

# CONVERSATIONS WITH THE BUDDHA

A Modern Imaginary  
Dialog

By

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## INTRODUCTION

First and foremost, this is not intended to be an introduction or description of Buddhist principles and practices. This is not nor ever was the intent of the manuscript.

Second, it is totally fictional, and portrays the imaginary conversations that might be held with the Buddha himself, if he returned to this time for whatever reason, and someone found him. I certainly could not put any words into the Buddha's mouth as factual ... I wasn't there and didn't hear what the Buddha said myself.

This is a work that is intended to be an adjunct to other Buddhist practices, teachings and volumes. It may not adhere strictly to fundamentalist Buddhist teachings in some minor respects, but in general I have tried to explain and give other meanings to questions that any seeker of Buddhist truth may have. It is not a standalone work, in that the in-depth descriptions of meditative practices are not here, and are not included. Nor does this work intend to be a complete guide to achieving enlightenment, nor can any other work except the Dharma itself.

It does, I believe, portray additional insights that may lend insight into what the Buddha might think and teach if he were to indeed be here in this day and time.

There will be those that will assail me for putting words in the Buddha's mouth. To them, I say ... do better and I will applaud you. What I have written is what I have written ... for better or worse.

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## CONVERSATION ONE

Me: First, thank you for agreeing to meet with me and allow me to pursue the many questions that I have for you. Why did you agree to meet with me, and not with most of the major news media?

Buddha: You are welcome. We are not entirely unfamiliar with the media structure here, and your previous work indicates an open mind. The major media will usually take a confrontational tack in their questions and their interpretation of answers. Your approach seemed to be reasonable and balanced.

M: You have been portrayed as representing a sect of fundamental Buddhists that are at odds with much of mainstream Buddhist thought. Is this true and if so, why?

B: There are many interpretations and sects of Buddhist thought. Ours is one wherein we take the words of the historical Buddha as close to the source as we can get, without intermediate interpretation. In our case, it is the documents produced by the First Council, which is as close as we can get to the original teachings of the Buddha.

M: Some have portrayed you as the Buddha.

B: The “real” Buddha died over twenty-five-hundred years ago. How could I be the real Buddha?

M: Many are saying that you are. Isn't it true?

B: I am thought by some to be a Buddha, but not the historical Buddha. However, I am not a Buddha.

M: What's the difference?

B: The historical Buddha was called the 'Enlightened One'. I, on the other hand, am a practitioner of what the historical Buddha taught, and have gained some perspective on how his enlightenment came to be and how it works.

M: So you are not the reincarnated historical Buddha?

B: How can that be? I am here, he is dead. And it is impossible to have that person be here time after time.

M: Some believe that is possible.

B: I will not dissuade them from that notion, if it suits them. It merely doesn't seem to be a possibility to me. But if they are happy with that idea, then they have a perfect right to believe it.

M: Now I'm confused. If you are not The Buddha, then who are you?

B: I am, as I said, a potential Buddha or Bodhisattva, blessed with the insight that Buddhist practices have given me.

M: You are saying that with a smile, as though you are mocking me.

B: On the contrary, I am only speaking the truth, and the smile comes from being content with the person that I have become. I would never mock anyone, let alone someone who is trying to write about me.

M: OK, so you aren't the Buddha. Then exactly what is a Buddha?

B: One who follows the basic teachings of the historical Buddha and has gained ultimate enlightenment, which we call Nirvana.

M: And why should I be writing about you? What makes you special to a lot of people?

B: You should not be writing about me. The subject should not be me as a person, but what teachings and ideas that I can bring to the forefront of human thinking. It is not me as a person that is important, it is the teachings that the historical Buddha propounded long ago.

What makes me special to a large number of people is not me. I am merely the messenger. I cannot heal anyone with a touch of my hand. I cannot 'save' anyone. I cannot do anything for anyone that they could not do for themselves, and indeed they have to do that. The practices laid down by the historical Buddha are totally an individual effort, and no one can do them for another.

M: So why are these practices so important that you are willing to be called a fraud and a charlatan when you talk to people?

B: It is my wish to make the teachings available to as many people as want to learn them. Those that label me as a fraud have little tolerance for other views ... which flies in the face of Buddhist practice.

M: OK, but you didn't answer my question. Why is the practice so important?

B: Look around you. Look at all these people. How many of them are living happy, productive lives?

M: I personally would think most of them would say that they were happy.

B: I think that you would be surprised at the number that would say they weren't happy if you could peel back the layers of the onion that is their life.

M: But they would argue with you, I think.

B: I'm sure they would, at least in public. But when they lie awake in the small hours of the morning with only their own thoughts to deal with, the real dialog within themselves is

quite different than the public persona that they project. Ask any therapist about the things their patients have to work on as opposed to their outward appearance and demeanor.

M: OK, so what? Nobody's really happy?

B: Happiness is relative. Some people feel that satisfying their every whim and making the money to do so is happiness. Others take the exact opposite and give everything they have in the service of others, which they say provides them happiness. Each would say that they are happy doing so. But the person who continually lusts after what they think they desire always requires more of it in increasing amounts, and the one giving to others finds that what is requested of them is always more than they can provide.

M: So even those who appear to be happy only think that they are?

B: They believe that they are, yes. But under their external shell, there is unhappiness, yes.

M: But you're saying that they aren't happy?

B: I'm not saying that ... the universe is. Truth is. The Buddhist practice is.

M: I'm confused. If the universe is telling them that they're not really happy, why aren't they listening?

B: Because the clutter of their minds is shutting it out.

M: Clutter? Most people would say that they are focused like a laser beam on what they are doing, and their families.

B: Do you have a cluttered mind?

M: Me? I try to believe that I'm not too cluttered in that respect.

B: In the quiet of your bedroom, when nothing else interferes, is your mind quiet? What does it come up with?

M: I guess that it would come up with questions and try to answer them ... things that interest me to write about ... odd irrelevant stuff that seems to pop up from nowhere.

B: And how much of that has to do with what makes you happy?

M: I don't know ... probably most of it is irrelevant.

B: Ah ... there you go. Your mind keeps bringing up information and ideas that are irrelevant.

M: I hate to admit it, but yes. Most of it is junk.

B: Do you think you represent a lot of people in that respect?

M: I guess so ... I might. I never thought about it.

B: The truth is, you do represent a lot of people in that respect. You do have a cluttered mind. Almost everyone does. Surely, you concentrate on things that you want to do and write about, but there's lots of other material running at the same time that sometimes makes it difficult to focus on what makes you happy.

M: But that's real world distractions. I can't shut out that which distracts me much of the time. It intrudes and I have to pay attention to it.

B: Ah ... but you only *think* you have to pay attention to it. How much of it really is important to you? How much of what you call distractions really matters, and how much of it is just clutter?

M: Not many of the distractions really matter, in reality.

B: That's true. You see, your mind takes in a lot of information and makes evaluations of it that you aren't even aware of. Try this the next time you're in an airport. Just look at someone and think about the type of person they are, and what they do for a living. I would guess that you would have an opinion of almost everyone there and all of these are constructs that your mind makes up at the time.

M: What are you getting at here?

B: Merely to show you that your mind does many things to affect your ideas about both the people and things that your senses provide to it.

M: But my ideas of, say, the people in the airport are the result of my experiences with people similar in nature and appearance. Those are valid perceptions.

B: Are they? In the mid-western United States, in most small-town coffee shops, usually towards the back, you'll find a group of people gathered around a table, casually dressed in dilapidated farm work clothes having coffee. At first glance you'd think they were farm or ranch hands that had just come in on a break from their chores. But in reality, they are probably some of the richest people in their county, catching up on the day's dialogs. Your perceptions ... no, your evaluations of them ... would be totally wrong.

M: So the old adage applies ... 'You can't tell a book by its cover.'

B: Absolutely true. But this illustrates the fact that your mind provided the evaluations of their appearance without you even asking for it, and if you had to have interactions with these people, you would interact based on that evaluation that was probably incorrect.

M: But what else do I have to go on besides that? Are my experiences up to this point totally invalid?



B: Yes, and no. Yes, in that in some cases what you perceive is a construct of your mind that is totally incorrect. In others, the construct may be valid, but you have to choose to accept it or reject it and interact in a different way.

M: How do you know which is which?

B: When the constructs come up, you also have what is called a 'gut feeling' about it ... if you listen. This intangible idea that accompanies the construct from your mind will provide a good clue as to whether the construct is valid or not. Most of the time we have learned to just ignore that intangible and proceed with the interaction based on just the construct. That construct may be wrong, and thus your interaction will be incorrectly mounted.

M: So my mind is providing me all this stuff, and I'm just accepting it as valid?

B: Yes.

M: Just 'yes'?

B: Yes. That's exactly what you're doing.

M: Is there some reason I should be thinking differently? Everybody makes assumptions all the time about people and things.

B: And you wonder why things never to go right? Surely you must have wondered why people are continually assuming erroneous things about both people and the world. It is these mind-driven assumptions that people act on which get them in so much trouble. They see or hear things that they immediately put together ... jumping to a conclusion that 'this is this' and 'that is that' ... when in reality, neither is true, and they may be perceiving something that 'looks like but isn't'. But they act as if it is what their perception thinks it is.

Let me cite an example:

I hear a gunshot. I see a man running. I smell gunpowder residue. I see another man lying down.

Now most of us would take these sensory inputs and immediately conjecture that there has been a shooting, and that the man running has shot the man lying down. But is that really the case?

Hearing the gunshot, you identify it as such. Feelings about gunshots are usually bad, unless you're in the Middle East and it's festival time. You add the things you know about gunshots, and start making assumptions.

Seeing the man running is another identification. Now by itself, it could be that he forgot to feed the parking meter, or is just in a hurry to get to work because the bus is late. It results in an indeterminate feeling ... it doesn't move me one way or the other.

Smelling the gunpowder residue could just be a coincidence, but probably not.

Seeing the other man lying down could be that he is drunk, sleeping on the street or needs medical attention.

The perception that is generated by the combined senses is a general one that something bad just happened. While each input is possible on its own, the mind has combined them all to provide a basis for determining action (or not). In this case, most of us would assume that a shooting just occurred and the running man did it. In fact, it may have just been a car backfire, the running man is in a hurry for his bus, your nose misidentified the smell, and there is a drunk in the gutter.

Perception in this case is based on a whole series of assumptions, grounded in identifying what the sensory input means. Some of the time it's right. Sometimes it's wrong. The more complex the set of inputs, and the more connections the mind has to make, the more likely it is that you will make the wrong end assumption and make an incorrect decision on action.

