

why were we born?

Buddhadāsa  
Bhikkhu



## INTRODUCTION

In this booklet the Ven. Buddhādāsa examines the perennial questions "Why was I born? what am I living for? What is the purpose of life? "

The answer he gives is that man's task in life is to break free from the bondage of his own mental processes.

The way the mind normally works just won't do. Each man's mind is a treadmill to which he is chained; and real freedom is an impossibility unless a man can break out of his old unsatisfactory thought patterns and develop a new consciousness of an entirely new order. In the Buddha's teaching this mental treadmill is referred to as samsāra.

The first step towards breaking free from samsāra is to recognize its existence and realize the manner in which it enslaves. Close scrutiny reveals that our bondage in samsāra is dependent entirely on ignorance of that very samsāra. As soon as we recognize its existence and mode of working, it ceases to operate. We become free by realizing how we are bound.

The booklet is in two sections corresponding to two consecutive lectures given by Ven. Buddhādāsa. The first section presents a picture of life as a struggle to break free from the vicious circle of samsāra and move towards nirvāna. The second describes this progress towards nirvāna, this "walking the Path."

The attainment of enlightenment is presented as not merely a task facing each individual, but as a long-term project for the whole of mankind taken collectively. More than this, it is seen as part of the evolutionary process in general. Enlight-

enment, full self-knowledge, is presented as the final goal of all life, the climax and end of evolution.

But more importantly, this attainment of enlightenment is presented as a thoroughly practicable undertaking, a feasible project, something that can be done.

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## WHY WERE WE BORN ?

“ Why were we born ? ”

First of all, is this question a significant one for the average man ? I think we can take it that this question is one that everyone is interested in and puzzled over. There may, however, be some who will raise an objection.

“ The Buddha taught the non-existence of ‘the being,’ ‘the individual,’ ‘the self,’ ‘you,’ and ‘me.’ He taught that there is no self to be born. So the problem ‘Why were we born ?’ does not arise !”

This sort of objection is valid only at the very highest mental level, for someone who himself knows Freedom. But for the ordinary man who does not yet know Freedom, it is not a valid objection since it is not relevant, not to the point. A person who does not as yet know Dharma thoroughly is bound to feel himself involved in the process of birth and to have a great many problems and questions. He has no idea for what purpose he has been born.

It is only an arahant, one who has gone all the way in Buddha-Dharma, who will really realize that there is no birth, and no “being” or “person” or “self” to be born. For an arahant the question “Why was I born ?” does not arise. But for anyone who has not yet attained the stage of arahantship, even though he may be at one of the lower stages of insight such as Stream-entry, and in whom the idea of “self” and “of self” does still arise, the question “Why was I born ?” very definitely does exist.

So we are putting the question "Why was I born ?" and we are taking it that this question is a relevant one for anyone who is not as yet an arahant.

Now let us have a look at the different ideas that naturally come up in the minds of different people in answer to this question "Why were we born ?"

If we ask a child for what purpose he was born, he will simply say that he was born in order to be able to play and have fun and games. A teenage boy or girl is bound to answer that he or she was born for the sake of good looks, dating, and flirting. And an adult, parent, householder, will probably say he was born to earn a living, to save up money for his retirement and his children. These are the kinds of answers we are bound to get.

A person who has become old and feeble, is more than likely to have the foolish idea that he was born in order to die and be born again, and again, and again, over and over. Very few people consider that, having been born, we shall simply die and that will be the end of it. Right from early childhood we have been trained and conditioned to this idea of another world, another birth to come after death, with the result that it has become well and truly fixed in our minds. In any culture having its origins in India the majority of people, Buddhists, Hindus, and others, adhere to this doctrine of rebirth after death. So people who are too old and senile to be able to think for themselves are bound to answer that they were born to die and be reborn.

Generally these are the kinds of answer we get. If we go into it in rather more detail, we shall find some people saying they were born to eat, because they happen to have a weakness

for food. And there are bound to be some, those who are permanent slaves to alcohol and value nothing more highly, who will say they were born to drink. Others were born to gamble and would part with their own skin before they would give up their vicious habit. And there are all sorts of other things, some of them utterly trivial, in which people become so wrapped up that they come to regard them as the best of all things. Some people, usually the so-called well educated ones, set a lot of value on prestige. They are very concerned about making a name for themselves. Such people were born for the sake of name and fame.

So some people consider they were born for the sake of eating, some for the sake of sensuality, and some for the sake of name and fame.

The first of these, eating, is a necessity. But people carry it so far that they become infatuated with taste and addicted to eating. At the present time there is evidence of a general increase of interest in food. The rate of increase of newspaper advertisements promoting the art of eating would lead one to conclude that not a few people are obsessed with eating and worship food. These born eaters form the first group.

The second group comprises those who were born for sensuality, for every kind of pleasure and delight obtainable by way of eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body. Most people when they have satisfied themselves with eating go off in search of sense pleasures. Their subjection to the power of sensuality may be such that they can rightly be described as slaves to it. Ultimately all the kinds of infatuation we have mentioned so far can be included under sensuality. Even ideas in the mind, the sixth of the senses, can be a source of delight amounting to

infatuation. It can be said that such people live for the sake of sensuality, for the sake of visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, and mental things serving as objects of desire. They constitute the second group.

