

# The Urban Well

## The Mercy Seminar 2026, Term I.4

### Opening Comments

This week we turn our attention to the Buddhist understanding of the meaning of life in the light of death, beginning with the Theravada Buddhist tradition. “Theravada” means “the way of the elders,” and its adherents see it as preserving the oldest and original *dhamma*, or teaching, of the Buddha, as it is transmitted in *Pali*, which is the language spoken by the Buddha. The Theravada Buddhist tradition is present today in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos. The text we are reading, the *Dhammapada*, comes from one of the collections, or baskets, of the Buddha’s *dharma* in the Pali scriptures, or *suttas*, and is the most widely known and influential collections of the Buddha’s teaching in the Theravada tradition. Novice monks, or *bhikkus*, memorize the *Dhammapada* as part of their training.

The Buddha was born in a prosperous town in what is now Nepal, in the foothills of the Himalayas, around the year 500 BCE. He is reported to have a wondrous birth, meaning he would either become a universal monarch, or a Buddha. His father wanted him to become a monarch, so he shielded him throughout his life from all suffering and death. He lived in his father’s palace and married when he was sixteen. When he was a young man, he went on carriage rides outside the palace, where he came to see the realities from which his father sought to shield him. He first saw old age, then disease, then death, and finally he saw a recluse (*shramana*), who was an individual ascetic who renounced the world in his quest for enlightenment, much like those who withdrew to the forest academies from which the Upanishads emerged.

Sakyamuni resolved to become a *shramana*, but his wife had a son right when he wanted to leave. He determined to see his son again after he attained enlightenment, and so he renounced his life in the palace and went out to discover the way that leads to the extinguishing of birth, old age, disease, suffering, death, and rebirth. He initially studied under two recluses, but did not attain enlightenment under them. He left them and undertook six years of intense asceticism, with five ascetics who followed him. He attained high meditative states, but did not achieve enlightenment. A woman saved him from starvation by offering him a bowl of rice, which caused his five followers to leave him. He sat under a fig (*pipal*) tree until he attained enlightenment. Mara, the god associated with desire, death, and rebirth, assaulted him at this time to try to reawaken desire, lust, and craving for existence in him. The Buddha defeated Mara and attained Enlightenment, which he called *Nibbana*, which is the word one would use to refer to blowing out a candle. After this, the Buddha spent several weeks meditating under various trees in the area, but he was unsure whether to teach anyone his discovery.

The gods, led by Brahma, entreated him to teach, and they assured him there were some who were not far from *Nibbana*. He first thinks of his original teachers, but he can now see that they are dead. He then thinks of the five ascetics who followed him, and he discerns that they are all gathered nearby in the Deer Park. He went to them and taught them his first sermon, and upon hearing this, they were enlightened. The Deer Park Sermon is called “the first turning of the wheel of *dhamma*,” and it is seen as an act of extraordinary compassion on the part of the Buddha, for he could have kept his enlightenment to himself out of fear that no one would be able to understand his teaching. He spent the next forty-five years traveling around north India teaching the *dhamma* and establishing the community of monks or *bhikkus*, which he called the *Sangha*.

The Deer Park Sermon contains the major insights of the *dhamma* taught by the Buddha. He insists that he discovered this truth himself, and was not taught it by anyone else. Here are the major insights of that sermon, which he addresses to *bhikkus*, which would be the term adopted by the monks who became part of the *Sangha*. First, he tells them of the wisdom of eating the rice offered to him by the woman, which caused his disciples to abandon him. He called this “the middle path” between the extremes of self-indulgence and self-renunciation, which he called the Noble Eightfold Path:

There are two extremes, oh Bhikkus, which a holy man should avoid--the habitual practice of . . . self-indulgence, which is vulgar and profitless . . . and the habitual practice of self-mortification, which is painful and equally profitless.

There is a middle path, oh Bhikkus, discovered by the Tathagata--a path which opens the eyes, and bestows understanding, which leads to peace of mind, to the higher wisdom, to full enlightenment, to *Nibbana*. Verily! it is this noble eightfold path; that is to say: Right views; Right aspirations; Right speech; Right conduct; Right livelihood; Right effort; Right mindfulness; and Right contemplation.

This, oh Bhikkus, is that middle path, avoiding these two extremes, discovered by the Tathagata--that path which opens the eyes, and bestows understanding, which leads to peace of mind, to the higher wisdom, to full enlightenment, to *Nibbana*!

At the heart of the *dhamma* taught by the Buddha are what he called the Four Noble Truths, as first taught in the Deer Park Sermon.

Now this, oh Bhikkus, is the noble truth concerning suffering (*dukkha*). Birth is attended with pain, decay is painful, disease is painful, death is painful. Union with the unpleasant is painful, painful is separation from the pleasant; and any craving that is unsatisfied, that too is painful. In brief, these [components of individuality] are painful.