Now if you see the running man point the gun and fire before he starts running, you have a better handle on things. But he still could have missed, your nose could have erred on the gunpowder, and the person in the gutter is still drunk.

If the running man fired the gun, and the person in the gutter fell as a result, then you've got much more evidence that you were correct in your original assessment. The smell aspect becomes minor. Since you have overwhelming visual evidence as to what went on.

But you still do not know if the person in the gutter got shot, do you? He might just have been taking a dive for cover and the running man missed or wasn't aiming for him at all. If the man in the gutter was a Vietnam veteran, the dive for cover is a good possibility.

This is just one small example of the incorrectness of the constructs that your mind comes up with without your asking for it. It is this kind of assumptions that lead to the situation where four eyewitnesses from different backgrounds have four totally different versions of an event.

M: OK, I have to agree that in this case, the assumptions could have been wrong. But is this the case with all these constructs that the mind builds for you?

B: For some people, it's totally wrong all the time. They are called insane, since their perceptions of reality are totally incorrect almost all the time, and they act on those constructs without thinking about it. Most of us, however, maintain at least an outer semblance of sanity in their interactions with their world, no matter what their inside thoughts may be.

M: So, in a broad sense, our minds are our own worst enemy?

B: In that broad sense, yes. But they can also be our best friend and ally in becoming happy. It is the mind's constructs that most of the time prevents us from being happy.

M: So if it is the mind and its constructs that are keeping us from being happy, how do we get the mind to not give us these bad constructs?

B: You asked why the practice is so important. You now are at the heart of the Dharma. It is the truth about the universe and yourself. The Dharma is sometimes called the 'science of mind', and is practiced many different ways, all of which will in some way lead you to the answers you seek about happiness.

M: I'm confused. First we're talking about the 'truth about the universe' and the next thing we're talking about is happiness. I don't understand the connection. Where does the practice take us?

B: That is because your mind has a preconceived notion of how it is supposed to work, and it's giving you an incorrect version of what it thinks you want to know. The universe, the mind and happiness are integrally tied together. Eventually you will see this if you look hard enough. The practice allows us to see this interrelationship.

M: OK, so my mind is fighting me on what it is supposed to think, at least according to you. Yet making the stretch between the universe and my mind is pretty broad.

B: Only because you think it is. You see, what you think you want out of life and your ignorance of what you do to yourself in the process are at the root of your confusion. Happiness isn't something you attain. It is something that you dig for by eliminating those things that make you unhappy. It is much like strip mining for coal. It is not on the surface. You have to employ ways of taking the rock and dirt from above the coal seam in order to enjoy the warmth and energy from the coal. Your mind is much the same. Your preconceived notions and judgments that you have stored back in the archives of the mind have to be stopped from coming up and modifying your life so as to enjoy that life without distraction.

M: Hmmm ... so how do I go about eliminating all these 'notions and judgments' anyway?

B: It is simple and complicated at the same time. It requires work and introspection ... with emphasis on the introspection. Again, this is what the practice teaches us.

M: So if I were to summarize the process, how would I state it in terms that people would understand?

B: Twenty-five hundred years ago, the historical Buddha taught a set of truths ... he called them the Four Noble Truths. The first one said simply, "All is suffering."

M: Oh, now wait a minute. Suffering is something that most people wouldn't say that they endure unless it's physical. How can it be 'All is suffering.'?

B: That depends on whether you understand the true meaning of suffering, doesn't it.

M: Which is?

B: Excellent question. The definition of suffering is much wider than most people would expect. It encompasses not only the physical kind of suffering, but also the kind that the mind cooks up for itself.

It could be a guilt trip laid on by a mother to her child, or the pain of a relationship gone badly. It could be the loss of a prized possession or the failure to attain something of importance for you. It could be the pain of loneliness or the isolation in a crowd of people. It could be the anger at a subordinate that comes from their not doing what you told them to.

All of these things are 'suffering', and no one is left out in having them. In all these cases, happiness is overlaid by the various things that cause it not to be present. People just never put their finger on the fact that they are in truth suffering every day.

M: I see your point. But this suffering is intangible, isn't it? It can't be measured in any way that I can think of.

B: Precisely. There is no definitive way to measure suffering. The main reason that you can't quantify suffering is because your suffering seems to be the worst in the world, even though by other standards it might be a minor annoyance. It is all relative and can't be compared very easily. But your mind will level all of your suffering out and make it personal and ultimate for you.

M: So my suffering is mine, and I can't compare it to yours.

B: Exactly. I cannot truly understand your suffering, because I don't have your experiences and mind constructs. I may be able to make generalizations, but I won't really understand what you feel as suffering.

M: So if my suffering is mine and mine alone, what can I do about it?

B: We said that 'All is suffering.' That is the First Noble Truth. In order to begin the process of 'doing something about it' we have to understand the roots of that suffering, and what causes us to suffer.  
That brings us to the Second Noble Truth. 'Suffering is caused by desire and ignorance.'

M: Desire and ignorance. I think I understand a glimmer of these, but aren't they fairly superficial in our lives?

B: Again, just as with suffering, we have to expand the definition of both desire and ignorance.  
Desire can be rooted in any number of emotions ... lust, greed, and the need for more to impress your neighbors or co-workers ... the list goes on. It causes suffering when that desire is unfulfilled or turns out differently than what you had hoped ... which is most of the time, by the way. Even when the desire is satisfied, that object or thing that you acquired or

achieved eventually will not satisfy your desire any more. It will change.

By the way, that desire can also become suffering when you lose something that you really liked or cherished. This is the other side of desire. You desire it because you had it and want it returned.

The second factor, ignorance, is the failure to see that what the actions you take in the real world (or in your mind) are doing to your life and the world you perceive that you live in. Inherent in this is that we delude ourselves about what we are doing, and the results of our actions. By failing to understand the rules or results of your actions, you cause yourself suffering. These are anything but superficial.

M: That's a lot to bite off. How can it be that simple? How can all of my unhappiness be boiled down to a couple of definitions?

B: Because that is the truth of it. Your mind will fight you a long time before it will give up its ability to make all those evaluations and comparisons and let you see exactly what the world is like and what you can do to make it better for yourself. It loves all these projections and constructs and hates to part with them. And both desire and ignorance are driven in large part by the constructs of the mind ... expectations, evaluations, projections ... all of which are subject to a lot of error and false premises. The practice shows us how to deal with these.

M: I'm going to have to mull this over and think about it. Can we have another talk later?

B: I will be glad to answer your questions whenever you wish. I will arrange it when you call. By the way, I might recommend reading the book by Walpola Rahula, called What the Buddha Taught. You can download it from this site:

<http://buddhasociety.com/online-books/what-buddha-taught-walpola-rahula-9>.

I highly recommend it.

## CONVERSATION TWO

M: When we last spoke, you were talking about desire and ignorance, and their definitions. I was having trouble with the application of these definitions in my own life. I think intellectually I understand what you're saying, but I'm not sure that the application to my own life has sunk in yet.

B: You mean you don't think that you have desires or admit that you don't understand what your actions cause for yourself?

M: To a point, but I think that my desires are moderate, and I have yet to see where my actions are out of the norm.

B: That is because you do not yet see. The desires you do have still cause suffering, and even if your actions are not out of the 'norm', they also still cause you suffering. Perhaps not as much as some others with greater problems, but nonetheless they still are painful.

M: And just how am I supposed to see what I do not yet see?

B: The ancient conundrum. This is the object of the Third Noble Truth, which is 'Eliminating desire and ignorance will eliminate suffering.' It is just that simple. But not seeing that will hamper your efforts in eliminating desire and ignorance. If you don't see the necessity of at least diminishing your desires and ignorance, then you're not going to feel that you have to eliminate them.

M: OK, but eliminating desire can't be all good. There's always things that I desire, but can't afford or aren't available to me.

B: If you truly look behind the desire, you will find a reason that you desire it. You will have to differentiate, however, between



desire and need. You need basic transportation, but you want that Ferrari Testarossa. You need to have a place to call home, but a multi-million dollar mansion with cyclone fencing around it is a desire, not a need. You have to evaluate why you want stuff, over and above what you actually need to survive and thrive.

As to the reason behind it, it could be to impress the neighbors, your co-workers, or whoever. It usually has to do with social status or to show how far you've come from your beginnings ... in other words, feeding your ego. Alternatively, it could just be a lust for power or plain simple greed.

M: I never thought of it that way.

B: Before the historical Buddha became enlightened in Nepal, he first experienced the satisfaction of every minor whim. His father, in that lifetime, was a rich prince and tried to keep him from seeing the poverty and misery that existed outside the gates of the castle. This isolation kept him from understanding what we all are doing on this earth. In some way, he understood that he had to abandon this lifestyle and see what else was out in the world.

When he finally got out into the real world, he went to the opposite extreme and became a wandering ascetic ... having no possessions and existing on minimal food and water. He became a walking skeleton, and found that this also did not allow him to find any relief ... he was too busy trying to keep his body from demanding more than he was giving it.

It was at that point he found that there was a 'middle way' of neither opulence nor scarcity that allowed him to continue his search for the truth.

M: And he found it?

B: Eventually. It came only after meditating a long time, and it arrived after an overnight thought process under his favorite Bodhi tree.

M: So if I meditate under a tree, I can find enlightenment?

B: [Laughter.] It is possible, I suppose. But you first have to lay aside your desires and ignorance.

A moment ago, I did not speak of ignorance when I talked of desire. Ignorance is equally important in its effects on our lives. We have to be able to see what the results of our actions are, and evaluate whether it was harmful or helpful to us and to others. To just blindly go on doing what we've been doing without evaluating what the results of an action have caused, is similar to the popular definition of insanity which goes: 'insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.'

M: So introspection is the key to all of this? Asking 'why am I doing this?'

B: It is only a starting point. When you arrive at a point where you can keep your mind from doing what it wants to do and have it do only what you want it to, you then can begin to see the world and your existence as it truly is, not as you would like it to be.

M: That sounds like a tall order.

B: It is. Most people do not want to put out the effort for what they would consider a minimal return on its face. In addition, they are many times scared to find out what is really in their minds. Alternatively, they wrap themselves so tightly in their everyday lives and/or their religion, that they cannot see what those lives are all about. They want absolution for when they made errors in their lives, and they want some kind of reward for living 'correctly'. Religion gives them both of those, and prods them with 'hell' if they do not comply. It is the old 'carrot and stick' routine.

M: This sounds vaguely like karma and its effects.

