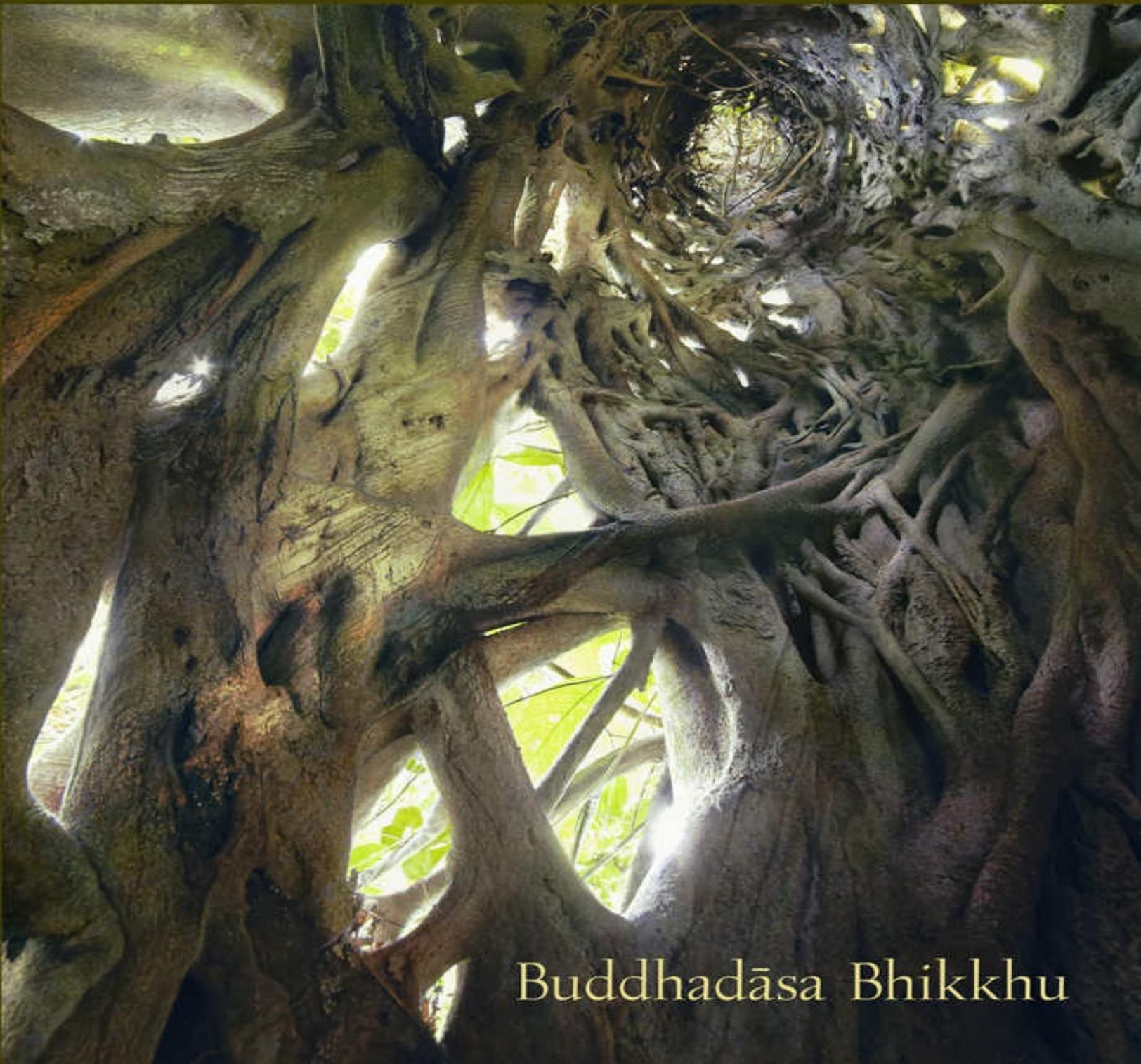


Heartwood

OF THE BODHI TREE

The Buddha's Teachings on Voidness



Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu





Heartwood *of the* Bodhi Tree

The Buddha's Teaching on Voidness

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu

Original translation from the Thai by Dhammicayo

Edited by Santikaro Bhikkhu



Wisdom Publications • Boston



The Bodhi Tree

BODHI TREE” is the nickname of the species of tree under which each Buddha awakens to *suññatā*. Each Buddha has his particular Bodhi tree. The present Buddha, Gotama, realized perfect awakening under a member of the *ficus* family, which, due to its association with Buddhism, has been given the scientific name *ficus religiosa*. In India, it is now known as the pipal tree. In Thailand, this tree and its close relatives are all known as *poh* trees. Ajahn Buddhādāsa pointed out that all members of the *ficus* family lack “heartwood” or the hard inner pith found in most trees. The heartwood of the Bodhi tree is truly void.