The third group consists of those born for the sake of name and fame. They have been conditioned to worship prestige, to the extent that they would sacrifice their very lives for it. Name and fame, whether the means employed for attaining it bring benefit to others or only to the individual concerned, can still be of considerable worth, and in terms of worldly values is not something to be condemned. But in terms of absolute values, to go so far as to become a slave to name and fame is a tragedy. It by no means puts an end to the unsatisfactory condition (dukkha).

So eating, sensuality, and prestige all lead to various kinds of obsession.

Among poorer people, we hear more than anything else of the need to earn a living in order to get the necessities of life. For the poor man nothing is so important or necessary as earning a living. This then is his major concern, and it can be said that he was born to earn a living. He is all the time ploughing his fields, or attending to his business, or whatever it may be, so that this becomes his one and only concern, and he can never have enough of it. In other words he really feels he was born to earn a living, and has never regarded anything as more important than this. The reason for this is that he has never moved among spiritually advanced people, never heard Dharma from them. It is fairly certain that he has moved only among his fellow worldlings and heard only the talk of worldlings. This is something well worth thinking about. Such a person

considers his way of life thoroughly right and proper and worthwhile; but in reality it is only half right, or even less. The magnitude of such a man's obsession with material things shows that he lives to get much more than just enough to eat.

Now what each one of us has to concern himself with, and examine, and come to understand clearly is why we were born to earn a living and stay alive. When we have come to understand properly for what ultimate purpose we are here in this life, we realize that this business of earning a living is something quite incidental. It is subsidiary to another big and important purpose, the real purpose for which we were born. Do we earn a living simply in order to stay alive and go on endlessly accumulating more and more wealth and property? Or do we do it in order to achieve some higher purpose?

For most people this endless accumulation of wealth and property does seem to be the purpose of earning a living. Few people stop short at earning just enough to satisfy their basic wants, to feed themselves and family, to provide the necessities for a happy life free from misery. For most people no amount of wealth and property is enough. Most don't know where to stop, and have so much they don't know what to do with it. There are plenty like this in the world.

In terms of religion this kind of behaviour is considered, either explicitly or implicitly, to be sinful. In Christianity the accumulation of more wealth than necessary is explicitly stated to be a sin. Other religions say much the same. A person who goes on endlessly accumulating and hoarding wealth and property, who has become in some way or other infatuated and obsessed by it, is regarded as deluded and a sinner. He is not as much of a sinner as someone who kills, but he is a sinner never-



theless. This then is now we ought to see it. We ought not to live just in order to go on endlessly accumulating wealth and property. We ought to regard it as simply a means to an end. We ought to acquire wealth simply to provide for our basic wants, in order that we can then go in search of something else, something better than wealth. And just what that something is we shall discuss later on.

Now the man who lives for the sake of sensuality ought to give a thought to an old saying: "Seeking pleasure in eating, sleeping, and sex, and avoiding danger --- all these man and beast have in common. What sets man apart is Dharma. Without Dharma man is no different from the beasts."

This is an old saying dating back to pre-Buddhist times, and no doubt also current at the time of the Buddha. In any case it certainly accords with Buddhist principles. Human beings normally feel the same way as lower animals towards eating, sleeping, and sex, and danger in the form of disease, pain, and enemies. The lower animals can handle these things just as well as human beings. Preoccupation with these things, which any animal has access to, indicates a none too high level of intelligence. And because those objects of sensuality have such an influence over the mind, it is difficult for any ordinary being to recognize them for what they are and break free from them.

To live for sensuality by way of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind will never lead to Liberation. The average run of people are far removed from the top level, the highest stage attainable in human birth. Having become obsessed with sense objects, they have got stuck half-way along the road, mid-way towards the goal. They are not to be taken as a model. If this sensuality were really as precious as they seem to think it is,

then they, together with their animal counterparts, ought to be rated the highest of beings.

At this point we ought to mention that even celestial beings dwelling in the "heaven of sensuality" (kāmāvacara-devatā) are in no way especially well-off. They too are subject to suffering and anxiety. They too are impure, constantly defiled by their inappropriate bodily, vocal, and mental actions. Devatās of this type, whenever they succeed in elevating themselves, leave their heaven of sensuality and go off in search of Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. Sensuality, even in its highest form, is not by any means the highest thing for man, and no man should maintain that this was the purpose for which he was born.

Now we come to prestige. For a man to think he was born for the sake of name and fame is a tragedy. A glance at this thing known as prestige shows it to be thoroughly insubstantial. It depends on other people's having a high regard for one; and it may well be that, though no-one realizes it, this high regard is quite unfounded. When the majority of people are deluded, slow-witted, undiscerning, lacking any knowledge of Dharma, the things for which they have a high regard and to which they give prestige are bound to be pretty ordinary and average things, in keeping with their ordinary and average sense of values. In their eyes the things advocated and taught by spiritually advanced people will hardly rate very high. In fact we invariably find that the more concerned people are with name and fame, the more worldly are the things they rate highly. The person who deserves to be rated highest is the one who is able to renounce worldly values and promote the happiness of mankind; but in practice we find all the prestige going to the people responsible for adding to the world's confusion and distress. This

is an example of prestige in the eyes of the worldling, the man stuck here in the world.

To say that we were born to gain prestige is as ridiculous as to say we were born to pursue sensuality or to eat. All these views are equally pitiful. They differ only in degree of sophistication. In short then, there is no doubt whatsoever that neither eating, nor sensuality, nor prestige is the highest thing, the objective for which a Buddhist ought to aim.