B: That is a very astute observation. However, religion is the external application of moral force that operates, not the internal and personal variety of restraints on actions that are necessary for a happy life. Karma is a force that you alone generate for yourself and have to answer for. We can talk about that some other time.  
But I have to return to introspection. In order to see that our desires and ignorance are causing us harm, we have to invest in introspection and dig into our minds. This is the 'science of mind' part of what I was taught.

M: So I have to learn to be introspective and prevent my mind from giving me all this stuff.

B: Yes.

M: I hate it when you give me one-word answers.

B: I am sure you do. But another thing that you will learn if you travel this road is patience.

M: So how would I begin to learn introspection and mind evaluation?

B: The Fourth Noble Truth simply says that 'Desire and ignorance can be eliminated by applying the system known as the Eight-Fold Path.' I paraphrase here.

M: And what does this Eight-Fold Path consist of?

B: It is a set of guidelines and methods that will allow you to not only keep your actions in check in regards to the outside world, but will help you start getting into your mind and seeing what it is doing to you. Note the emphasis on 'Not for you, to you.'

It consists of eight parts:

- Right View
- Right Intention
- Right Speech
- Right Action
- Right Livelihood
- Right Effort
- Right Mindfulness
- Right Concentration

M: Some of these are almost straightforward, but quite a few are pretty obscure.

B: They are indeed. Some can be implemented immediately, but some take years to understand.

Right View consists of a complete understanding and acceptance that the Four Noble Truths are indeed true and accurate. As you progress, your view of the Four Noble Truths expands and allows you to see the validity of them in their full expansion.

Right Intention is the resolve to walk this path and work to achieve enlightenment.

Right Speech is a set of guidelines about how you communicate with other people. It provides a means of reducing the interactive conflict in your life so that you can get on with the other parts of the path.

Right Action is similar. It provides a set of rules that you can use to govern your physical interactions in regards to others and the outside world.

Right livelihood is a third set of guidelines that will allow you to pick a profession that reinforces the previous parts of the Path.

Right Effort means providing the energy and direction to keep at the difficult process of walking the path.

Right Mindfulness involves the quieting of the mind, through meditation or other means.

Right Concentration is the process of focusing the mind only on what is necessary and excluding all distractions. It works in conjunction with Right Mindfulness and all the other parts of the Path.

M: That's quite a handful.

B: It is not for the faint of heart or someone who seeks instant gratification.

M: I can see that already. So where do you start on this path?

B: There is no real starting point, except to admit that you are suffering; that you see at some level that desire and ignorance are part of that suffering; that you want to eliminate desire and suffering; and think that perhaps the EightFold Path is a means to do just that.

M: I'm confused. There is no starting point?

B: As in dealing with alcoholism, you first have to admit you have a problem. If there is no admission of the problem, then there is no incentive to do anything about it.

M: Then there is a starting point. You have to start with a belief and trust that the Four Noble Truths are valid, and that you accept that they are relevant.

B: Yes and no.

M: There you go again. Please explain.

B: Yes in that you start from that realization and acceptance that the problem exists. No, in that from that point on, there is no fixed curriculum to follow in dealing with it.

M: OK. So the Four Noble Truths define the problem and point to a solution?

B: Yes.

M: But that solution doesn't seem to have form yet.

B: Let me try to explain that from another perspective. The parts of the EightFold Path are all interrelated. If you use one part to better your life, then the other seven parts will all change ... some in a minor way, some in a major way ... all for the better. As an example, if you take to heart the part of the path dealing with Right Speech and Right Action, then your life calms down a lot, and you can devote more time to Right Concentration and Right Mindfulness.

M: So what is the ultimate goal of all this?

B: Enlightenment. Nirvana. Light. Understanding. All these nebulous terms that people have been throwing out for as long as man has been thinking.

M: So ... what is enlightenment, anyway? I've heard it defined a hundred different ways.

B: Defining enlightenment is a lot like defining pornography. I cannot tell you what it is for you, but I know it when I see it for myself.

M: Oh, thanks. That tells me a lot.

B: I was not trying to be facetious. I was speaking the truth. The closest I can come to a definition is that it is a state of mind that manifests itself as prolonged and total bliss. Now, this is not the bliss that follows good sex, nor is it an intellectual buzz that you get when you accomplish something satisfying.

Nor is it experiencing the adulation of others for something they perceive as good, great or superb. It is none of these. By the way, Nirvana is not a place in the supernatural, no matter how many times the Buddhist teachings describe a 'place in the air' or any other popular descriptions. Nirvana is a state of mind, not a place that we go to when we expire physically.

M: I was going to ask about that.

B: I am sure you were at some point.

M: So the objective is to get my head into a space where I'm happy and nothing can shake that?

B: Excellent. I think you have it. That is the objective.

M: I've heard that it's impossible to do this within a lifetime.

B: Nothing is impossible. It is just more difficult for some people than others. There have been people that achieved enlightenment instantaneously, making the leap to understanding in a single jump. Others study for a lifetime and never progress. It is up to the individual and how they choose to progress.

M: But is there a wrong way to go in pursuing enlightenment?

B: In the EightFold Path there is no right or wrong. There is only what works for you and what does not. Even an incorrect path or action or speech can serve as a teaching moment to see what you caused yourself and how you can make it better next time. But as for right and wrong ... there is no such thing.

M: Whoa!!! No right or wrong? Then I'm free to do whatever I want whenever I want? There are no restrictions?

B: I did not say that there wasn't a penalty in the outside world for violating their ideas of right or wrong. I merely said that for you personally, inside your mind, that right and wrong are concepts just like farming or walking or religion. I may think that killing people that steal is a good idea, but it is not 'right' or 'wrong' unless I put that idea into action.

M: Now I'm confused. Isn't there any basic structure to this? No social rules or whatever?

B: The social rules you speak of are mutually agreed upon standards of conduct between individuals or groups of people. They usually apply only to interactions between you and your immediate outside world. Once you get into the realm of what you are thinking, then the only time that those rules will apply is if you act on the thought and externalize it in any way. Then those social rules you speak of do indeed apply. Within the mind, all delusions, truths, and ideas are equally valid unless you choose to make judgment calls about them based on what is right for you ... or at least what you 'think' is right for you.

M: I'm beginning to see what that difference is.

B: The whole concept of 'what should I be thinking' needs to be replaced with 'is what I'm thinking right for me' and 'should I act on what I'm thinking.' We cannot ignore some of our thoughts and ideas just because we think they are not socially correct or that others would think we are crazy. We have to look at them as to whether they are really correct or necessary. In most cases, they are neither. When we realize that they are not valid, we must abandon them. I understand that this concept goes against all kinds of political correctness, so-called right thought, and all kinds of religious dogma. The moment that we allow external concepts of what is right and wrong to prevail without seeing the advantage to ourselves by adhering to them, we have succumbed to our minds being programmed. This is entirely



consistent with the practice's insistence that all ideas and dogma must be challenged and questioned ... even those of the Buddha, until you determine that it is right for you. Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood are at the forefront of this. When you see that these so-called rules work for you and your life, then you will choose to live by them.

M: This sounds a lot like heresy to many religious people.

B: And you would be right to call it so, by their standards and beliefs. But they are entitled to their beliefs and thoughts as you are to yours. After all, it is only with psycho-tropic drugs or long-term manipulation that the mind can be externally altered. Torture and mind-control techniques have been used for centuries to create altered states of mind for all kinds of purposes.

M: If I recall correctly, even the various religions have used such techniques at times ... one example being the Spanish Inquisition.

B: Very true. And indoctrination from an early age may be used to create a mindset for children to produce mind-numbed robots.

M: That's a lot to think about. May I return in a while to discuss this further?

B: Of course.

### CONVERSATION THREE

M: Since our last conversation, I've had time to think about what you've said, and strangely enough, I'm still somewhat confused.

B: I am not surprised, nor is it strange. What we have talked about is a lot to understand in such a short time.

M: One of the things that bothers me is that if I manage somehow to destroy my desires, that I will be left with nothing that will give me pleasure. In that light, what you have said is pretty negative and depressing.

B: I understand what is bothering you. It bothered me also for a long time before I understood it.  
Let me put it another way. If by some magical effort, I was able to wave my hand and all of your troubles and debts would instantly vanish, how would you feel?

M: Hmmmmm. I would be left with nothing to worry about?

B: Yes.

M: I suppose I'd be bored but happy.

B: Would you be free to do whatever you wanted?

M: I suppose so.

B: So you would be free?

M: Theoretically, yes.

B: Why would you be only theoretically free? There would be no obligations or restrictions on your thought or actions.

M: I guess that I would just figure out what I wanted to do and go from there ... and I guess that, with no restrictions whatsoever, I'd just indulge every whim and try them out.

B: Would anything be right or wrong to indulge yourself in?

M: Hmmm. I guess there would be some things I wouldn't do even if I could.

B: And how would you determine that? What premises would you use to determine what was right or wrong for you?

M: Whether it satisfied me or not. Or made me happy.

B: Suppose that killing things or people made you happy. Would that be a right or wrong?

M: That's crazy.

B: It might be crazy, but there are people for whom killing is happiness. Are they wrong?

M: Of course.

B: By what standard? How do you determine that killing is wrong?

M: I'm not sure.

B: By what standard would you determine if it was right or wrong for yourself?

M: By how I felt about it.

B: And that feeling comes from where? A religion or some moral value that you were taught early on?

M: The 'depths of my soul' or somesuch. I don't really know. I'm not all that religious.

B: But for some people, killing is an acceptable form of population control. Could you put your mother on an ice floe and let her slowly freeze to death when she became a burden on the community? Could you let her die because the expense to your family was too great to keep her alive?

Or could you be passive and not defend yourself when someone tried to kill you or your family in a home invasion?

Are wars that kill multitudes of people acceptable?

M: Sheeeze. Talk about extreme choices here. All of these examples you cite have to do with what I was taught and what my peers would approve or disapprove of. I might do any or all of these in spite of what my inner being was saying.

B: So you are much more governed by what your external reality dictates rather than anything your 'inner being' is saying?

M: From that viewpoint, obviously. So your inner being and the outside world might be in conflict? What may be 'right or wrong' in my heart of hearts may be at odds with my reality? Would I go with my inner being? I don't know.

B: You are close to the truth there. That 'depth of your soul' is what I would call your inner being or your 'Buddha Nature.' It is the core being from which all else is built. You may call it basic instinct or fundamental personality, but it is the basis for all of the things that you say, do, or act upon.

Now, you will take my last arguments about killing and tell me that if my inner nature and instinct is not to kill, then how do we have the situation where people kill, and enjoy doing it?

