traffic ahead and that passes us by. Since we are on the road, we must watch the traffic. If the road is good and clear, enjoy it, for it will not last forever. If the way is jammed, or we have lost our way, keep a patient look-out. It does not go on forever.

Friends, like **books**, should be few and good. Even if we might not have the time or inclination to read through every book or even through a single book, especially when they are very thick and deep, we could still surprise ourselves with its wisdom, when we leisurely browse through one, or open and read a random page. Friendship is like a book: it takes but a moment to burn it, but years and sometimes tears to write one.

**Old friends** are like good wine. The older they are, the sweeter they taste. Yet there must be some space amongst us. For, too much wine might intoxicate and blur us. Even the best of friends must be at times be apart. The moments of silence in our friendship allows our words to be clearly and truly heard. Even the best of friends must part, so let us treasure the moment with love and respect. Yet true friends never say goodbye: we wish one another farewell, till we meet again.

Our **eyes** alone, no matter how good, does not make a good driver. When we do not look at the road or where we are really going, we are as good as being blind. We all have eyes but not always vision. We might travel the world and visit great places and see great sights, but without a proper purpose in life, we would keep coming back to the same spot.

*A good sense of direction in life is not found  
by looking outside, nor by looking up, nor looking down,  
but by looking within, by diligently making  
the journey to inner peace.*

# 7

## TRULY RENOUNCING



The core practice of early Buddhism is renunciation, that is, the letting go and cutting off of unwholesome states of mind so that we become liberated individuals. From the early texts, we know that there are two ways: renouncing as a monastic and practising meditation as a lay person.

True renunciation depends on the commitment of the monastic or the lay person to Dharma training. Living as a monastic, truly keeping to the Vinaya, is like taking the high road to nirvāṇa (Pāli: nibbāna). On the other hand, the laity would mostly take what might be said to be the good old country road, hilly and winding but a pleasant journey, much slower, but capable of reaching the same goal.

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As a rule, those who take the monastic course should be serious meditators, those we are unlikely to chat with online, but have to meet personally for any useful spiritual training. Such monastic meditators are the *dhyāna*-attainers. Attaining *dhyāna* (*jhāna*) means they have transcended the limits of the five physical senses and have tasted pure mental pleasure.

This is as if we have graduated with a PhD; so philosophy 101 is a breeze; or we have the very first mint issue of **ACTION COMICS #1** (1939), so we would not think much of the newsstand copies.

Even if we do not work for PhDs, we could still graduate as good teachers. Even if we do not collect all the first editions of books, we could still enjoy reading them. In fact, most of us could easily afford newsstand comics, rather than collector's editions. The Buddhist lay life, then, is a fun life, like playing football. Football is not merely kicking the ball about, but it is the football rules that make it fun. The Buddhist lay life is defined by the five precepts, which keep us on the human level, so that we can direct our energies to mental cultivation or meditation.

Meditation is here best understood as progressive renunciation. When we seriously make an effort to meditate, we are effectively getting into the state of a renunciant. The very first thing we do in meditation is to find a conducive place and sit as comfortably as we can so that we can forget about our body after a while. This is a **bodily renunciation**.

After sitting for some time, we might begin to feel some discomfort. Again here, we should simply ignore it if possible. Otherwise, try to observe with an open mind, “What is this pain?” We would notice that it is a process of rising and falling of feeling. If we do not let our negative mind to return and colour the pain, then this is a **feeling renunciation**.

Once we are physically comfortable, we go on to work with our thoughts as they arise. The usual way is to simply ignore them and keep our focus on the meditation object (say, the breath or lovingkindness). If thoughts do arise, it is best to simply let them come and let them go. Never follow them. If we can do this comfortably over time, then this is a **mental renunciation**.

Another kind of renunciation is that directed to blissful feeling or an experience of some mental brightness, often known as “the sign” (*nimitta*). This sort of feeling or experience, if it is truly blissful, should be silently enjoyed for as long as we like. When we feel some sense of familiarity with it, then it is time to let it go gently, so that a higher state would arise. This is a **higher renunciation**.

Finally, when we are fully free of bodily sensations, thoughts and feelings, we might go on to attain deep concentration, even dhyana. Then, whether we are monastic or lay, we have truly “renounced the world.” This is **true renunciation**.<sup>5</sup>

If we patiently bear the initial pains of starting meditation, the fruits will come in due course. Good meditation begins by a total acceptance of ourselves just as we are. Then we leave the past where it should be, and we do not cross the bridge of the future until we reach it. Good meditation

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<sup>5</sup> This reflection is based on Piya Tan, *Bhāvana* = SD 15.1: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/15.1-Bhavana-piya.pdf>

empowers us to renounce the pains of the past — they are gone; it teaches us to renounce the future —it never comes. We have a good sense of what needs to be rightly done now.