PART I

The Heart of Buddhism

Nothing whatsoever should be clung to as “I” or “mine.”





1. Fundamental Principles

LET US INVESTIGATE the fundamental principles of Dhamma, Natural Truth.¹ I would like to discuss these essential points of Buddhism in the hope that a grasp of them will help you advance in your studies and training. If you don't grasp these points, you will get confused. You will feel that there are a great number of things to be known, and that they keep increasing until there are too many to remember, understand, or practice. This confusion is the root cause of failure; it leads to discouragement and an interest increasingly more unfocused and imprecise. In the end, it's as if one is carrying a great load of knowledge around on one's back without being able to remember, understand, or make use of it.

Therefore, I would like to focus on the essential points of Buddhism (*Buddha-sāsanā*), which are necessary for a correct understanding of Dhamma. I emphasize the fact that these points are fundamental principles, because there are some kinds of knowledge that are not fundamental, and there are some kinds that are misunderstandings deviating little by little, until they are no longer Buddhism. Or, if they are still Buddhist teachings, they are offshoots that continually branch away from the trunk.

THE QUENCHING OF DUKKHA

To call something “a fundamental principle of Buddhism” is only correct if, first, it is a principle that aims at the quenching of *dukkha* (pain, misery, suffering) and, second, it has a logic that one can see for oneself without having to believe others. These are the important constituents of such a

foundation.

The Buddha refused to deal with those things that don't lead to the extinction of *dukkha*. He didn't discuss them. Take the question of whether or not there is rebirth after death. What is reborn? How is it reborn? What is its "karmic inheritance"? These questions don't aim at the extinction of *dukkha*. That being so, they are not the Buddha's teaching nor are they connected with it. They don't lie within the range of Buddhism. Also, the one who asks about such matters has no choice but to believe indiscriminately any answer that's given, because the one who answers won't be able to produce any proofs and will just speak according to his own memory and feeling. The listener can't see for herself and consequently must blindly believe the other's words. Little by little the subject strays from Dhamma until it becomes something else altogether, unconnected with the extinction of *dukkha*.

Now, if we don't raise those sorts of issues, we can ask instead, "Is there *dukkha*?" and "How can *dukkha* be extinguished?" The Buddha agreed to answer these questions. The listener can recognize the truth of every word of the answers without having to believe them blindly and can see their truth more and more clearly until he understands for himself. If one understands to the extent of being able to extinguish *dukkha*, that is the ultimate understanding. With such understanding one knows that, even at this moment, there is no person living; one sees without doubt that there is no self or anything belonging to a self. There is just the feeling of "I" and "mine" arising due to our being deluded by the beguiling nature of sense experience. With ultimate understanding, one knows that, because there is no one born, there is no one who dies and is reborn. Therefore, the whole question of rebirth is quite foolish and has nothing to do with Buddhism at all.

The Buddhist teachings aim to inform us that there is no person who is a self or belongs to a self. The sense of self is only the false understanding of the ignorant mind. There exist merely the natural processes of body and mind, which function as mechanisms for processing, interpreting, and transforming sense data. If these natural processes function in the wrong way, they give rise to foolishness and delusion, so that one feels that there is a self and things that belong to self. If the natural processes function in the correct way, those feelings don't arise. There is the original mindfulness

and wisdom (*sati-paññā*), the fundamental clear knowing and true seeing that there is no “I” or “mine.”

This being so, it follows that in the sphere of the Buddhist teachings there is no question of rebirth or reincarnation. Rather, there are the questions, “Is there *dukkha*?” and “How can it be quenched?” Knowing the root cause of *dukkha*, one will be able to extinguish it. And that root cause of *dukkha* is the delusion, the wrong understanding, that there is “I” and “mine.”