That answer **is** the mind and the programming of it. The mind is capable of overriding our inner nature in any

number of ways. It can provide such powerful rationalizations that the inner voice is totally drowned out and we act on what our mind tells us, rather than what our inner being is trying to have us do. Justifying killing is one of these constructs that the mind comes up with to make us feel better about performing it.

M: Ah. So if we can quiet the mind, then we allow our inner voice to come through with more volume.

B: Excellent.

M: But how do I know whether it is my inner voice or my mind talking?

B: You just know. The mind can be separated from the inner voice. You just have to listen for it.

M: And when I hear that inner voice and follow it, what happens? And how do I justify that to the outside world?

B: The inner voice will always be right. It will always have you think and act in ways that will bring you happiness. And justifying it to the outside world isn't something that you have to do, at least as long as you are at peace with your decision.

M: If my decision has to be to go with the flow of my outside world, how do I resolve that within myself?

B: Your mind will rationalize it for you. However, the negative karma you generate is ever present, and you'll have to work it out by doing things that will generate good karma to balance it out long term.

M: So my mind gives me a rationalization, and I can either act on it or not? Usually you get the rationalization before you are even aware of it, I think.

B: That is true. But if you quiet your mind and let it do only those things that you ask of it, such as only analyzing your options in those extreme cases I cited, you will be happy with the result. That allows you to check in with your inner voice and ascertain whether the decision you are making is right for you and will allow you to be happy.

M: You mean that when I quiet my mind, that happiness is the end result?

B: Absolutely. There will be nothing but your inner being informing your thoughts and actions, and it will never push you in directions that will bring you unhappiness. When the mind is finally quiet, and the inner being is guiding your path, that is Nirvana. At that point, you are free to do whatever is right for you.

M: So, if I'm hearing you right, achieving Nirvana is taking all the bad stuff and the junk out of my thinking, and only trusting my inner being?

B: Yes.

M: Ah ... it's like peeling back the layers of an onion, or somesuch.

B: Yes.

M: So by what means do I go about this 'quieting of the mind'?

B: You start at the beginning and work your way through to the end.

M: <Laughter> Much as the Mad Hatter said to Alice? Or was it the Red Queen?

B: Correct. It actually was the Red King, who said “Begin at the beginning and go on till you come to the end; then stop.”

M: But you said that there was no real beginning to doing this stuff.

B: What I said was that all of the sections of the EightFold Path were circular and interlocking. I said that, in that respect, there was no real beginning or ending point. But I also said that observing the ‘Moral Precepts’ would ease your entry into the path to help you to work on your mind. You remember ... Right Actions, Right Speech, and Right Livelihood.

M: So there is no beginning point, but there is a beginning point.

B: Correct.

M: This is a lot like Alice in Wonderland, isn’t it?

B: I suppose you could use that analogy.

M: I’m speaking of the intricacies of the mind that provide such totally different views on what should be and not be.

B: In that respect, you would be correct. The mind is the problem, and your inner being is the solution. The trick is to allow the mind to think it is doing these modifications on its own.

M: Then it is your mind that is causing you to suffer, as you put it?

B: Yes.

M: And it is the mind that is the greatest obstacle to eliminating that suffering?

B: Yes.

M: I hate it when all you give me is one-word answers.

B: I cannot hand this to you on a silver platter. When you ask the right questions, I will give you the answer to that question and that question alone.

M: That means that I have to work for it, I guess. Or that I'll ask the right questions when I'm ready for the answers.

B: Yes.

M: So it's up to me as to what I need to know and how I apply it?

B: Yes. You are responsible for your own enlightenment. Neither I nor anyone else can do it for you. It is your mind and your thinking that you have to understand and work with. I do not understand your thinking, because I do not have your experiences, memories, and thinking processes. I can only guide you to look for certain things and apply them to your own existence.

M: OK. But if I don't get what I'm supposed to work on or think about, what's the penalty?

B: None. No penalty except that you will continue to be unhappy and suffer. You will continue exactly as you have been doing and keep generating karma for yourself that will rule your life.

M: But if I don't even realize that I'm suffering, what difference will it make?



B: None whatsoever ... at least as far as you are able to see.  
You will continue your life as you know it. There is no penalty for not seeing what you are doing to yourself, except to repeat it over and over. There are only rewards if you do see what it is doing. However, you will occasionally see that you are unhappy, and think about what to do about it.

M: Then what about the heavens and hells that I have heard Buddhists talk about? Is there none of that after death?

B: No.

M: Buddhism has no heaven or Nirvana or hell?

B: True. Even though the historical Buddha taught that there were many levels of hell, it was a metaphor so that people could perhaps understand that they created all of them for themselves in this lifetime. Many religions and philosophies have used this technique to allow people to see the results of their actions.

They are all constructs that people over the ages have made so as to not have to face their own deaths. They want there to be life everlasting to keep enjoying what they enjoyed when they were alive. They are scared to die. Religions have been built entirely on the concept of life after death and immortality and they use it as a fear weapon to make their followers adhere to the dogma.

M: So if there's no afterlife penalty in Buddhism, how do you get people to toe the line and adhere to the precepts that you have taught?

B: They have to want to. There is no penalty for not following them except perhaps for those penalties that are assessed by the society in which you live. In the practice that the historical Buddha advocated, there is no master or guru that is going to force you to adhere to the rules. Even in the monasteries and nunneries, anyone is free to

leave whenever they choose, and return if they want to, to resume their studies.

M: Let me get this straight. I can believe or not. I can adhere to the precepts or not. And the only penalty that I'll pay is not progressing in my own enlightenment. And there will be no one there to make sure that I progress.

B: Correct.

M: This is insane. Rules that aren't rules. Concepts that aren't defined. Penalties that don't really exist. How can this work?

B: It works because you as an individual make it work. It works because it strips the mind's conditioning to allow you to see what you are doing to yourself that makes you unhappy or 'suffer'. It works because you take or find the time to actually study and make your mind stop performing non-stop mental gymnastics all the time to cloud or misinform you of what the real world is about or what you're doing in it.

M: So it's entirely up to me as to how far I travel down this road?

B: Yes. Entirely.

M: If this is true, how is it that Buddhism is considered to be a religion?

B: The historical Buddha originally taught only the Brahmins of India what he had found. They were already deeply invested in looking at the meaning of life, and how they interacted with the world. They had the time and energy to further progress to enlightenment, since they were the intellectuals and philosophers of their day. It was not long before the rest of the population heard about the teachings and wanted to participate, but they

had little education or training as to how to look at their own situations and were incapable of understanding the concepts. It was therefore necessary to accommodate them in some way to allow them to better their lives, so the Buddha's disciples taught them the basics of how to proceed to look at their lives.

Unfortunately, the disciples' followers soon started to deify them (which neither they nor the Buddha himself could prevent), and formed schools of thought based on his disciples own ideas of how to apply the fundamentals. This is where they began to form the various schools of Buddhism which exist to this day.

M: But each of the Buddhist schools claims to be the true path to enlightenment.

B: That they do. And for their followers, as long as it works for them, it is. But were there only one path to enlightenment, then almost all of these schools would waste away through attrition when what they promised did not come true or work for their adherents.

M: But what I don't understand is why there is such a wide differential between the various schools. Some just say to chant a mantra over and over again, while others rely on ceremony and dogma for sustenance. Others deify a 'Buddha' whom they say was a disciple of his many centuries ago and go from there. Still others require an almost ascetic existence and strict meditation.

B: Unless you get to a certain level, there is no capacity for really understanding the mind. Up to that point, all we can do is try to lead people to a place from which they can see how to proceed on their own. Once there, they no longer need the guru or teacher and they will find their own way.

M: So the various schools are only steppingstones to enlightenment?

B: Correct.

M: But what about the ones that seem to dead-end without progress ... only rote repetition.

B: They too have a purpose. If and when the adherents find that there is no progress, they will turn away from it and seek it elsewhere. That is not a negative. Finding things that do not work for you is equally as important as finding things that do, perhaps even more important. Such is the nature of 'religion'. What we are talking about when we speak of enlightenment is not religion ... it is philosophy. Religion promises something eternal that it cannot deliver. Philosophy invites the individual to find its rewards in this lifetime.

M: So Buddhism is not a religion?

B: Not in the common sense. At the less educated levels, it may be taught as a form of religion to aspire to. At the turning point of seeing the goal and starting to dig into what it is really about, it becomes a philosophy to live your life by and understand how reality works so as to make your life happy and serene.

M: So at the lower levels it pulls people along to a point of investigation and study, then turns them loose to find all this stuff out on their own?

B: In a way, you are right. The only part I would quibble with is that they are not truly 'on their own' in their quest. There are the Four Noble Truths and the Eight-Fold Path to guide them in their quest. These and these alone will bring them to true enlightenment.

M: How will they know when they arrive at that point?

B: They will know, because they understand intimately how it all works and the ramifications of their thinking and actions.

M: So you just 'know'?

B: By the same process that you 'know' what is right for you, as we discussed earlier. It is not a rational thought, it's a certainty that you hold at the center of your being. You just know.

M: It is time for me to think about all of this. May I return later?

B: Of course. A seeker will always find what they are truly looking for. "Seek and ye shall find. Knock and the door shall be opened to you."

M: That sounds very familiar. Thank you.

## CONVERSATION FOUR

M: In our last conversation, you spoke of the forms of your practice as being 'religion-like'. Yet, you say that it is a way of living, not a religion. How do you resolve this?

B: I did say both of those things, and they are not contradictory. For most people to gain just a little improvement in their lives, they need something that will brighten their days and give them the incentive to learn a little more. This is the function of dogma and liturgy. It gives them a little insight ... not into their minds yet ... but into shifting some of their living traits into more peaceful and worthwhile paths. Dogma and liturgy, however, if made the centerpiece of the study will not advance the seeker very much.

Having the monastic orders as a vocation provides space for individuals who desire a more formal training in the practice at the beginning. You might consider it a boarding school environment for those who need and desire it. They also serve a more practical purpose in the keeping and distribution of the Dharma.

The practice for more advanced individuals is a concentrated and more rigorous path that actually makes them investigate their minds and the negativity wrought by those minds upon them. It becomes at that point an individual quest, not a group direction.

Remember, I said that the historical Buddha personally only taught the Bodhisattvas or Brahmins, because of the significantly intricate concepts presented in advanced trainings. Other teachers impart the Dhamma at the lower levels. It is good for them, in that they have to understand what they are teaching ... and they learn it so much better for the experience.