This, then, oh Bhikkus, is the noble truth concerning suffering.

Now this, oh Bhikkus, is the noble truth concerning the origin of suffering. Verily, it is that thirst [*tanha*], causing the renewal of existence, accompanied by sensual delight, seeking satisfaction now here, now there--that is to say, the craving for the gratification of the passions, or the craving for a future life, or the craving for success in this present life.

This, oh Bhikkus, is the noble truth concerning the origin of suffering.

Now this, oh Bhikkus, is the noble truth concerning the destruction of suffering. Verily, it is the destruction, in which no passion remains, of this very thirst; the laying aside of, the getting rid of, the being free from, the harboring no longer of this thirst.

This then, oh Bhikkus, is the noble truth concerning the destruction of suffering.

Now this, oh Bhikkus, is the noble truth concerning the way which leads to the destruction of sorrow (*dukkha*). Verily! it is this noble eightfold path; that is to say: Right views; Right aspirations; Right speech; Right conduct; Right livelihood; Right effort; Right mindfulness; and, Right contemplation.

This then, oh Bhikkus, is the noble truth concerning the destruction of sorrow.

And now this knowledge and this insight has arisen within me. Immovable is the emancipation of my heart. This is my last existence. There will now be no rebirth for me!

The reality of suffering, or *dukkha*, its cause, and its elimination, lies at the heart of the teaching of the Buddha. As we see in the opening quotes from the *Dhammapada* tonight, the opposite of *dukkha* is *sukkhā*, which means “ease” or “happiness.” *Sukkhā* refers to the way a well-greased wheel spins effortlessly on an axle. *Dukkha* would then be the torsion, heat, friction, and twisting that would take place when the wheel is not greased, and when it is not perfectly fitted around the axle. *Dukkha* is the torsion and distortion that take place in our suffering, and it accompanies every moment of our lives, from birth through suffering and death to rebirth, if we do not extinguish *dukkha* by extinguishing its cause.

As we can also see in the *Dhammapada*, the cause of *dukkha* is craving or thirst (*tanha*). This craving causes us to become attached to the things and people in the world around us, through our ignorance of their true nature. The enlightenment of the Buddha centered on his insight into what he called *paticca-samuppāda*, or dependent co-origination, best embodied in the saying, “When this arises, that arises; when this is not, that is not.” All things originate dependently, but our ignorance keeps us from seeing this. The nature of dependent co-origination is clearly expressed in three terms: *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anatta*, as we see in tonight’s reading.

277. ‘All conditioned things are impermanent [*anicca*].’ When one sees this with insight (*panna*) one becomes weary of suffering. This is the Way to Purity.

278. ‘All conditioned things are painful [*dukkha*].’ When one sees this with insight (*panna*) one becomes weary of suffering. This is the Way to Purity.

279. ‘All things (whatsoever) are devoid of unchanging selfhood [*anatta*].’ When one sees this with insight (*panna*) one becomes weary of suffering. This is the Way to Purity.

As we can see, the *dhamma* of the Buddha has much in common with the Upanishads. Both teachings speak of the suffering of birth, old age, death, and rebirth which form the endless cycle of *samsara*. Both see the energy driving the wheel of *samsara* in *kamma*, which is created by our thirst and craving for existence and pleasure. Both see *Nibbana* or *moksha* in terms of the meditative practice and self-discipline that brings craving or attachment to an end and burns up any remaining *karma*. The major difference is in the teaching of Atman/Brahman in the Upanishads, and the teaching of *anatta* in the *dhamma* of the Buddha. According to the Buddha, there is no Atman or Self present within us alongside the ego. Hence it is not realizing and seeing the Atman that frees us from suffering and death, but the insight that there is no soul or Self in us, or in anyone or anything else, for only this insight extinguishes the *tanha*, the thirst or craving, within us.

46. Seeing the body as froth, (and) thoroughly comprehending its mirage nature, let one proceed unseen by the King of Death, having broken the flower-tipped arrows of Mara.

170. Look upon (the world) as a bubble; look upon (it) as a mirage. The King of Death does not see one who looks upon the world in this way.

Hence if we are weary of suffering, and if we seek the end of the cycle of death and rebirth, we should take refuge in the teaching and community of the Buddha.

188. Many people, out of fear, flee for refuge to (sacred) hills, woods, groves, trees, and shrines.

189. In reality this is not a safe refuge. In reality this is not the best refuge. Fleeing to such a refuge one is not released from all suffering [*dukkha*].

190. He who goes for refuge to the Enlightened One [the Buddha], to the Truth [the *Dhamma*], and to the Spiritual Community [the *Sangha*], and who sees with perfect wisdom the Four Noble Truths –

191. namely, suffering, the origin of suffering, the passing beyond suffering, and the Noble Eightfold Way leading to the pacification of suffering –

192. (for him) this is a safe refuge, (for him) this is the best refuge. Having gone to such a refuge, one is released from all suffering.