In our practice, we must gently keep bringing the mind back to the meditation-object, and constantly extend the horizon of our lovingkindness. We are laying the foundations of emotional strength. We grow emotionally stronger by first identifying and overcoming our inner weaknesses, our negative emotions. Then we work on discovering our positive emotions, or inner resilience by recalling happy memories and focussing on positive actions. We constantly remind ourselves that whichever way our lives go, people change and they may not be always there for us, and that things, too, are not always what they seem to be.

In other words, what we really are — the truth about ourselves — is not *out* there or in what we *have*. Our true being lies in what we really *are*. Just as the sun and its light are not two separate things, even so our life and love cannot be separated. Thinking makes it so. The examined life is

the one that truly feels: we do not *think* happy, we *feel* happy. Happiness is a direct experience of true reality: it is to see ourselves as a word embracing other words on this page, completing what needs to be said here.

*As our inner happiness grows,  
we need less worldliness, less religion:  
we no more need any parent-figure or guru-figure,  
or any kind of power-figure.*

Our locus of control stays within us: we become emotionally self-reliant, without any need for the approval of others, or any measuring ourselves against others. Yet our happiness is capable of inspiring happiness in others. We have a clear vision of our true self and liberation.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See SD 17.8c: (8.4) Downside of meditation (the danger of cults); (8.5) **Who should not meditate.** Link: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/17.8c-Meditation-consciousness.-piya1.pdf>



## KEEP WHAT YOU CANNOT LOSE



**R**enowned social psychologist and humanist philosopher, Erich Fromm (1900-1980), writes in his book, **TO HAVE OR TO BE**, “If I am what I have, and if I lose what I have, then what am I?” Nobody, Fromm answers, but a defeated, deflated, pathetic testimony to a wrong way of living (1976:89).

“To have” almost always is related to something external to us. We might say: I have a family, friends, books, a car, money, and so on. We can also “have” beauty, fame, power, greed, hate, delusion, and other intangibles. In this latter case, there is a sense that these qualities are not really “us,” even though we can say “I *am* beautiful, famous, powerful, greedy, hateful, deluded...” There is a pervading sense of impermanence about them.

## KEEP WHAT YOU CANNOT LOSE

When we say we “have” something, at least two important implications immediately arise. It is not really a part of us. We might “have” them but they *are* not really “us.” We might try to identify with them, but we would be at odds with them sooner or later. We are capable of losing what we have, as it is not really an integral part of our being (like “I *am* truly happy”). Most importantly, we can only *enjoy* what we have – it brings us true joy – when we use it in a wholesome way. In this sense, we can only “own” what we enjoy. The point is that we can only “be” something or “use” something.

We came with nothing into this world; we take nothing with us when we depart. That is as far as “things” go. In other words, we do not really have any true power over what we have. Buddhism teaches us to look deeper into what it means to “have” and to “be.” Let us now free these words from the pages and see them with our hearts.

The Buddha teaches us to *give away what we cannot keep* so that *we become what we really are*. This may sound like a wordplay, but let us take

these letters and words to be musical notes and phrases, and simply feel them. Early Buddhism is a teaching about wholesome feelings: being happy is a feeling; so is love.

What is it that we cannot keep? What is that we do not have until we give it away? It is love. We can only be loved when we love others. Love is not love until we give it away. To love another is to unconditionally accept that person or being. Friendship begins when we unconditionally accept this other person or being, but we do not stop there.

Love is not love unless you show it. We best show love by first feeling it in our hearts. Then we are able to show or say this love to another.

What is “love”? There are animal love, human love and divine love. **Animal love** is merely the desire for things, such as the physical body. But the body changes and decays, and our desire soon turns into disgust. Animal love is grasping and collecting with almost no giving. It is exploitative (seeing others as objects) and, hence, it is not healthy.

**Human love**, on a simple level is friendly love, a desire and willingness to communicate and learn with others in a positive manner. Human love inspires us to share what we have and to give to others. By patiently listening to others, we allow them to see themselves more fully and joyfully: this is the gift of time. By comforting others we remove their fears: this is the gift of fearlessness

**Divine love** is an ability and willingness to see goodness in others and bring about mutual and active joy. Divine love is more than merely giving what we *have*: we give others what we *are*. Being happy, we wish others well and happy, too. It begins with a single thought. Being compassionate, we reach out to the less fortunate. We show kindness to others even when they do not deserve it. Being appreciative, we joyfully celebrate the fortunes and goodness of others.

Being equanimous, we see success and failure as the sides of the same coin: so too praise and blame; fame and obscurity. We see joy and sorrow as defining one another.

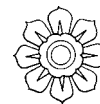
We live with lovingkindness, compassion, and appreciative joy, but there are still those whose hearts remain untouched and unmoved. For the moment, let us accept things as they are, as we have done our best. So we calmly await new opportunities for showing love.

Just as we are touched and moved by the kindness and love of others, they too would sooner or later be similarly moved. Plant the seeds of love and water them with virtue and patience.