M: Putting that aside for a while, you said that the basic tenets of the practice are totally interactive, and that there is no real beginning or end to their study. Could you explain a little more?

B: The fact that they are totally interactive is true. Each of the parts of the EightFold Path affects the other seven, and no part is immune to the changes in the others. Now, that said, it does not mean that there is no starting point for study. While they are interactive, they are still open to study in some form of order. After all, you have to start somewhere, or you go nowhere.

M: Is there a point for a novice like myself to begin?

B: Do you accept the Four Noble Truths?

M: You mean about suffering and the causes for it?

B: Yes.

M: I think that I can accept it as a premise, although there are still questions.

B: Very well. Those questions will resolve eventually.

M: I hope so. But where would I start on the path?

B: I would start with what are known as the Moral Disciplines of which there are three: Right Action, Right Speech and Right Livelihood.

These are the moral parts of the Eight-Fold Path.

There are more prohibitions for the monks and nuns, but for the laity, these three precepts form the basis for social conduct.

If you are interested, there is a book by Bikkhu Bodhi about the EightFold Path that you can download and read. It is a little more advanced than you need right now, but well worth reading and rereading. The link is <http://buddhasociety.com/online-books/the-noble-eightfold-path-bhikkhu-bodhi-2>. When you have read it I'm sure you will have more questions.

M: Thank you. I'll do that soon. But for now, let's start from our non-beginning. What exactly is Right Action?

B: Right Action consists of three major parts:

No killing.

No stealing.

No incorrect sexual conduct.

M: OK. Would you explain in a little more detail, please? Take 'No killing.' If we take that literally, we could not exist.

B: You are absolutely correct. The formal meaning is 'no killing of other sentient beings.'

Now you are going to ask what the definition of a sentient being is, and I cannot provide you with a definitive answer. I can tell you for sure that it includes other humans, but beyond that, there is a broad range of opinion. Even to me there is a very indistinct dividing line. In my view, anything that exists in the animal kingdom is probably sentient. As to plants, there is some evidence of possible sentience, but I cannot say for sure yet.

M: Which is why the Buddha recommended and required of your monks and nuns to be vegetarians?

B: Yes. However, for anyone else it is not mandatory. Just like everything in this practice. You may follow it or not ... it is up to you. You are the one, and the only one, who must pay the price in karma for not following the path.

M: So no killing of other animal life. How about stealing?

B: Again the formal definition is 'not taking something not given freely.' You may take from others only what is given without expectation of something in return. An interesting sidelight is the prohibition for the monastic orders that they cannot handle money. If they did, and



bought or sold anything, it would not have been given freely ... because there was something of value exchanged for it.

This whole area gets complex and it boils down to merely accepting only what is given without reservation or compensation.

M: That makes so much sense that it almost seems unnecessary to include in these moral values.

B: There are many people that would not agree, and would violate that precept in a heartbeat. Take for instance something that was given to you with strings attached ... say from your parents. Could you accept that gift, given that you would have to adhere to those strings?

M: Why do you always have to give me examples that cause me pain? That would be tough to do. Given the circumstances, I would be torn. On the one hand, it would probably be something I needed or wanted pretty badly, and on the other, I would have to do something that I probably wouldn't want to do on my own.

B: So? Which would be right?

M: My mind would tell me that I would be hurting them for not accepting, and that I would probably be hurting myself because I needed or wanted what they were offering.

B: Ah. Excellent distinction.

M: What distinction?

B: The distinction between giving freely and offering. In the first case, there are no strings attached, and in the latter, there are. Yes, you can offer something without anything in return, but unless accepted, it remains only an offer. Offers usually have a value associated with them, and a mutual exchange of some sort.

As to hurting your parents by refusing the offered item,  
are you really hurting them?

M: Of course. By refusing, I hurt them.

B: I repeat. Are you really hurting them?

M: Yes. I don't understand what you're driving at.

B: Think for a minute. Can you every really hurt anyone? Or  
are they hurting themselves by thinking that you refused  
their gift and for what reasons?

M: Wait ... wait. You're saying that I can't hurt them?

B: Yes.

M: But they'll feel bad if I refuse.

B: Yes, but that is their decision to feel hurt, not yours.

M: Isn't that a little self-centered and egotistical to think that I  
can't hurt other people?

B: I suppose from your viewpoint that is true for right now.  
However, when you look at it from the standpoint of what  
you need to do to satisfy your own happiness and be at  
peace, I think that eventually that attitude will change.

M: But that means that I don't have any love or compassion if  
I think that I can't hurt other people.

B: That is totally incorrect. I have the utmost compassion and  
love for people that are doing things to themselves. I hurt  
with them when they hurt themselves. Nevertheless, I  
cannot make their wrong decisions and thinking go away.  
Only they can do that. I am responsible only for myself in  
that respect.

M: So we have gone from killing other animals of any kind, to not accepting anything not given freely to not being responsible for what others think and feel. My head is spinning.

Let's leave this for a moment and talk about the third part of the Right Action that you mentioned. Something about sexual misconduct?

B: Yes. The prohibition against sexual misconduct is somewhat broader than you may be used to. Currently, there is much being done in this realm that causes pain and suffering to those performing it.

Of course, there is the initial prohibition against rape ... which incidentally also falls under the concept of taking something not freely given.

But basically it is primarily supportive of marital fidelity. Adultery with another man's wife or husband is not a good thing to do, and hurts both eventually. This extends to those who are engaged to marry, also.

Then there are those still under the protection of their family ... such as underage children and the mentally incompetent. This also precludes elopements and secret marriages contrary to the wishes of the family for underage children.

Thirdly, there are those who are in a much broader category, such as those who have taken a vow of celibacy, close relatives, and others designated by the law of the land.

M: I understand the part about adultery and that of protection by family for underage children. But to prohibit an elopement or secret marriage seems to be taking it a bit far.

B: I will grant you that these were originally generated for a society that was quite paternalistic and authoritarian at the time. However, for underage children to elope for all the wrong reasons is still a problem.

How many times did you understand the ramifications of what you were doing when you were growing up?

M: I made some ... well ... quite a few mistakes as I was growing up ... and after, for that matter. But isn't making your own mistakes part of growing up and becoming an adult?

B: Yes. Of course. But in matters sexual, you always run the risk of bringing an infant into the world which will almost always become the responsibility of the woman in the long term. Especially in emotionally charged situations where logic has flown out the window, the possibility of a child ... many times unwanted ... is more than a young adult is capable of handling.

M: But that is still their responsibility for thinking it through, isn't it?

B: Yes. But at fifteen, were you capable of thinking the responsibility of a child through? Did you have enough experience to really understand what you were doing?

M: Ummmm. No. I see your point. But this can also be taken to the opposite extreme where the parent controls until well past any notion of dependence is possible.

B: Yes. It can and many times does. Any parent wants to have only the best for their child, and prevent them from doing harm to themselves. But parents also run the risk of imposing their own values on the child, which may be outdated and obsolete for the time and place that their child grows up in. The responsibility cuts both ways.

M: So the responsibility is equal between parent and child?

B: The parent is responsible for giving the child the best possible start in life. The child is responsible for learning as much as possible to take advantage of that best

possible start. Early on, the parent shoulders the majority of the responsibility, but that shifts to the child as the child grows older and is capable of understanding what the ramifications of their actions are.

M: That's interesting. I've seen many times, that the parent is an authoritarian tyrant, and the child has no chance of seeing what freedom means, or learning from it. How do you prevent that situation?

B: You don't. That would be trying to take responsibility away from someone else and assume it yourself. As much as it hurts and as much as you can be compassionate for someone else's situation, you cannot assume responsibility for anyone but yourself. Suppose that your view of the situation is incomplete, and that there are other factors that you are not able to see. Any action that you might want to take could amplify the negatives of the situation and cause further damage. In addition, it is really none of your business, unless there is a situation where someone might be hurt, maimed or killed. Even then, you have to evaluate what your responsibility extends to ... especially if you yourself are going to be involved in a physical manner.

M: So I can't get involved in a street fight? Or in a parent/child altercation?

B: The street fight, no, unless someone is about to be killed ... and then you are primarily responsible for your own safety, no matter how altruistic you may be. The parent/child altercation is much more uncertain, but again, the primary concern is that your intervention may cause further harm later on, if not some physical damage to yourself from an angry parent then and there. That is a decision that you must take at the time. However, if you are altruistic by nature, and feel that you can make a positive difference, then the risks may be worth taking. That is your decision and responsibility.

M: Again, we come down to individual responsibility, don't we?

B: Of course. That is all there is. We can be responsible only for ourselves, unless we accept responsibilities that others want to place upon us. However, it is our own responsibility to accept those other responsibilities or not. We can choose to be responsible only for ourselves and our own actions, or we can choose to not do so, in which case we usually run afoul of those others that we have to deal with in our social structure.

M: So it would seem that these moral precepts that you are defining in Right Action, are all about taking responsibility for your own actions and not treading on other individual's space and their responsibilities.

B: You are getting to the fundamental idea here. Since all the actions that we are proscribing here are the result of actions that you take, you are responsible for them. You have to take the consequences for them if you perform them. Therefore ... you are responsible for them.

M: But other than the direct consequences of my actions for which I have to take responsibility, is there any other incentive for me to stick to these precepts?

B: Of course there is. But it is a far more consequential situation, which we will have to take up another time, since it requires much more explanation than we have time for now.

M: May I have a brief preview to quench my curiosity?

B: It is called karma.

M: OoooooKkkkkkkk. I guess I asked for that. And I'm sure it's a lot different from what I am expecting.

B: I'm sure it is. But it is far better than what you are expecting, also.

M: I can only hope. Thank you until next time. Every time we talk, I have hours of thinking that follows.

B: That is not a bad thing. Eventually you will look forward to it.

## CONVERSATION FIVE

M: When we last spoke, we were talking about individual responsibility and you said that I can only be responsible for myself, and that I can't really hurt anyone. I'm still conflicted about that one. Could you explain a little further?

B: Certainly. Take for example, someone who says or does something that hurts you and causes you pain and anguish, but they are blissfully unaware that they have done so. Are they hurt? No. Are you hurt? Yes. Are they to blame for your hurt? No. Why? Because you are the one that allowed yourself to be hurt. It was your responsibility to understand that the other person was unaware of your pain, and that you have no control over them in any way. They did not hurt you ... you allowed yourself to be hurt.

M: So if I extend this a little, there is no room for victim-hood here?

B: That is true. If everyone is responsible for only his or her own actions, there can be no application of victim status for them.