The matter of “I” and “mine,” ego and selfishness, is the single essential issue of Buddhism. The sense of “I” and “mine” is the one thing that must be purged completely. And it follows that in this principle lies the knowing, understanding, and practice of all the Buddha’s teachings, without exception.

A SINGLE HANDFUL

There aren’t that many fundamental, or root, principles of Dhamma. The Buddha said that his teaching is “a single handful.” A passage in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya*² makes this clear. While walking through the forest, the Buddha picked up a handful of fallen leaves and asked the monks who were present to decide which was the greater amount, the leaves in his hand or all the leaves in the forest. Of course, they all said that there were many more leaves in the forest, that the difference was beyond comparison. Try to imagine the truth of this scene; clearly see how huge the difference is. The Buddha then said that, similarly, those things that he had realized were a great amount, equal to all the leaves in the forest. However, what was necessary to know, things that should be taught and practiced, were equal to the number of leaves in his hand.

From this it can be seen that, compared to all the myriad things in the world, the root principles to be practiced for the complete extinction of *dukkha* amount to a single handful. We must appreciate that this single handful is not a huge amount; it’s not something beyond our capabilities to reach and understand. This is the first important point that we must grasp if we want to lay the foundation for a correct understanding of the Buddha’s teachings.

We must understand the word “Buddhism” (*Buddha-sāsanā*) correctly.

These days, what is labeled as Buddhism or the Buddha's teaching is a very nebulous thing, because it is so extensive that it has no limit or definition. In the Buddha's time, a different word was used. The word was "Dhamma," which specifically referred to the Dhamma (or teaching) that quenches *dukkha*. The Dhamma of the Buddha was called "Samana Gotama's Dhamma." The Dhamma of another sect, say that of Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta,³ would be called "Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta's Dhamma." One who liked a particular Dhamma would try to study until he understood it, and then he would practice accordingly. The Buddha's Dhamma was genuine and pure Dhamma, without trappings, without any of the numerous things that have come to be associated with it in later times. Now we call those trappings "Buddhism." Due to our carelessness, Buddhism has become so nebulous that it now includes many things that were originally foreign to it.

You should observe that there is Buddhism, and then there are the things associated with Buddhism. These latter things are endless in number and variety, yet we mix them up with the former and call it all "Buddhism."

The real Buddhist teachings alone are already abundant, as many as all the leaves in the forest. But what has to be studied and practiced is merely a handful. Nowadays we include those things that are merely associated with the teachings, such as the history of the religion or an explanation of the psychological aspects of the teachings. Take the *Abhidhamma* ("Higher Dhamma"): some parts of it have become psychology and some parts philosophy. It's continually expanding to fulfill the requirements of those disciplines. In addition, there are many further offshoots, so that the things associated with Buddhism have become exceedingly numerous. They have all been swept in together under the single term "Buddhism," so that it has become an enormous subject.

If we don't know how to take hold of the essential points, we will think there are too many and we won't be able to choose between them. It will be like going into a shop that sells a great variety of goods and being at a loss as to what to buy. So we just follow our common sense—a bit of this, a bit of that, as we see fit. Mostly we take those things that agree with our defilements (*kilesa*), rather than let ourselves be guided by mindfulness and wisdom. Then spiritual life becomes a matter of superstition, of rites and rituals, and of making merit by rote or to insure against some kind of fear; and there is no contact with real Buddhism.

Let us know how to separate true Buddhism from those things that have merely come to be associated with it and included under the same name. Even in the teachings themselves, we must know how to distinguish the root principles, the essential points.



2. The Spiritual Doctor

IN THE COMMENTARIES,⁴ the Buddha is called “the spiritual doctor” because he cures “the illness of the spirit.” Following some of the Buddha’s teachings and their subsequent explanations in the Commentaries, there arose a distinction between two kinds of disease: physical disease and mental disease. In these texts, the term “mental disease” does not have the same meaning that it has today. In the time of the Buddha, “mental disease” referred to an illness of view (understanding, *ditṭhi*), or defilement and craving. These days, however, it refers to ordinary mental ailments that have their base in the body and are mixed up with physical disease. To prevent differences in terminology from hindering our understanding, I would like to introduce “spiritual illness” as a third term. Let us consider physical and mental diseases as both being physical, and use the term “spiritual disease” as an equivalent of the term “mental disease” as it was used in the Buddha’s time.