Now let us have a look at a saying of the Buddha which I believe may help us to answer the question of why we were born.

Saṅkhārā paramā dukkhā,  
Nibbānaṃ paramaṃ sukhaṃ.  
Etaṃ nātvā yathābhūtaṃ  
Sāntimaggam va brūhayeti.

Compounding is utter misery,  
 Nirvāna is highest bliss.  
 Real'y knowing this truth  
 One is on the Path to Peace.

To understand the first line of this quotation, we have first of all to understand properly the word "saṅkhāra." This word has several meanings. It can refer either to the physical, the body, or as in the present case to the mental, the mind. Literally "saṅkhāra" means simply "compound" [both noun and verb], that is, the function we refer to as "compounding" [and the compound that results therefrom].

Following this definition, then, compounding is utter

misery, thoroughly unsatisfactory (dukkha). But it is not being stated that compounding is in itself misery, a cause of human distress and suffering. The word "compounding" implies no rest, just continual combining leading to continual "rebirth". And the things responsible for this compounding are the mental defilements (kilesa). These are the compounders. With the arising of ignorance, stupidity, infatuation, the root cause of the other defilements greed and hatred, compounding takes place. They are responsible for the compounding function of the mind, causing it to grasp at and cling to one thing after another, endlessly, without let-up. The word "compounding" as used here refers to grasping and clinging with attachment (upādāna). If there is no attachment, if contamination by attachment does not take place, then the term "compounding" is not applicable.

Saṅkhārā paramā dukkhā --- All compounding is thoroughly unsatisfactory. This means that involvement which has reached the point of craving and attachment is nothing but misery. Without this kind of compounding there is freedom from the misery of the unsatisfactory condition. It is this very compounding that constitutes the unsatisfactory condition. It is this very compounding that is referred to as the Wheel of Samāsāra, that cyclic process with its three aspects: defilements, action based on those defilements, and results of the action. The defilements, producing satisfaction with the results of our actions (or karmas), prompt us to further action --- and so the cycle of defilements, action, and fruit of action goes on endlessly. It is this process that is called compounding; and it is this endlessly repeated process of compounding that is referred to in the statement that all compounding is thoroughly unsatisfactory.

Now the second line: Nibbānaṃ paramaṃ sukham.

This has become a household maxim. It refers to nirvana (nibbāna), the precise opposite of the compounded condition, in other words, freedom from saṅkhāras. At any time when compounding ceases, there is nirvana. Complete and final freedom from compounds is full nirvana, momentary freedom from compounds is momentary nirvana, just a trial sample of the real nirvana. Anyone who has come to know fully the true nature of compounding will have no trouble in understanding by inference the opposite condition of freedom from compounding. The word "nirvana" can be translated "extinction," or "cessation," or "coolness," or "freedom from distress." All these meanings are consistent with the idea of stopping, of not compounding. Compounding is nothing but constant worry, trouble, distress, misery. "Nirvana" implies the antithesis of "saṅkhāra," that is, freedom from this process of compounding.

Now the next part of the quotation: "Really knowing this truth one is on the Path to Peace." This means that the realization of this truth leads one to seek the path leading to peace or nirvana. Nirvana is sometimes called peace (sānti), that is, stillness, coolness. They are equivalent terms. So this realization prompts us to do everything possible to move in the direction of peace or nirvana.

From this we can gather that the Buddha wished us to know about the unsatisfactory condition (dukkha), to know about freedom from the unsatisfactory condition, and to set out on the path leading to this freedom from the unsatisfactory condition, in other words to nirvana. If a person has no idea of the possibility of nirvana, and does not realize that nirvana, being the absolute cessation of the unsatisfactory condition, is something to be valued above all else, then he will have no wish for nir-

vana, and will never set out on the path towards it. As soon as a person recognizes this present condition as thoroughly unsatisfactory, and loses all wish for anything but the very opposite condition, he will start taking an interest in nirvana and will set out on the path towards it. What he has to do is have a good look at his own mind and subject it to a deep and detailed scrutiny, to discover whether or not it is in the compounded condition.

When a person under the influence of defilements performs some action (karma), especially when he performs some action considered evil, such as drinking, killing, adultery, stealing, or the like, then he is compounding. Compounding is based on ignorance, delusion, stupidity. It goes on until it produces feelings of pleasure and satisfaction in the mind of the doer. When he experiences the unsatisfactory result of his actions, he attempts to deal with it by further action --- which only makes matters worse. The result is that compounding goes on more than ever --- until the time comes when he recognizes this as an unsatisfactory state of affairs and determines to put a stop to it. He then has a look around for something that is not unsatisfactory, and so is able to get free from his evil ways.

Now let us have a quick look at the man who does good, the sort that abstains from evil acts and performs only acts of the type usually called good. Such a man gets all the fitting results of his so-called good actions. He may get wealth and prestige, and all the things a good man could wish for. But if he were to examine his mental condition, he would realize that he is still subject to worry and anxiety. He experiences the suffering that always goes with wealth and prestige. A man rich in fame is usually caused distress by that very fame; and the same goes for wealth and children. Whatever one happens to be attached to and

find satisfaction in is bound to be a cause of distress.