M: But there are instances when people do things to other people unintentionally or accidentally, and there is damage and pain. It wasn't my fault that the other driver without thinking ran a stop sign, plowed into my car, and injured me.

B: You are right. It was not your fault. But fault is only applicable if you are a victim or think you are. Fault, blame and guilt are all on the same side of the coin. If you are not a victim, then there can be no fault assigned. Is the other person responsible for the accident? Just as much as if they had not run the stop sign. Sometimes things just happen to us for no apparent reason. It is



also possible that you were the object (not victim) of this incident because of past karma. In no case are you ever a victim.

M: OK. Let's take the classic example of the woman who parked in a far corner of the mall parking lot at night who is raped while going to their car. Isn't she a victim?

B: No.

M: She had no control over the situation. How can she not be a victim of her rapist?

B: Because she is not. In this case, there were any number of things she could have done to alter or prevent the situation from happening. She could have parked closer to the entrance in a lighted area. She could have asked someone to walk with her to her car. She could have carried some kind of defense weapon such as Mace or a concealed handgun. She could have shopped at an earlier time of day. Any of these could have prevented this from happening. As with any accident or incident, there is no one thing that is the direct cause of what happened, but many individual causes ... any one of which having been different would have had a different result.

M: This is difficult for me. I have always thought of bad things happening to you beyond your control was being victimized.

B: That is a popular concept to avoid responsibility for your life.

M: But how can I be responsible if it is beyond my control?

B: Because there is always an element of risk of the unforeseen happening. But you are responsible for the actions you take to mitigate that risk and for actions that

you voluntarily perform after the incident. Say you are hit by lightning. Where were you at the time? Were you standing out in the middle of a field or holding onto a barbed wire fence? If not, there is no way that you are a victim, since you took action (or in this case inaction) to get to a safer place.

If you live in a floodplain, and you get flooded out, knowing that this kind of thing can happen, are you a victim? No, you chose to live there. You chose to build your house there. Your actions knowingly put you in jeopardy.

M: What if it is the only place that I can find to live?

B: What else is going on in your life that prevents you from going upscale a little bit and being able to afford a more secure place to live? Could you get more education? Could you take a menial job to just make a little money? Do you have mental or physical problems that prevent you from working and you have not sought treatment?

M: As much as I'm having trouble with this, I can't argue with much of the logic here. So, if I consider myself a victim, it was because I'm trying to avoid responsibility for my life? I'm trying to make someone or something else take responsibility for what happened to me?

B: Yes. Or it may have been a karmic result returning.

M: <Taking a deep breath> Then what about the unforeseen or something that you have no clue that it is going to happen to you ... you don't have the capability of avoiding the consequences of something.

B: Some things just happen. If you tried to avoid all risk in life, you would be living underground in a concrete bomb shelter with food slid in under the door. Even then, there would be risk of food poisoning, or any number of other things. There is no such thing as a risk free existence,

and we have to accept that. Not everything that happens to us is avoidable. However, we are responsible for how we respond to and accept those risks that we can see and perceive. Again, if it is a karmic result, we have to accept that also.

M: Then if I try to avoid as much risk as possible, then I'm taking action and am responsible for those actions?

B: Yes. You have created karma for your actions. Whether it sufficient to mitigate your karmic account balance, only you will find out.

M: Oh, so karma is the result of my actions?

B: Yes. Karma or 'kamma' are the words literally meaning 'action'. In this case, the results of actions that you put into motion. Karma is the result of 'volitional' action. This means action that you willfully initiated. You started it consciously and you now own it. It is not a self-defensive or an involuntary reaction, but action that you thought about or put into being. Of course there can be either good or bad karma that you extend into the universe from these actions, but it will return to you in some manner equal to the action that created it.

M: I was wondering when you were going to get around to talking about karma. Exactly what is it?

B: For every voluntary action, there is a karmic reaction put into the universe that will return and impact your life at some point. There is a phrase, I believe, that sums it up quite nicely ... "What goes around, comes around". If you voluntarily perform an action, there is karma associated with it, whether good or bad. That karma will eventually return to you and alter your life in some way.

M: I've heard that karma created in this lifetime can return in the next life or somewhere downstream. Is this true?

B: All I can say about that is that at some point it will return. Bad actions performed just before death still have karma that has to return somewhere. Maybe this does not seem fair, but karmic balance is a zero-sum situation that has to be balanced at some point.

M: So some unsuspecting slob could inherit someone else's karma and never know it?

B: That is theoretically possible.

M: But that's not fair.

B: Who told you that life is supposed to be fair? Where in your contract for this lifetime is a clause that you have to be treated justly?

M: OK. You got me on that one. So, I'm responsible for all the things that I do, but I can't be held responsible for external things that I didn't foresee.

B: And, in reality, who is going to hold you responsible except yourself? It is your volitional actions that you are responsible for, and only those. It is your karma that you generate that is your responsibility. The external things that affect you are someone else's or something else's or maybe nothing's responsibility, be it another person or nature doing what it does. Sometimes events just happen. However, your voluntary response to these things is what generates the karma. You may be held responsible for actions that you perform knowingly that violate a dictate of the society in which you live, but that is still karma that you control. Violation of other people's laws is still a voluntary action in most cases.

M: Where does the concept of blame come into this in any way?

B: Blame is an attempt to place responsibility for something that happened to you outside yourself. Blame and fault are judgment calls for assigning responsibility for bad things that happen. But they are meaningless concepts to those who believe that they are only responsible for actions that they took (or did not take). Guilt and innocence likewise have no meaning. The only true justice is the return of karma, and that is a function of the law of the universe.

M: This goes against almost all of the civil and criminal law that I know of.

B: The law you speak of is a product of 'civilized' society. But if everyone was totally responsible for his or her actions, the law would be unnecessary. However, not everyone is yet that responsible, and indeed, they may never be. So, the law becomes necessary.

M: So what happens when the law causes you to do actions that will generate negative karma? Perhaps you are an enforcer for a mob or a policeman who has to shoot others in the line of duty.

B: In the cases of which you speak, you have made conscious choices as to your livelihood. In both cases, you have accepted the fact that you may be required to kill others. This is a voluntary choice. If you were true to the precept of not killing, then you would not have chosen to do those jobs.

M: What if I had no choice to become an enforcer? What if my family was hostage to my doing this?

B: Then that is the result of something that you chose to do earlier on in the chain and you are now paying the karmic result for now. There was at least a choice of leaving the community or state to avoid those

consequences. I see no conflict. If I am a hostage in a situation, I probably am not there voluntarily, however. However, I am still bound by the karmic law and my choices. They generate karma no matter the circumstances. It can be murky sometimes as to the reasons for whatever karmic result you are experiencing, but have no doubt that it is probably a karmic result.

M: OK, so karma exists and I generate it by choices I make and actions that I take voluntarily.

B: Yes.

M: But what of all of what I hear about the cycle of death and rebirth. And what of reincarnation?

B: Enlightenment allows us to break what has been called the cycle of death and rebirth. The original word was 'samsara.' It denotes the external world we live in. In that world we continually experience the death and rebirth of our thoughts, reactions, and actions, both positive and negative. If we can break the habits of reaction, feeling, and bad actions, we can escape the karmic reactions that these bring.

As for reincarnation, you physically or mentally do not return as an entity, only your karma is still out there waiting to be returned. Even I am not sure by what process the universe chooses to balance this account, but it does.

M: So the karma generated by the Nazis in World War II could conceivably still be out there somewhere waiting to be balanced?

B: It is possible that their deaths cleared their accounts, or the suffering that they experienced balanced it out. How are we to know if their internal suffering was agonizing enough to have them zero the account? On the other hand, I cannot say that their karmic accounts are clean,

and that their balance is not being wrought in the world somewhere.

What I do know is that if part of that karma is coming back to me, it is my reactions to it and my conscious decisions about my circumstances that will help balance it out. Or not.

M: So it may be that there is 'evil loose in the world?'

B: That may very well be the case. It is up to us to help balance out that account.

M: In some roundabout way, that makes sense.

B: I do not think I ever said that karma generated by one person is reinvested in another entity. It very well may be distributed to a number of people or other entities.

M: Somewhere I read that it isn't possible for 'group' karma to exist ... that it only individual to individual.

B: That is one interpretation. But the idea remains open to question.

M: Somehow that feels more right than the whole reincarnation thing. But enough of karma for now. Can we return to the Moral Disciplines for a while?

B: Very well. I think we left off at Right Speech. Right Speech is knowing the best thing to say, the best time to say it, and the best person to say it to. That is simplified, of course, but that is the basic premise. Note that I said 'best' rather than 'right'. 'Right' and 'correct' in this sense have no meaning since the situation may require other things said than what the appearance of the situation might require. Which gets us back to our assessment of the external world and what we think it requires of us. We make voluntary actions and communication based on what we think is the right thing to do. Bear in mind that

within this injunction of Right Speech is the precept of not lying. What you have to say must be true ... and there must be the right time to say it, and to the right person.

Telling someone to their face something about them that is not true is probably pandering to their egos for some end on your part ... which gets back to karma.

M: Then I'm not only responsible for what I say, but where I say it, when I say it, and to whom I say it to? And it can't be a lie?

B: That is correct. The last three are as important as what you say. Timing, location, and recipient are equally either harmful or helpful as what you say.

Many times, saying the right thing at the wrong time is worse than saying it at all. Likewise speaking it to the wrong person can have disastrous consequences. And where this happens can negate all the other three factors instantly if it is wrongly chosen.

In the Majjhima Nikaya, it is said:

"Whenever you want to perform a verbal act, you should reflect on it: 'This verbal act I want to perform — would it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Is it an unskillful verbal act, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it would lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it would be an unskillful verbal act with painful consequences, painful results, then any verbal act of that sort is absolutely unfit for you to do. But if on reflection you know that it would not cause affliction ... it would be a skillful verbal action with happy consequences, happy results, then any verbal act of that sort is fit for you to do.

"While you are performing a verbal act, you should reflect on it: 'This verbal act I am doing — is it leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Is it an unskillful verbal act, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it is leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both... you should give it up. But if on reflection you know that it is not... you may continue with it.

"Having performed a verbal act, you should reflect on it ... If, on reflection, you know that it led to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it was an unskillful verbal act with painful consequences, painful results, then you should confess it, reveal it, lay it open to the Teacher or to a knowledgeable companion in the holy life. Having confessed it ... you should exercise restraint in the future. But if on reflection you know that it did not lead to affliction ... it was a skillful verbal action with happy



consequences, happy results, then you should stay mentally refreshed and joyful, training day and night in skillful mental qualities."