SPIRITUAL DISEASE

The words “spiritual” and “mental” have very different meanings. “Mental” refers to the mental factors connected to and associated with the body. If we suffer from mental illnesses, we go to a psychiatric hospital or an asylum; it’s not a spiritual matter. The word “spirit” here doesn’t mean anything like a ghost or a being that takes possession of people; it refers to the subtle aspects of the mind that is ill through the power of defilement, in particular through ignorance or wrong view. The mind composed of

ignorance or wrong view suffers from the spiritual disease; it sees falsely. Seeing falsely causes it to think falsely, speak falsely, and act falsely. Consequently, the disease lies right there in the false thought, false speech, and false action.

You will see immediately that everyone, without exception, has the spiritual disease. As for physical and mental diseases, they only occur in some people some of the time. They are not so terrible. They don't give people the constant suffering with every inhalation and exhalation that spiritual disease does. Thus, physical and mental diseases are not dealt with in Buddhism. The Buddha's teachings are the cure for the spiritual disease and the Buddha is the spiritual doctor.

Remembering that the commentators called the Buddha "the spiritual doctor" will make it easier for us to understand each other, for everyone suffers from the spiritual disease and everyone has to cure it spiritually. That cure is Dhamma, the single handful of the Buddha's teachings that must be realized, used, and digested so as to overcome the disease.

You must pay further attention to the point that, these days, humanity pays no heed to spiritual disease, and so things are getting worse both for the individual and for society. When everyone has the spiritual disease, the whole world has it. It's a diseased world, both mentally and spiritually. Rather than lasting peace, we have permanent crisis. Moreover, as we strive and struggle, we can't find peace for even a moment. It's a waste of breath to talk about lasting peace while every side has the spiritual disease, so it's all just a matter of creating *dukkha* for oneself and one's side, as well as for the other side. It's as if a *dukkha*-making machine has appeared in the world. How then can the world find peace?

The solution lies in ending the spiritual disease within the hearts of all the world's people. What can cure it? There must be an antidote for this disease. The cure is the one handful of Dhamma.

This, then, is the answer to the question of why, today, the teachings are not as much of a refuge for people as Buddhism intends. It's true that many people believe that Buddhism is developing and spreading much more than previously, and that those who have a correct intellectual understanding of it are more numerous than before. And it's true that there is much study of the teachings and a greater understanding of them. However, if we don't realize that we have the spiritual disease, how will we take the teachings

and make use of them? If we don't realize that we are ill, we won't go to see the doctor, and we won't take any medicine. For the most part, people don't see their illness, and merely develop a fad for collecting medicine. Although Dhamma is an effective medicine that needs to be taken internally, we merely listen to it and study it externally as an intellectual endeavor, without feeling that we are ill and in need of the medicine. We unmindfully accept the medicine in order to store it away and clutter up the place. In some cases, we use it merely as a subject for discussion or as the basis for argument and dispute. This is why Dhamma is not yet a fully effective means to cure the world.

If we are going to study Dhamma and establish Buddhist groups, we should know the ultimate aim, so that the work can proceed decisively. We should direct our effort so that Dhamma can help to treat spiritual diseases directly and quickly. Don't leave the aim so undefined that you don't know in which direction to go. Let there be just one handful of "sacred nectar" used correctly and used decisively. Then our Buddhist practice will be truly beneficial and above ridicule.

"I" AND "MINE"

Now we will explain what spiritual disease is and how a single handful of Dhamma can cure it. Spiritual disease is the disease whose germ lies in the feeling of "we" and "ours," of "I" and "mine" that is regularly present in the mind. The germ that is already in the mind develops first into the feeling of "I" and "mine" and then, acting through the influence of self-centeredness, becomes greed, hatred, and delusion, causing trouble for both oneself and others. These are the symptoms of the spiritual disease that lies within us. To remember it easily, you can call it the disease of "I" and "mine."