So even good action, action in no way evil, sinful, unwholesome, does not by any means bring freedom from the unsatisfactory condition. Just as an evil man suffers the torment due to an evil-doer, so a good man too is bound to experience his own particular type of suffering. A good man experiences the subtle inconspicuous type of suffering that comes whenever one clings to one's own goodness. So when we examine it as a phenomenon of nature, we find that it is not only the evil man experiencing the fruits of his evil deeds who is whirling around in the cycle of compounding; the good man too, experiencing the fruits of his good deeds, is likewise involved in compounding. Both of them are involved in compounding. There is no end to this process. It goes on and on incessantly. Thought is followed by action, and when the fruits of the action have been got, thinking follows once again. This is the wheel of saṃsāra, the cycle of wandering on. Saṃsāra is simply this cycle of compounding.

As soon as a person has managed to comprehend this process, he is bound to start taking an interest in the opposite condition. He comes to realize that money, name and fame, and the like are of no help at all and that what is needed is something better than all these. He then starts looking around for something better and higher, some other way. He continues his search until such time as he meets some spiritually advanced person, sits at his feet, and learns from him the Truth, the Dharma. In this way he comes to know about that state which is the very opposite of all that he has so far had and been and done. He comes to know about nirvana and the way to attain it. He arrives at the certitude that this is the goal that each and

every man ought to attain. He realizes: "This is why I was born!" Anything other than this is involvement, entanglement, compounding. This alone is the putting out of the flame, coolness, stillness. His interest in nirvana prompts him to seek the means of attaining it, and he is convinced that the treading of this path to nirvana is the purpose for which he was born.

There is one more small question to think over in this connection: "Am I glad I was born ? Am I happy about it or not ?" Of course no-one ever has any choice in the matter of birth. It never happens that a person is in a position to decide that he will be born. He simply is born. But no sooner is he born than he comes into contact with sense objects by way of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. He becomes engrossed in these objects, and finds satisfaction in them. This means that he is glad of having been born and wishes to continue existing in order that he may continue experiencing these sense objects. And when people speak of making a lot of merit in order to have sense objects again after death, at a better, more refined, higher level than at present, this indicates an even greater desire to be born for the sake of these pleasant things.

The important point here is this: A person having been born, enjoys the forms, sounds, odours, tastes, tactile sensations, and mental images which his mind encounters. As a result he grasps at them and clings to them with egoism, and possessiveness. He has been born and he finds satisfaction and delight in having been born. He dreads death because death would mean no more of all these things. The essence of this is that no man is ever born of his own free will, as a result of some decision on his own part; birth just happens as a natural process characterising all living reproducing things. No sooner is a man born



than a liking for this birth arises in him in the manner described. In the completely natural situation, that is, among the lower animals, the desire for birth is very slight and does not pose the great problem it does for man.

A man should question himself and verify two things: "I am glad I was born." and "I was born for some purpose." Now if a man concludes that he is glad of having been born to carry out the highest task possible for a man, then his position is rather paradoxical. If the real goal of life is freedom from re-birth, then he was born in order not to be reborn, and so ought never to have been born in the first place ! Why should he be glad he was born and so given the opportunity to walk the path to nirvana ? If freedom from birth is such a good thing, why then is there birth in the first place ?

These are some of the questions that constitute ignorance, or at least that arise out of ignorance. "Was I born of my own free will or was birth forced upon me ?" "Having been born, what ought I to be doing ?" The average person doesn't delve so deeply into these questions. Accepting his birth as an accomplished fact, he simply asks himself the immediate question "What to do now ?" Believing he was born to accumulate wealth, he goes right on accumulating wealth. Or if he believes he was born to eat, or to build up name and fame, then he works towards those ends. He feels that is enough. To get name and fame and be materially well off is all the average person wants. For him that is the ideal; and there are not a few people who take this sort of shallow view.

But we are now in a position to consider this question rather more deeply. We have come to see that no amount of this

kind of action or this kind of condition is by any means satisfactory. There is still something dissatisfying about it. Something is lacking. No matter how successfully we may pursue these worldly ends we are always left dissatisfied. We are forced to recognize that something more is needed, and in the end we find ourselves drawn to the Dhamma. We come to realize that we were born to study this highest and most precious piece of human knowledge and come to understand it, in order to attain Freedom, the highest and most precious thing accessible to a human being. There is nothing higher than this. This is the summum bonum, the best thing attainable by a human being.

Suppose we accept that we have been born, and that having been born we have a certain task to do, a task so important that to carry it through to completion ought to be man's highest aim. There can be no aim higher than this attainment of complete freedom from the misery of the unsatisfactory condition. And by following the Buddha's directions this complete freedom can be attained. The Buddhist teaching came into the world in order to inform people about the highest thing attainable by human beings. All the other religions existing prior to Buddhism had had this same objective, to answer the question "Why was I born?" They had all been fully occupied with this same question: "What is that highest good for the sake of which man was born?"

Some of these religions considered sensual satisfaction to be the ultimate, the highest good. Some considered the summum bonum to be the pure non-sensual bliss of the brahma-loka. Then there was a sect which maintained that man's purpose in life was to seek bliss in the knowledge that nothing at all exists! There even existed the view that the highest thing attain-

able by man is the death-like condition of complete unconsciousness in which there is no awareness of anything whatsoever ! These were the highest doctrines in existence at the time when the Buddha-to-be started his seeking. When he searched and studied in the various ashrams, the highest teaching he was able to find was this. Being sufficiently wise to see that this was by no means the summum bonum, he set about investigating on his own account. Thus he arrived at the perfect insight which puts a final end to the unsatisfactory condition, and as we say, he attained nirvana.