M: That pretty well sums it up. But it's tough to remember this stuff when you're in the midst of it.

B: It is only through practice and reflection that you begin to analyze what you are about to do, what you are doing, and what you did. And it is not just with speech or communication, either. It is with all dealings in the world beyond the interface of your senses.  
As the old railroad crossing used to say: "Stop, look, and listen". Stop what you're doing, look at what you're doing, and listen to your Buddha Nature as to what is the right course of action.

M: More to think about. Until next time.

## CONVERSATION SIX

M: It has been very interesting since we last talked. The three sections of the Moral Discipline part of the EightFold Path kept running through my mind at odd times, and the phrase “Stop, look, and listen” would crop up at the most interesting points.

B: And did you Stop, Look and Listen?

M: Superficially, I think I did, at least sometimes, but the ‘look’ and ‘listen’ parts pretty much escaped me for the most part. Getting to the ‘why’ of what I was thinking the way I was or why I was reacting to my sensory input the way I did was difficult. When I tried to stop the mind to see what it was doing, it flitted by so fast that I couldn’t even begin to catch it.

B: That is normal for anyone who has not experienced the Path before. They have no way of slowing the mind down in order to see what it is doing.

M: I never realized how difficult that is. It seems that it just takes off and covers all kinds of distance without much effort. Figuring out how it got from point ‘a’ to point ‘b’ is almost impossible.

B: It may seem as such now, but if you take the time to work on it, it becomes much easier and much more interesting.

M: I also found myself doing a lot more thinking before I did things. The Moral Disciplines kept running through my mind.

B: They do that. Were you successful in following them?

M: Surprisingly, yes. Moreover, it wasn’t that hard. But I had to stop and think a lot before I went ahead. The

prohibition against killing wasn't hard, but the taking of things without them being given and particularly the speech parts were a lot tougher.

B: Yes. The normal give-and-take of this modern society is so involved with gossip and the offhand jab or pinprick of a nasty phrase or judgment slips off the tongue all too easily. However, trying to adhere to the language and actions of diplomacy and political correctness is to go against the ways and means of the present time. Moreover, the pressure to tell others what they want to hear from you, be it positive or negative, many times overwhelms the right thing to say. But again, try to say only the right words at the right time to the right person. That is not to say that 'small talk' is not necessary. It is necessary just to survive in this modern society. Much of it is dishonest and superficial, but necessary.

M: I have noticed that when I speak with you, I think it's unusual that all of your attention is focused on me and what I'm saying. At first, it was a little disconcerting, but it becomes refreshing the more I experience it. Is that perception of mine just that, or is this what you do?

B: You are not wrong in your perception. I am totally focusing on what you are saying, and what you are not saying. Both of these are equally important, and observing what you are not saying is to lose a lot of what you are communicating.

M: Sorry, that I don't understand.

B: By observing your body language, the context of your words, and seeing what words or subjects you tend to avoid, I can get a much more accurate picture of who you are and what you are communicating.

M: Does that mean that it is more than just what I say?

B: Very much so. And it is in many instances, a subliminal 'feeling' is projected that is entirely at odds with your words. Can you tell when someone is lying or, as your generation puts it, 'beating around the bush'?

M: Sometimes, but I can never be sure.

B: I am sure there are some people that you find it uneasy or uncomfortable to be around. Have you ever thought about why this is?

M: Not really, now that you mention it. I just don't like to be around them.

B: Think for a minute about one of them and how you feel when they are around you.

M: OK, I'm thinking about one in particular.

B: What is it that bothers you about this person?

M: I feel that I can't trust them.

B: And what signals do they project that they are not to be trusted?

M: I don't know exactly. Maybe that they always seem to agree with me no matter what, and tell me what they think I want to hear.

B: Is it just the words, or is there more?

M: There's more, I just can't put my finger on it.

B: That is the subliminal part. You are sensing what they are not saying. You are going beyond the eggshell that they are projecting to their outside world, much as an actor projects a persona while on the stage. As Shakespeare put it, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and

women merely players;”. So when you see a difference between what someone projects and what you subliminally sense underneath, it is disturbing because of that dissonance.

M: Imagine that. A Buddha quoting Shakespeare. But I see your point. So do all of us have this ‘eggshell’ as you put it?

B: Yes. The eggshell is the ‘self’ that you put up to protect you from your external reality. It filters that reality before it gets to your internal conscience and keeps you from seeing the truth of what you are both doing and receiving from that external world.

We have to modify or destroy that eggshell to see and experience the world and the universe as it really is, not as we would like it to be.

M: I think that would be a shock to many people. Wouldn’t destroying your protection mechanism make you vulnerable?

B: Undoubtedly. But that truth of how things really are is what liberates us from our suffering. It seems counter-intuitive to think that destroying what we think protects us will make us more invulnerable, but it is a truth. The seeing of what our universe really is all about is the true liberation of ourselves.

The ‘slings and arrows of outraged fortune’ are better withstood when we see that it is our reaction to them which makes us feel personally violated. Seeing the place from which they came and why makes it less personal and puts the responsibility for it on the sender.

We also become much stronger for understanding the universe, and thus even with our eggshell vulnerable (and we think, ourselves), our inner being is much stronger. The stronger the inner being, the less we need the eggshell.

M: That almost sounds preachy.

B: That is your perception, not my intent. Already you see that your perception of what I said is different than what I really said. If you take my words at face value, there is nothing in them but the truth.

M: Yes, but ...

B: But what?

M: That's reminiscent of what I used to hear in church and Sunday school about the end result of religion.

B: That merely means that what religion you experienced had the right goal, but the wrong methodology. It didn't stick with you, did it?

M: No. It didn't. There was too much of a logical gap between what I understood logically and what the religion required me to take on faith.

B: Ah, that wonderful word ... faith.

M: I never could take things on faith. I had to find out for myself if they were true or not. And promising life after death didn't seem too logical, particularly as there was never anyone around that had experienced it. Is there life after death?

B: I don't know.

M: But you're one of the enlightened ones. Surely you know that answer.

B: I only know what I know. I try to see the universe for what it really is, and that's all I can speak to.

M: But you, or your counterparts, have been around forever ... however long that is.

B: I personally have been here only this lifetime. The person that I currently am will cease to exist someday. The truths of the universe, the dharma (which is the real Buddha) has been around for eternity and will continue to infinity. I know the dharma intimately for this lifetime. But what happens after death is open to conjecture. If I, as an aspiring Buddha, were to say that there was life after death, I would be saying an untruth, because that is something I don't know. So I will not say it. Some believe that there is reincarnation of the 'soul'. That may or may not be true. But I do know that the dharma is eternal and the ultimate truth.

M: But what exactly is the Dharma?

B: First, let me make one thing clear here. You think that the Buddhas have lived forever. They have not. I have not. I am not. You make the association between the persona and the truths that they espouse. There is none. The Dharma is eternal and changeless, and I am not. I am merely one of the vessels through which the Dharma is taught. The Dharma is the ultimate truth of the universe. It can only be attained through insight and enlightenment. It is not something that can be transmitted or given. It cannot be quantified in any terms other than those you experience for yourself. All I or any other being can do is to point a direction to look in. And to do that looking, you have to first understand your mind and what it does both for and to us. To try to understand the universe without understanding and quieting our minds is to try to pilot an aircraft without training and experience or understand quantum physics without calculus and linear algebra.

M: And these truths will just roll in out of nowhere if I quiet my mind?

B: Yes.

M: How can you be sure that it will happen for me?

B: I cannot be sure of what you will do or not do. That's up to you. It is your responsibility to achieve that state of being or not. It is your call.

M: I have the ultimate responsibility, don't I?

B: Yes.

M: So if I manage to quiet my mind, will I achieve enlightenment?

B: You may, if you so desire. But you also may just enjoy the quiet without anything else. It is up to you. To quote from Richard Bach, in his masterpiece "Illusions", 'The world is your exercise-book, the pages on which you do your sums. It is not reality, although you can express reality there if you wish. You are also free to write nonsense, or lies, or to tear the pages. ' It is entirely up to you.

M: OK, inquiring minds want to know. How do I get started in quieting my mind?

B: This is where the Second division of the EightFold Path comes into play. It is called the Concentration division. It consists of Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. "Right Effort" looks at funding the Path with the energy to accomplish what we have set out to do. If we do not provide the energy to do what is required, all the Right Intent in the cosmos won't help us along.



“Right Mindfulness” shows us how to quiet the mind and accept only sensory input that does not possess all the overburden of preconceived notions and biases.

“Right Concentration” is more rightly called “Singularity Focus”. It allows us to zero in on what we are interested in with ever increasing narrowness of view, looking at only that which applies to what we’re doing or thinking.

M: It sounds a bit complicated. And it sounds like a lot of work.

B: No and Yes. It is not nearly as complicated as you first think. And yes, it is a lot of work. But it is the most worthwhile work that one can undertake.

M: And just how do I start to do this ... this quieting of the mind?

B: You can start with a simple exercise right now. You may have read about it at some point. It is called the Breathing Exercise. To do it is quite simple. You just get in a comfortable position, close your eyes, and feel the breath.

While you are concentrating on the breath, think about was it short or long, deep or shallow, noisy or quiet, fast or slow.

As you are doing this, you will find that initially your mind will start doing gyrations and jump off to other things. When this happens, bring it back gently to looking at your breathing. Gradually, over many times, the mind will not wander nearly as much and your concentration will increase to just the breath ... nothing else will intrude. Try it.

M: Right now?

B: Yes.

(pause)

M: Drat! I can't stay on the breath for more than thirty seconds at a time. All kinds of things keep intruding.

B: They will. But eventually you will be able to focus solely on your breath and stay there without reacting to these other influences ... both external and internal.

M: I think I'll try this at home and see if I can improve my concentration through this. Is this the only thing that I can concentrate on?

B: For the time being, until you fully see how much your mind wanders and get the ability to bring it back to what you want it to do, this is more than enough.

M: Thank you. It's going to be fun.

B: Fun, yes. But a lot of work, even though someone watching you would think you had fallen asleep sitting upright.

M: So true. Until our next conversation.

## CONVERSATION SEVEN

B: Welcome. How did your exercise go? Was it possible to concentrate solely on breathing?

M: It was far more difficult than I could have imagined. My mind kept wandering off and I had to keep consciously pulling it back to what it was supposed to be doing.

B: And where did it wander to?

M: Anywhere and everywhere. It would respond to sounds. It would start thinking about something else entirely without any rhyme or reason.

B: It is amazing, is it not?