Every one of us has the disease of "I" and "mine." We absorb more germs every time we see a form, hear a sound, smell an odor, touch a tangible object, taste a flavor, or think in the manner of an ignorant person. In other words, when the things that surround us—visual forms, sounds, odors, flavors, tangibles, and ideas—interact with their respective sense organs under the influence of ignorance, that is, without true understanding, the sense objects become germs that infect us and cause disease every time there is sense contact (*phassa*).

We must recognize this germ, which is clinging (*upādāna*), and see that it is of two kinds: attachment to “I” and attachment to “mine.” Attachment to “I” is the feeling that “I” is a special entity, that I am like this or like that, that I am the greatest, or something of the sort. “Mine” is taking something as belonging to me, that which I love, that which I like. Even that which we hate is regarded as “my enemy.” All this is called “mine.”

In the Pali language,⁵ “I” is *attā* and “mine” is *attanīyā*. As an alternative, we may use the terms generally used in Indian philosophy. The word *ahamkāra*, “I-ing,” means having or making the feeling of “I,” and it stems from the word *aham*, “I.” The word *mamānkāra* means “my-ing,” having or making the feeling of “mine,” and it stems from the word *mama*, “mine.”

The feelings of I-ing and my-ing are so dangerous and poisonous that we call them the “spiritual disease.” Every branch of philosophy and Dhamma in the Buddha’s time wanted to wipe them out. Even the followers of other creeds had the same aim of wiping out I-ing and my-ing. The difference between other creeds and Buddhism is that when they eradicated those feelings, they called what remained the “True Self,” the “Pure *Atman*,” the “Person.” Buddhism refused to use these names because it didn’t want to cause any new attachment to self or things belonging to a self. The state free of I-ing and my-ing is considered simply to be a perfect voidness. This voidness is called *nibbāna*, as in the phrase, “*Nibbāna* is the supreme voidness” (*Nibbānaṃ paramaṃ suññaṃ*). *Nibbāna* is absolutely void of “I” and void of “mine,” in every possible respect, without any remainder. Such is *nibbāna*, the end of spiritual disease.

This matter of “I” or “mine” is very hard to see. If you don’t take a genuine interest in it, you won’t be able to understand that it is the force behind *dukkha*, the power behind spiritual disease.

EGO, EGOISM, AND SELFISHNESS

That which is called *attā* or “self” corresponds to the Latin word “ego.” If the feeling of self-consciousness arises, we call it egoism because once the feeling of “I” arises, it naturally and inevitably gives rise to the feeling of “mine.” Therefore the feeling of self and the feeling of things belonging to self, taken together, are egoism. Ego can be said to be natural to living beings and, moreover, to be their center. If the word “ego” is translated into

English, it must be rendered as “soul,” a word corresponding to the Greek *kentron*, which means “center.” Thus, relating these three words, the soul (*attā*) can be regarded as the center of living beings, as their necessary nucleus. Since it is so central, ordinary people cannot easily rid themselves of the ego.

It follows that all unenlightened people must experience this feeling of egoism arising continually. Although it is true that it doesn't express itself all the time, it does manifest whenever one sees a form, hears a sound, smells an odor, touches a tactile object, or has a thought arise in the mind. On every occasion that the feeling of “I” and “mine” arises, we can take it to be the disease fully developed, regardless of whether it's dependent upon seeing a form, hearing a sound, smelling an odor, or whatever. Whenever an experience sparks the feelings of “I” and “mine,” the disease is considered fully developed and the feeling of selfishness becomes more intense.

At this point, we no longer call it egoism but selfishness, because it's an agitated egoism that leads one into low, false ways, into states of thinking only of oneself without consideration for others. Everything one does is selfish. One is completely ruled by greed, hatred, and delusion. The disease expresses itself as selfishness and then harms both oneself and others. It is the greatest danger to the world. That the world is currently so troubled and in such turmoil is due to nothing other than the selfishness of each person and of all the many factions that form into competing groups. They are fighting each other without any real desire to fight, but through compulsion, because they can't control this thing. They can't withstand its force, and so the disease takes root. The world has taken in the germ, which has then caused the disease, because no one is aware of what can resist the disease, namely, the heart of Buddhism.