Even though people had been talking about nirvana long before the time of the Buddha, the meaning of the word as used by him differs from the meanings it had for those sects. Mere words cannot be relied on; it is the meanings that count. When we say we were born in order to attain nirvana, we mean nirvana as that word was used by the Buddha. We don't mean the nirvana of other sects, such as abundance of sensual pleasures, or the highest stage of mental concentration. When we say nirvana is our goal, we must have in mind nirvana as understood in the Buddha's teaching. And in the Buddha's teaching nirvana is generally to be taken as the opposite of the compounded condition. This is expressed in the Pali saying we have already quoted:

Saṅkhārā paramā dukkhā,  
Nibbānaṃ paramaṃ sukhaṃ.

Nirvana is simply freedom from sankharas, compounds. We must understand then that we were born in order to attain freedom from compounding. Some people may laugh at this

statement that our objective in life is to attain "freedom from compounding." Compounding, this spinning on in the wheel of samsara, is unsatisfactory. Freedom from compounding consists in having such a degree of insight that this vicious circle is cut through and got rid of completely. When there is freedom from compounding, there is no more spinning on, no more wheel of samsara. Our purpose in life is to bring to a standstill the cycle of samsara to put a complete end to the unsatisfactory condition. This complete freedom from unsatisfactoriness is called nirvana.

Now nirvana is not something occult and mysterious. It is not some sort of miracle, something supernatural. Furthermore, nirvana is not something to be attained only after death. This is a point that must be understood. Nirvana is attained at any moment that the mind becomes free from compounding. Freedom from compounding, at any moment, is nirvana. Permanent cessation of compounding is full nirvana; temporary cessation is just a momentary nirvana, which is the kind we have been discussing. The experiencing of temporary nirvana serves as an incentive to go further, to head for permanent nirvana, the full nirvana that makes a man an arahant. This state arises with the knowledge that saṅkhāras, that is compounds and compounding, are misery, while nirvana, freedom from compounding, is peace, bliss. Every man's purpose in life ought to be to tread the path to full nirvana.

So the answer to the question "Why were we born?" is provided by this saying:

Compounding is utter misery,  
Nirvana is highest bliss.

## WALKING THE PATH.

Our present birth is to be thought of as resembling a journey along a road. It is necessary then to have a good look and discover which is the right and which the wrong way to walk this road. If we just follow the crowd, we may well go astray and miss the true destination. This is not the kind of walking we have in mind when we speak of "walking the Path." By "walking the Path" we mean progress towards nirvana, towards freedom from the unsatisfactory condition.

If this comparison of our present birth to a journey along a road is still unclear, the matter must be thought over deeply, discussed, and studied thoroughly. In this study and practice, we can find help and guidance in the teachings of the Buddha, the one who succeeded in walking the Path right to the end. Unfortunately however, most people take no interest in the Buddha's teaching as a guide to the Path and how to walk it.

Now here is an important point to consider: This person who is to walk the Path -- just which particular person is it? Or if it is a number of people, how many? Taking the broad outlook we can see that it is really the whole of humanity, mankind in general. Think about it. As long as no-one exists who knows the Path and how to walk it, most people are sure to stray from the Path. But slowly and by degrees the right way is found, little by little the Path is re-discovered, until the time comes when there arises a fully enlightened being, a buddha, someone who manages to walk the perfectly right Path. In other words walking the Path is a long-term project which mankind is engaged in collectively, until such time as some exceptional indi-

vidual happens to increase so much in insight that he manages to walk it right to the end.

Let us put this another way. Most people live no longer than one hundred years at the most. Walking the Path more or less clumsily, they cover only a short distance before they die. No single person gets very far -- and who is to carry on where he leaves off ? The answer is posterity. Succeeding generations, benefitting from the insight gained by their predecessors, inherit the task of carrying on the journey. Children and grand-children carry on where their elders have left off, making steadily more progress until the time comes when one of them manages to complete the journey.

Looked at in this way, even the having of children, the propagation of the species, has as its objective continual progress along the Path, and ultimately arrival at the end. But do people at the present time really have this objective in view when they have children ? People go on producing more and more dark-eyed little infants -- but are they thinking of these new individuals as heirs to the task of carrying on along the Path ? If not, then their motivation must be on some lower level, the level of animals like dogs and cats. People give birth to offspring, which they then love so dearly they would willingly lay down their life for them. But animals do this too. The attachment to offspring dominating the mind of a parent operates in precisely the same way in animals as in man.

But let us examine why an animal has such an attachment to its offspring, such a strong desire to protect them. Just what is the purpose of it ? We can safely assume that it is not a result of rational thinking on the part of the animal. Attachment to offspring and desire to protect them are naturally present in

animals. And why has Nature equipped animals with this kind of instinct ? In order to guard against the extinction of the species. And for what purpose should the extinction of an animal species be averted ? Ultimately in order to make possible further evolution, further steady progress towards the highest stage possible for a reproducing species. Thus we see Nature working to save each species of living things from extinction, thereby ensuring continued evolution up to the highest point. This is Nature's purpose. Animals in general are subject to this law, whether they realize it or not. It can be said, then, that for the lower animals too, birth is a journey. It is a non-stop journey of progress until the top is reached, until there evolves Man. And after that further progress is possible to the stage of Fully Enlightened Man.