Love is something we can neither have nor own because it is an active appreciation of self and other. In time, we begin to see others as being no different from us, and the self-and-other wall is broken down.

When we show love, we are giving what we are. If we want to be loved, we must first show that love. When we feel love in this way, we have something we cannot lose. We will never lose the memory and power of such a joy. Those we love are impermanent and subject to change; they might even leave us forever one day. But our happiness about them remains forever with us.

*Give what we cannot keep;  
get what we cannot lose.  
This is the beginning of  
Buddhist living and practice.*



# 9 SMALL CHANGE



To live as a Buddhist is to keep to the three trainings, based on a wholesome understanding of our body, mind and spirit. The training begins with our **body and speech**, how we communicate with others: this is the basis of moral conduct. We may not be able to change others, but we can begin by accepting them as they are: this is what the five precepts are about.

On a more difficult level, we need to tame our **mind**. As we think so we are: if we think we can, we can; if we think we can't, we can't. When we know our mind, we can change ourself in a wholesome way.

The third training is that of **the spirit**, meaning the “essence” of things. With properly developed body (physical actions) and speech, and

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a disciplined mind, we are able to see true reality, things as they really are, which is liberating in the highest sense.

### **May I be at Peace with What I Cannot Change**

Two things we cannot change are the past and others. We cannot change the past because it is gone. Our past may have shaped us, or even still control us. However, our past is gone, so how can it really control us? What is influencing or controlling us is not really the past, but *how* we think of our past.

Let's say something happened in the past, and we remembered it. How we remembered it (put it together) is deeply influenced by circumstances then, for example, we were much younger or knew much less then

We are different now. The past is gone: it is *now*. We need to accept the present so that we really live a full life. We might not be able to change our past, but we can be at peace with it. **To be at peace** here means that we no more think negatively about ourselves because of some past memory.

We may not be able to change others, but we can be at peace with our *ideas* of them. Everyone is in some ways shaped by their circumstances. There are really no “persons,” only circumstances. Often they do not know this, but we need to give them the benefit of the doubt because we are not them. When we meet or think of such people, we should train ourselves by *feeling*: “I accept you just as you are.”

This will help remove negative images and imprints from our mind, and keep it positive. Remember that no one can hurt us as badly as we ourselves can. No one can hurt us, if we do not allow it.

### **May I Have Courage to Change What I Can**

We are limited by our beliefs. A belief is what we *think*, put together in *words*. To believe something is to give supremacy to the “word,” whether we really *know* it or not. Our thoughts (*what* we think) and behaviour (the results of *how* we think) depend on our sense-experiences: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching. In other words, these are our experiences of the world.

Our senses *are* our world. The quality of our “world” is *how* we sense things. More often than not we have a “reactive” experience of our senses, our world. We tend to love or desire something that we were familiar with in our past; we tend to dislike, even hate, something that reminds us (often unconsciously) of a past negative experience; and we tend to ignore an experience which we cannot relate to our past. Hence, we have a predictably limited existence, living in the past.

We can change things, become a better person, by rising above our ideas of liking and disliking. We can begin by showing lovingkindness, unconditionally accepting all our experiences. Nothing happens to us from a single cause (whether it is a person, a thing, or an idea). Things happen as a result of numerous causes and conditions.

When we examine the life-events, we will see familiar patterns. It is an endless loop of causes and effects, a snake eating its own tail. We are powerfully driven by what we see as desirable; we dislike what prevents us from getting it; we ignore what we see as unrelated to our desire. To break this painful chain-cycle, we need *wisdom*.

**May I Wisely Know the Difference**

We are liberated by *knowing true reality*, that is, **knowing our mind, taming it, and freeing it**. Our mind is fed through our physical senses, but it also thinks for itself by creating new and highly imaginative ideas of its own. To tame the mind is to understand and refine how this idea-making process works.

One simple way of freeing the mind is to understand and accept that our mind is *changing* all the time. An **idea** is a fixed view of something that is changing. So we need to understand that even our ideas and beliefs are changing. We only need to look back over the years at how our ideas and beliefs have changed.

If we accept that our ideas and beliefs must change, then they become steps of mental development. This is truly **learning**. We can see how science has progressed over the centuries by changing theory after theory. We truly grow if we honestly examine *how* we think, *why* we think that way, and *what* we think about or believe.

To change is to grow. Real growth is that of the mind. The mind grows by letting go of ideas, by freeing ourselves from the words that limit it. We are limited by the words in our heads, the voice of the past: it is dead and gone. Let it go.

Personal development begins with a small change, by looking within. When we look deeply at ourself, we see that we have a mind that has created our world from our sense-experiences. We may not be able to change the world outside, not always anyway, but we can and need to change the world within. We need to understand this difference. Positive change begins when we see and accept this difference.

*May I be  
at peace with what I cannot change,  
bravely change what I can, and  
wisely know the difference.*