NOTHING WHATSOEVER SHOULD BE CLUNG TO AS “I” OR “MINE”

Let us clearly understand this phrase, “the heart of Buddhism.” Whenever we ask what the heart of Buddhism is, there are so many contending replies that it's like a sea of voices. Everyone has an answer. Whether they are correct or not is another matter. It isn't good enough to answer according to what we have heard and memorized. We must each look into ourselves and see with our own mindfulness and wisdom (*sati-pañña*) whether or not

we have the true heart of Buddhism.

Some will probably say the Four Noble Truths (*ariya-sacca*), others impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness (*aniccatā, dukkhatā, and anattatā*), and others may cite the verse:

Refraining from doing evil (*Sabba pāpassa akaranam*),
Doing only good (*Kusalassūpasampadā*),
Purifying the mind (*Sacitta pariyodapanam*),
This is the Heart of Buddhism (*Etam Buddhānasāsanam*).⁶

All these replies are correct, but only to a degree. I would like to suggest that the heart of Buddhism is the short saying “Nothing whatsoever should be clung to.” There is a passage in the *Majjhima-nikāya* where someone approached the Buddha and asked him whether he could summarize his teachings in one phrase and, if he could, what it would be. The Buddha replied that he could, and he said, “*Sabbe dhammā nālam abhinivesāya.*”⁷ *Sabbe dhammā* means “all things,” *nālam* means “should not be,” *abhinivesāya* means “to be clung to.”⁸ Nothing whatsoever should be clung to. Then the Buddha emphasized this point by saying that whoever had heard this core phrase had heard all of Buddhism; whoever had put it into practice had practiced all of Buddhism; and whoever had received the fruits of practicing it had received all the fruits of Buddhism.

Now, if anyone realizes the truth of this point, that there is not a single thing that should be clung to, then they have no germ to cause the diseases of greed, hatred, and delusion, or of wrong actions of any kind, whether by body, speech, or mind. So whenever forms, sounds, odors, flavors, tangible objects, and mental phenomena crowd in, the antibody “Nothing whatsoever should be clung to” will resist the disease superbly. The germ will not be let in, or, if it is allowed in, it will be destroyed. The germ will not spread and cause the disease because it is continually destroyed by the antibody. There will be an absolute and perpetual immunity. This then is the heart of Buddhism, of all Dhamma. Nothing whatsoever should be clung to: *Sabbe dhammā nālam abhinivesāya.*

A person who realizes this truth is like someone who has an antibody that can resist and destroy a disease. It’s impossible for him or her to suffer

from the spiritual disease. However, for ordinary people who don't know the heart of Buddhism, it's just the opposite. They lack even the slightest immunity.

By now you probably understand the spiritual disease and the doctor who heals it. But it's only when we see that we ourselves have the disease that we become really serious about healing ourselves, and in the right way too. Before, we didn't notice our sickness; we just enjoyed ourselves as we pleased. We were like people unaware that they have some serious illness, such as cancer or TB, who just indulge in pleasure-seeking without bothering to seek any treatment until it's too late, and then die of their disease.

We won't be that foolish. We will follow the Buddha's instruction: "Don't be heedless. Be perfect in heedfulness."⁹ Being heedful people, we should take a look at the way in which we are suffering from the spiritual disease and examine the germ that causes the infection. If you do this correctly and unremittingly, you will certainly receive in this life the best thing that a human being can receive.

We must look more closely into the point that clinging is the germ and then investigate how it spreads and develops into the disease. If you've observed even slightly, you will have seen that it's this clinging to "I" and "mine" that is the chief of all the defilements.

GREED, HATRED, AND DELUSION

We can divide the defilements (*kilesa*) into greed, hatred, and delusion (*lobha*, *dosa*, and *moha*); or group them into sixteen types; or however many categories we want. In the end, they all are included in greed, hatred, and delusion. But these three, too, can be collected into one: the feeling of "I" and "mine." The feeling of "I" and "mine" is the inner nucleus that gives birth to greed, hatred, and delusion. When it emerges as greed, blind desire, and craving, it attracts the sense object that has made contact. If, at another moment, it repels the object, that is hatred or *dosa*. On those occasions when it's stupefied and doesn't know what it wants, hovering around the object, unsure whether to attract or repel, that is delusion or *moha*.