Now, for what purpose does present-day man produce offspring ? Possibly there do exist people who genuinely believe they are producing children in order that the human species may be perpetuated and nirvana ultimately attained, in other words, in order that there may be continual progress along the Path. But obviously the great majority do not think like this. They love their children. They feed and care for them and make all sorts of sacrifices on account of their blind love. Everyone wants his own children to be the best and the most beautiful. No-one is concerned about the propagation of the species for the sake of continuing the journey. No-one looks on his children in terms of humanity's collective progress towards the goal. Everyone thinks in terms of individual benefit, in terms of "me" and "mine." It is only "my child" that matters. It is only he whose condition and progress are of any concern. This kind of thinking conforms

with the laws of Nature, but conflicts with all the principles of Dharma. As a result, children are bound to bring their parents misery and tears. This narrow thinking does nothing to help humanity towards nirvana.

All this discussion is intended to bring us back to the questions: "Why was I born?" and "What ought I to be doing?" Even if one has children and keeps the species going, what must one hand on to them so that they may be fit to encounter the Dharma and become genuine Dharma-followers? As long as each individual considers himself a single self-sufficient unit, not involved with the rest, mankind has no means of moving forward towards the coming into existence of an enlightened being.

All of man's scientific knowledge is of no use unless it helps him to progress spiritually. Now, speaking in terms of material values, it does happen that what evil people achieve and pass on to evil people following them brings about progress. If this were not so, the world could never have attained its present unbelievably high stage of technological development. It could be maintained that we were born to work for the material progress of mankind up to the ultimate. But in material progress there is no ultimate. Progress, as understood by the average householder, the man of the world, never leads to any ultimate goal. By contrast, spiritual progress, progress towards the Truth known by an enlightened being, does have an ultimate goal. On this road it is possible to go right to the end and attain complete freedom from the unsatisfactory condition.

Let us pursue the question further. Given that man was born to walk the Path to nirvana, how exactly are we to set about this walking? The Buddha has said:



Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccāti  
Yadā paññāya passati  
Atha nibbindati dukkhe  
Esa maggo visuddhiyā.

“When a man sees with insight that all compounds are transient, he becomes fed up with them as unsatisfactory. That is the Path to Nirvana, to Purity.”

When a man comes to recognize the true nature of compounds (saṅkhāras), he becomes fed up with them. And this disenchantment with compounds is the first step on the Path leading to Nirvana, to Dharma. The Buddha said furthermore:

Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā,  
Sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā,  
Sabbe dhammā anattā,

All compounds are transient,  
 All compounds are unsatisfactory,  
 All things are not selves (anattā).

When one has seen these three characteristics, one becomes disenchanted with those unsatisfactory compounds. And that is the Path to nirvana --- or at least the beginning of it. The point to note here is that when a person has come to a proper realization of these characteristics of compounds, he finds himself naturally repelled by compounds, that is, by the unsatisfactory condition. All compounds are thoroughly unsatisfactory. As soon as a person begins to see compounds as thoroughly unsatisfactory, he becomes utterly fed-up with compounds. Com-

pounds are by their very nature unsatisfactory. The word "compound" automatically implies unsatisfactoriness. There is no such thing as a satisfactory compound. When compounding stops, there is nirvana, the ideal state.

But the last line of this quotation covers both compounds and non-compounds. Nothing whatsoever, be it compound or no compound, is a self that might be grasped at as being one's own. This is the last word. Compounds are ever changing; compounds are unsatisfactory; all things, compounds or not, are such that they may not be grasped at as selves or as belonging to oneself. Only when this fact is seen in all clarity has the real Path begun; only then has one really started moving towards the overcoming of the unsatisfactory condition, that is, towards nirvana.

The word "Path" has several meanings. First of all and most basically it should be understood as synonymous with "practice" (Patipatti) or "way of practice" (patipadā). Both of these terms imply stepwise progress like walking along a path; and they also imply the path itself which is to be walked. The word "Path" refers specifically to that which is practised or walked, but strictly speaking the Path and the walking of it ought not to be distinguished. The walking, the walker, and the path walked are not to be recognized as separate things. In the Pali language one single word was used for these, or at least one basic root word was used in slightly different forms which referred respectively to the one who walks, the path walked, and the act of walking. All these are in Pali variants of the one root word. So when we hear of the practice (Patipatti) or the way of practice (patipadā), let us bear in mind that they refer to walking the Path.

And there are numerous other terms all referring to this same Path. A person who, not having studied the matter very closely, comes across such a large number of equivalent terms may well jump to the conclusion that they refer to several different things. In reality they all refer to this one Path. For instance the Task (kammapatha) is simply the Path to be walked; the Ten Skillful Actions (kusalakammapatha) are also simply the Path; Morality, Concentration, and Insight (sīla-samādhi-paññā) are the Path; the Noble Eightfold Path (ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga) is once again the Path; and even to see all compounds as transient and unsatisfactory, and all things as not selves --- this too is the Path. Anyone who has been thinking of these various names as all denoting different things would do well to correct this misunderstanding. All these different names denote one and the same Path looked at from different points of view for purposes of instruction.

Now what are the Ten Skillful Actions ? These are ten kinds of abstinence from sinful bodily, vocal, and mental action. Taken together they are called the Ten Skillful Actions because anyone who practises in this way is walking the high Path. The Buddha used this particular mode of speaking when teaching ordinary average people. When he wished to teach on a higher level or in briefer terms, for the benefit of people with a more than average degree of understanding, he spoke in terms of the Noble Eightfold Path --- right understanding, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. This Eightfold Path is a mode of practice rather above the level appropriate for the average householder. But its objective is just the same. It too aims at the attainment of nirvana, differing from other schemes only

in intensity or level.

Now let us look at the Buddha's brief statement that whenever transience, unsatisfactoriness, and non-selfhood (anicca, dukkha, anattā) are perceived with insight, that is the Path. This is even more clearly a statement designed specifically for people with insight. The Pali says quite clearly: "When transience, unsatisfactoriness, and non-selfhood are perceived with insight, that is the Path."

Reflection will show that when we have proper insight and understanding of the true characteristics of all compounds, that is, of Nature itself, then at that time our behaviour, bodily, vocal, and mental, will be just as it should be. It will be right behaviour --- but not simply right in terms of the law-books or general morality, or social custom, not just unintelligently right. To put it another way, if a person really perceives transience, unsatisfactoriness, and non-selfhood, he cannot possibly do the wrong thing by way of body, speech or mind, because the power of this understanding acts as a governor. If we properly know and understand and perceive the three characteristics, we cannot possibly think wrong thoughts or have wrong aspirations, or say or do the wrong thing. Having had clear insight into the true nature of things, we are no longer liable to become obsessed with them. Actions based on true insight are always right actions. Thus morality, concentration, and insight (or the Noble Eight-fold Path, or the Ten Skillful Actions, etc.) come into being of their own accord.

Suppose now, that, having reached the peak of insight into transience, unsatisfactoriness, and non-selfhood, we then descend. Any action we then do at this lower level will be a thoroughly right action. And taking it the other way round, if we

are working up from the bottom, we have to build a firm foundation of right behaviour, bodily, vocal, and mental, supported by which we may grow in insight day by day. So a man of the world, one who is still an ordinary deluded worldling, must have faith in the efficacy of the Ten Skillful Actions and try his best to practise them. If he does this constantly, he will soon start making progress in insight because this is the right way to walk the Path. Ultimately he will reach the peak, attaining insight into transience, unsatisfactoriness, and non-selfhood. So regardless of whether the Path is viewed from the end towards the beginning, or from the beginning towards the end, it is seen as something that can be done --- provided of course the individual concerned is reasonably well equipped as to character, sense faculties, and intelligence. Everyone who has been born in the world and blessed with long life, ought to make it his business to develop insight, little by little, every day, until he reaches the stage where he is able to see the three characteristics of all compounds, to see the endless process of compounding as unsatisfactory, and to perceive escape from unsatisfactoriness in the state of freedom from compounding.

This is sufficient answer to the question why the Buddha taught the Path in several different ways. At the high level he taught the Four Exercises in Mindfulness (satipatthāna) as the One Path, the perfect system for the individual walking alone, the one way towards the one and only goal. He taught the Path under the name of Mindfulness, and under many other names which we need not go into here at length.

All we wish to do here is to realize that this thing called the Path will have come to be the True Path just as soon as there arises insight into transience, unsatisfactoriness, and nonselfhood.

As long as this insight has not yet arisen, it is still not the true Path, but only the very beginning of it. So if a person has not yet gained this insight into the three characteristics, he still does not know the Path to be walked. Instead he goes off in search of things which are transient, unsatisfactory, and not selves more than ever, and his life becomes more and more unsatisfactory. But if a person does come to see that all compounds are transient, unsatisfactory, and not selves, his mind will seek to avoid those compounds. It will seek to transcend them, to get above them, so that they cannot harm it. This is the true Path, the Path that leads away from unsatisfactoriness and towards the overcoming of it.

So it is up to each one of us to develop the true Path based on insight and try to gain understanding of the transience, unsatisfactoriness, and non-selfhood of compounds, to see them as inherently unsatisfactory, as nothing but unsatisfactory, as the unsatisfactory condition itself, to be avoided at all costs. This seen, behaviour will thenceforth be free of compounding with craving and attachment. Once transience, unsatisfactoriness, and non-selfhood have been seen, craving and attachment cannot arise. All that is left is the insight. Insight serves to prevent the arising of craving and attachment. So this life can be one with the Path. Life can be in itself a good steady progress; it can be one and the same as walking the Path.

I hope you will all now take a greater interest in these three words "transience, unsatisfactoriness, non-selfhood." Don't go just memorising someone's explanation of them. See for yourself that things which go on perpetually combining and changing possess these three characteristics. When a person does not realize the true nature of things, he unwittingly takes them as

lasting, worth-while, selves belonging to himself. You can imagine the trouble that then results. It's like taking a thing with certain properties and trying to force it to have different properties. It can't be done any more than fire can be forced to be without heat. The result is both comic and tragic.

So the majority of people believe that having been born into this life, we ought to go after one thing or another, according to our desires, being pleased when we get what we want and upset when we don't. When people have children they have nothing better to teach them than this primitive philosophy. This is all they have to offer. It is a far cry from the Path taught by the Buddha. Children walk in the same old ruts as their parents, and so it goes on from one generation to the next. There is no progress forwards, no variation or improvement based on knowledge that all things are transient, unsatisfactory, and not selves, and therefore not to be grasped at. If then our children, and we ourselves too, are to walk the Path easily and quickly, it behoves us to take a special interest in this matter of grasping and non-grasping, to train ourselves in it and teach it to others.