This way of speaking makes it easier for us to observe the actual defilements. Greed or lust (*lobha* or *rāga*) pulls the object in, gathers it into

itself. Hatred or anger (*dosa* or *kodha*) pushes things away. Delusion (*moha*) spins around uncertain what it should do, running in circles, afraid to push and unwilling to pull.

Defilement behaves in one of these ways toward sense objects (forms, sounds, odors, flavors, and tangible objects) depending on what form the object takes, whether it is clearly apprehensible or hidden, and whether it encourages attraction, repulsion, or confusion. Despite their differences, all three are defilements because they have their roots in the inner feeling of “I” and “mine.” Therefore, it can be said that the feeling of “I” and “mine” is the chief of all defilements and the root cause of all *dukkha* and of all disease.

Having not fully appreciated or examined the Buddha’s teaching regarding *dukkha*, many people have misunderstood it. They have taken it to mean that birth, old age, sickness, death, and so on are themselves *dukkha*. In fact, those are just its characteristic vehicles. The Buddha summarized his explanation of *dukkha* by saying, “In short, *dukkha* is the five aggregates (*khandha*) in which there is clinging (*upādāna*).” In Pali it’s “*Sankhittena pañcupādānak-khandā-dukkhā*.” This means that anything that clings or is clung to as “I” or “mine” is *dukkha*. Anything that has no clinging to “I” or “mine” is not *dukkha*. Therefore birth, old age, sickness, death, and so on, if they are not clung to as “I” or “mine,” cannot be *dukkha*. Only when birth, old age, sickness, and death are clung to as “I” or “mine” are they *dukkha*. The body and mind are the same. Don’t think that *dukkha* is inherent in the body and mind. Only when there is clinging to “I” or “mine” do they become *dukkha*. With the pure and undefiled body and mind, that of the Arahant, there is no *dukkha* at all.



3. Voidness, or *Suññatā*

WE MUST SEE that the sense of “I” and “mine” is the root cause of all forms of *dukkha*. Wherever there is clinging, there is the darkness of ignorance (*avijjā*). There is no clarity because the mind is not void (*suñña*); it is shaken up, frothing and foaming with the feeling of “I” and “mine.” In direct contrast, the mind that is free of clinging to “I” and “mine” is void, serene, and full of mindfulness and wisdom (*sati-paññā*).

If one speaks intelligently and concisely about voidness—although it is somewhat frightening—one speaks like a Zen master. Huang Po said that *suññatā* (voidness) is the Dhamma, *suññatā* is the Buddha, and *suññatā* is the One Mind.¹⁰ Confusion, the absence of *suññatā*, is not the Dhamma, is not the Buddha, and is not the One Mind. It is a new concoction. There are these two diametrically opposed things that arise—voidness (*suññatā*) and confusion. Once we have understood them, we will understand all Dhamma easily.

We must firmly grasp the fact that there are two kinds of experience: on the one hand, that of “I” and “mine,” and, on the other, that of mindfulness and wisdom. We also must see that the two are totally antagonistic; only one can be present at a time. If one enters the mind, the other springs out. If the mind is rife with “I” and “mine,” *sati-paññā* cannot enter; if there is mindfulness and wisdom, the “I” and “mine” disappear. Freedom from “I” and “mine” is *sati-paññā*.

Right now, you who are concentrating on this teaching are void, you are not concocting the feeling of “I” and “mine.” You are attending, and you

have mindfulness and wisdom; the feeling of “I” and “mine” cannot enter. But if on another occasion something impinges and gives rise to the feeling of “I” and “mine,” the voidness or *sati-paññā* you feel now will disappear.

If we are void of egoism, there is no experience of “I” and “mine.” We have the mindfulness and wisdom that can extinguish *dukkha* and is the cure for the spiritual disease. At that moment, the disease cannot be born, and the disease that has already arisen will disappear as if picked up and thrown away. At that moment, the mind will be completely filled with Dhamma. This demonstrates that voidness is *sati-paññā*, voidness is the Dhamma, voidness is the Buddha, because in that moment of being void of “I” and “mine” there will be present every desirable quality in all of the Buddhist scriptures.