True, we have to live in the world. We have to eat, to make use of various articles, to see and come in contact with all sorts of things. But it is possible to live with these things without grasping at and clinging to them. We must act intelligently, always mindful of the three characteristics. When our offspring have this insight, when they have come to see that nothing whatsoever can be grasped at and clung to, we can then leave them to look after themselves. They are then able to think, speak, and act correctly of their own accord, in the way that is free from the unsatisfactory condition. It is up to us to teach and train

our children in this matter of grasping and non-grasping so that they may be free from excessive depression and elation. They must develop sufficient intelligence to keep them above the things that would otherwise make them laugh or cry. They must develop in this insight just as they develop physically. This is how to be a good parent who hands on to his offspring the job of walking the Path the right and rapid way. This is how it should be, in keeping with the principle that man is born to walk the Path so that the goal may one day be attained.

Now let us have a look at Thailand, and the hundred-odd other countries of the world, and see what sorts of things people are teaching their children. What sorts of things are people doing ? What are their desires, the causes of those actions that are producing so much suffering and misery in every part of the world at the present time ?

We find that people, far from walking the right Path, are following the Devil, Satan, Mara, whatever one cares to call him, which is bound to be a source of all sorts of misery. This is not at all in keeping with the purpose of birth as a human being, let alone a human being who has encountered the Buddha's teaching. Even any ordinary human being ought not to behave like this, because the term "human" (in Sanskrit manuṣya) means something rather special. It implies a high-minded being, a descendant of Manu the wise, something higher than average. To deserve the title of human being, one must walk the true Path. As soon as one wanders from the Path, one ceases to be human in the true sense. If one thinks along lines inconsistent with Truth or Dharma for even one moment, then in that moment one has ceased being a true human being and is instead walking the path of Mara, or the path of the beasts. Our examination has



to be done in such detail that we walk the Path all the time, with every breath we take, every minute and every second. We must walk the Path all the time. As soon as we relax, we go astray.

So let us not go lapsing into thought patterns that lead to carelessness or overconfidence, or the idea that this journey is an easy one. There is also a danger of relaxing and simply going downstream, drifting with the current. This is one of the worst dangers. The Buddha taught us to be constantly aware, to walk the Path every single "thought moment." One moment of unawareness and the mind is off the track again. Sometimes it may go so far astray that to return to the Path becomes very difficult and time-consuming. Suppose one falls into one of the "woeful states" such as hell. This means that one has done the wrong thing, relaxed, and let the mind drop to the low level known as hell, so that it is difficult to return promptly. This wandering from the Path is like walking into a trap, falling into a pit or ditch. It comes from being careless, not keeping to the Path, not being constantly aware of those three characteristics, transience, unsatisfactoriness, and non-selfhood. And there is no travelling companion who will help us keep to the strait and narrow. There is no-one to keep an eye on us and see that we don't wander off the Path. Each of us is just a blind man being led by blind men. The lot of us are just fumbling along all the time. It is because the great majority of people are forever being careless and wandering off the Path that the entire world is in such a pitiful and hopeless condition.

Do realize that this business of the Path and the walking of it is no small matter no joke. On the contrary it is the most vital matter of all. It is the task for a human being. It is a job to

be done with all the intelligence and ability a human being can muster. Don't waver for an instant, not for a split second! In a single instant one may go astray from the Path. If the mind is not on the lookout at every moment, there is a danger of its running off the Path and even falling into hell. It behoves each one of us to reflect on the dangers of this kind of lapse, and resolve to maintain clear and unobscured insight into the transience, unsatisfactoriness, and non-selfhood of every single thing about him. His every action, word, and thought will then be in keeping with that insight. There is no way it can lapse and give rise to some kind of suffering.

This, then, is in brief the way to walk the Path. It is just a brief summary, just the essence of it. It could be dealt with in more detail to cover the numerous different forms of practice out of which an individual may choose just the one that best suits his own particular temperament. One can think of it as the Noble Eightfold Path, or the Four Exercises in Mindfulness, or the Ten Skillful Actions, or something else, just as one chooses. We may choose to think of it as the Ten Virtues, which a buddha is said to possess. These Virtues are once again the Path to be walked from ordinary human status to buddhahood. If we feel ten Virtues are too much for us to aim at, that is all right; and if we feel we could manage all ten but not to the degree possible for a buddha, that is all right too. These Virtues simply constitute a mode of practice governed by insight into the thoroughly unsatisfactory nature of this worldly condition, this cycle of samsara, these compounds. Our job is to cross over from all this to the other side, nirvana, by means of the kind of action that sees things as they really are, as transient, unsatisfactory, and not selves. So we practise in such a way as to wipe out all

grasping and clinging to these transient, unsatisfactory, self-less things. We practise charity, good-will, honesty, tolerance, all the virtues that we realize will give mastery over the lower kinds of thought, the kind that is blind to the three characteristics.

To sum up then, walking the Path must begin, develop, and culminate with perfectly clear insight into the three characteristics. This is all there is to it. I hope you will follow this Path taught by the Buddha and gain the benefits of so doing.

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**SUBLIME LIFE MISSION**  
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Published by:

The Buddhadāsa Indapañño Archives  
Vachirabenjatas Park (Rot Fai Park)  
Nikom Rot Fai Sai 2 Rd., Chatuchak, Bangkok  
Thailand, 10900 Tel. +66 2936 2800  
<https://en.bia.or.th/>