ALL VIRTUE IN VOIDNESS

To put it simply, in a moment of voidness, all the virtues are present. There is perfect mindfulness and self-awareness (*sati-sampajañña*), perfect sense of shame about doing evil (*hiri*), perfect fear of doing evil (*ottappa*), perfect patience and endurance (*khanti*), perfect gentleness (*soracca*), perfect gratitude (*kataññū-katavedī*), and perfect honesty (*sacca*). And, in voidness, there is the knowledge and vision according to reality (*yathābhūta-ñānadassana*) that is the cause for the fruition of the path and the attainment of *nibbāna*.

I’ve come down to basics, saying that there must be mindfulness and self-awareness, shame about doing evil, fear of doing evil, patience, gentleness, gratitude, and honesty—because these are also Dhamma. They too can be a refuge for the world. Even with *hiri* and *ottappa* alone, the aversion and shame toward doing evil and the fear of doing evil, the world would be tranquil with lasting peace. Nowadays there seem to be many callous people who have no sense of fear or shame with regard to doing evil. Being that way, they are able to do improper things and insist on doing them continually. Even when they see that their actions will create disaster for the whole world, they still persist, and so the world is being destroyed because it lacks even this small virtue.

Or we may take an even humbler virtue, that of gratitude (*kataññū-katavedī*). With just this one virtue, the world could be at peace. We must

recognize that every person in the world is the benefactor of everyone else. Never mind people, even cats and dogs are benefactors of humanity, even sparrows are. If we are aware of our debt of gratitude to these things, we will be unable to act in any way that harms or oppresses them. With the power of this single virtue of gratitude we can help the world.

It follows that those things that take the name of virtue, if they are real virtues, have an identical nature: every one of them has the power to help the world. But if virtues are false, they become obstructive, a disordered mass of contradictions. When there is true virtue—one that is void of “I” and “mine”—all of the Dhammas and all of the Buddhas can be found in it. All things are present within the one mind that is the true mind, the mind in its true state.

On the other hand, the mind that is feverishly proliferating with “I” and “mine” is without virtue. In those moments, there is no mindfulness or self-awareness. The mind is in a rash, hasty state. There is no forethought and consideration, no restraint. There is *ahiri* and *anottappa*, shamelessness and no fear of doing evil. One is callous regarding evil actions, and one is without gratitude. The mind is so enveloped in darkness that one can do things that destroy the world. There’s no use talking about the clear knowledge and vision of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness. All wholesome qualities are incomprehensible to a mind in such a lowly state.

Thus, we must be aware of these two kinds of mind: void of “I” and not void of “I.” We refer to the former as “void” and the latter as “disturbed” or “busy.”

A MIND UNDISTURBED

Here your common sense may say that nobody likes being disturbed. Everyone likes to be void in one way or another. Some people like the lazy voidness of not having to work. Everyone likes to be void of the annoyance of having noisy children bothering them. However, these types of voidnesses are external; they are not true voidness.

Inner voidness (*suññatā*) means to be truly normal and natural, to have a mind that is not scattered and confused. Anyone who experiences this really appreciates it. If voidness develops to its greatest degree, which is to

be absolutely void of egoism, then it is *nibbāna*.

The disturbed mind is just the opposite. It is disturbed in every way—physically, mentally, and spiritually. It is totally confused, without the slightest peace or happiness. In *suññatā* is Dhamma, is Buddha, is the mind's original nature. In busyness there is no Dhamma and no Buddha, no matter how many times we shout and holler “To the Buddha I go for refuge” (*Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*).¹¹ It is impossible for there to be Dhamma in the busy mind. For people whose minds are disturbed by “I” and “mine”—even if they take refuge in the Triple Gem, receive the precepts, offer alms, and make merit—there can be no true Buddha, Dhamma, or Sangha present. Everything becomes just a meaningless ritual. The true Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha abide in the void mind. Whenever the mind is void of “I” and “mine,” the Triple Gem is present right there. If it is void for only a while, that is temporary Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. If it is absolute voidness, that is real and enduring Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha.

Please keep making the effort to void your minds of “I” and “mine”: then the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha will be present regularly. Keep voiding the mind until the voidness is perfect, until it is absolute. We must take Dhamma, which is simultaneously the cure of the spiritual disease and the antibody that builds immunity, and we must put it to use in our mind, so that there is no way for the disease to be born.