M: I never knew how bad it was until I tried this. It's truly amazing how far your mind will travel even when you're trying to do something that requires concentration.

B: It does that. Did you find any reasons that your mind took off on these flights of fancy?

M: Only a couple. Much of it happened so fast and the leaps were so great that I couldn't catch it doing whatever it was doing to follow the thread. But a few times I could grab the thread, and see how it got from point A to point X without any intermediate steps. Some of the links were totally strange.

B: Do you now believe that your mind can cause you ignorance and desire without your ever knowing it?

M: Much more so than before. It's caused me to do as you prescribed. 'Stop, look, and listen' to what it is doing and try to follow back to where this all started. It's tough.

B: It is not easy. The mind will do everything in its power to keep doing what it has been trained to do. It has had years to entrench those patterns and it will take a lot of effort to get it to alter them.

M: So what's next on the agenda to progress from this one exercise to something more?

B: Now that you have had a taste of what the mind is doing for you, you can start to take a look at what is at the root of where it goes when it takes off.

For instance, you think about an instance in your life that is ongoing ... say an opinion that you have about someone ... and start digging into what it is that has formed that opinion. Usually it is a past similar experience that gave you an outcome to predict in this case. But is the current situation really the same as the previous one? It may seem much the same, but are your ideas from the last situation coloring this one and causing a erroneous view of it? It really is not the same, you know.

M: I know. "Past performance is no indication of future results." My stockbroker tells me that all the time. But don't my past experiences keep me from making the same mistakes or achieving my goals?

B: Maybe. Maybe not. Were your past experiences personal, or were you just accepting what others have said about this person? Even the cheat and robber has people that they will not take from. If it was you that got robbed, then you obviously are not on their 'do not steal from' list. Otherwise, you do not and will not know if that is the case.

M: There you go again ... a definitive answer.

B: I say that because it could be either way, and it is because our past experiences always color what we think we see in the present.

Is my present opinion of anything colored by my past experience? Of course. But it may very well be a case of 'looks like, but is not.' We have to be able to see where our own opinion came from in order to see if it applies in the current situation. Just because you saw someone get beaten up by a gang of teenage thugs, doesn't mean that all teenage thugs are going to beat you up. It is probably a small minority that would do this ... but you unconsciously lump all of these children into the same mold and act accordingly without analyzing the current situation and discarding your previous experience when necessary.

Are these kids menacing? Do they look like they intend to harm you or anyone? Just because they are on a street corner, does this mean trouble? You have to analyze this in the present, not make a blanket determination because you 'thought' it was equivalent.

M: OK, hold on. So is my experience valid or not? Is what I've learned or been taught useful or not?

B: Of course both things are valid ... to a point. But you must evaluate each and every one of them as to whether they are true or not, or are valid in the present situation. Your idea about the teenage thugs may be valid only one percent of the time, but you have to evaluate when that one percent is correct, and then act ... to act on it in all cases blindly is to generate ignorance and wrong actions.

M: So the experience and learning is valid, but only if it applies correctly to the current time and place?

B: Exactly.

M: But how do I know if that application is correct?

B: You have to see the current moment as it really is, not as what you think it to be. The teenagers are on the corner. Period. They may look a certain way. Period. That is all that you can ascertain initially. It is all you have to go on. Beyond that initial observation, you have no ability to project.

If they subsequently move towards you with bats and bricks in hand, you now have more information that you might need to take action. But until that happens, you cannot form a course of action that makes any sense. And to take action in light of that first single piece of information without any further verification is counterproductive in all instances. The kids could have helped you across the street. They could have ignored you entirely, and you went around the block for nothing.

M: I begin to see what you're talking about, but I can't see discarding what I know or have experienced unless I can prove it's wrong.

B: Ah, you begin to see. The key words you just used ... 'unless I can prove it is wrong.' Just using it until you can prove it wrong is also counterproductive and it usually reinforces the concept that you are trying to prove ... thus making it all the more right. "The bad thing didn't happen because I did this, so what I did was right." The real idea is to not prove it wrong or right by itself, but is it wrong or right in this instant ... in this current situation.

M: So it may be right, but only when it is supported within what I see as the current situation?

B: Absolutely. Under other circumstances, the action might be completely wrong.

M: That means that much of what I know about the world is probably open to question.

B: Correct. That is because all your experience and what you have been taught color what you think you know of the world. All of it is open to question, because your perceived world is always changing ... sometimes in big ways, sometimes in smaller increments. To be stuck in a mindset that is unalterable and unchanging is a sure way to generate ignorance, suffering and unfulfilled desires on your part.

M: So nothing is as it seems.

B: That may be true, or it may not.

M: So what do I have to do? Do I have to evaluate everything in the moment and check my prior experiences and learning at the door?

B: Not quite the way I would put it, but yes. That is true as far as you know right now.

M: So how do I know if my experiences and learning is appropriate for the current situation?

B: You listen to your inner voice ... your Buddha nature that is never wrong. That which you call a 'hunch' is usually correct. Trust it and you will never be wrong. You may not have the capability of dealing with it properly, but you will know it was the right thing to do.

M: So I could have the proper direction to go in, and not be able to go there?

B: Yes.

M: That's disheartening.

B: Yes. Sometimes. But think of it this way. Even if you go in the direction that is right, you may wind up not being able to affect the outcome and do adverse damage to

yourself in the process. Knowing that in advance can keep you safe and sane. Being a martyr has no benefit if you destroy yourself for no change in the outcomes of situations.

M: So I listen to my inner voice, and look at the situation as it really is, and go with what I can accomplish?

B: In a nutshell, yes. The trick is to get in touch with your Buddha nature, which is usually obscured by all the junk and previous experiences that your mind throws out at you.

If you see a cow, you recognize it as a cow. If it is high on a pole outside an ice cream shop, you may assume that it is not a real cow. If you see it out in a field by itself, you now cannot assume that it is real or not. It may be a fiberglass dummy or it may be real. Unless you see it move, you will not be able to make that determination. If it is a bull and you jump the fence to check it out, you will not know if it is truly real unless it begins to charge at you or stays stock-still. By that time it may be too late to listen to your inner voice as you are running back for the fence.

The idea here is to make no assumptions about anything until you get more direct facts ... not hearsay or rumor or any other kind of information that you do not directly know to be true.

Now this may be direct in watching someone speak and reading their body language and demeanor. Your inner voice will tell you if they are speaking true or not. It is subliminal and internal. You might have been told that this person is the reincarnation of a prophet and speaks the truth, but if you listen to your inner voice, you will know whether this person is to be trusted or not.

M: I've had that happen before, where I felt that something was amiss with someone else, but I ignored it because others told me that this person was legitimate. I found



out later that my first impression was correct, and that this person was a scam artist.

B: This idea of the ‘first impression’ is very relevant to this practice. That is the most open implementation of the ‘inner voice’ that we have. It for some reason bypasses the mind and flags down your consciousness to warn you that something is amiss, or that this situation is all right.

M: I’ve seen that first hand. But I’ve seen others that discount any use of it and suffered the consequences.

B: That first impression of people and situations is ignored and discounted by most people because they have programmed themselves to do so. They are taught that you cannot go by first impressions, and that assessing things over time is the only ‘fair’ way to judge someone or something. But this is not true. That first impression situation is where you get that raw look at what is going on, before your mind gets the chance to override what your inner voice is telling you.

M: So proceeding on this practice will allow me to listen to my inner voice more often?

B: Eventually it is the only guide that you will need. It is so much more accurate than what your mind will tell you.

M: So I’ve begun to try to keep my mind from drifting during the breathing exercise. What is the next step?

B: Continue with this until you can keep focus on your breath indefinitely, ignoring all the distractions. Then you can start concentrating on other objects in the room, keeping your focus completely on them without distraction. This is the next step.

M: OK, I can see that this is going to take a while. Just how long will it be before I see progress?

B: How long is a piece of string?

M: Huh?

B: The time it takes is entirely up to you and how fast you grasp the principles involved in quieting the mind. The metaphor 'How long is a piece of string?' merely illustrates the impossibility of my being able to tell you how long YOU will take to do something or learn a lesson or whatever. It is impossible. Each piece of string is different and has different lengths ... even similar strings.

M: OK ... Ok. I see your point. So this practice is an individual one and not a group activity.

B: It is entirely an individual and solitary activity. No one can do it for you, or even try to guide you in its use. All I or anyone else can do is point you in a direction and hope that you will benefit from it. But you may not. As they say in the car commercials ... "Your mileage may vary." Or "Results shown are not typical".

M: I never thought I'd see the day that the Buddha would quote auto commercials back to me.

B: The world is what it is ... commercials notwithstanding. By the way, do you know what commercials are and what they do in respect to this practice?

M: I suppose they want me to remember their product and buy it.

B: True, but superficial. What they are doing is the antithesis of this practice. They are trying to generate desire in you to buy something that you probably do not need nor have a use for. Or they are trying to instill an ignorance of the true nature of something by trying to tell you that it is something else. Both of these factors are not in your best

interests as a follower of the Eight-Fold Path seeking the true nature of the universe.

In the first case, they want you to buy the car. In the second, they want you to think that 'fracking' for natural gas is good, safe and of no consequence if you live nearby. In each case, it is the creation of either desire or ignorance.

M: I've heard you use this phrase before ... 'seeking the true nature of the universe.' Isn't this something for physics people or astronomers to play with?

B: There is the nature of the physical universe, and then there is the true nature of the universe, as you perceive it. These are two completely different things. The physical universe is out beyond your senses, while the true nature of your universe is internal and perceptual.

M: So there is an entire universe within me?

B: Yes. Indefinable and concretely manifesting every instant. It is internal and yours alone.

M: Wait a minute. How can something be indefinable and concretely manifesting at the same time?

B: Because you cannot define it, and yet it works within your inner voice ... your Buddha nature. It is absolutely there and works and you will never be able to define it in terms that anyone else but you will be able to understand.

M: Does everyone have a Buddha nature? What about the psychopath who commits horrible acts?

B: A. Everyone has a Buddha nature. Period. End of story.  
B. The psychopath has a very altered perception of reality on which they are acting. They are also convinced that their mind is right and their inner voice is lying to them. These ideas may be so deep seated that getting them to

alter their perception of reality is virtually impossible. The existence of their inner voice ... their Buddha nature ... is still true. It does exist. It just is drowned out completely by the perceptions and the mind.

M: I begin to see that. But it is tough to imagine that a hardened killer or sociopath could have any inner voice whatsoever.

B: Hard as it is to understand this, it is true. Everyone has such a Buddha nature, no matter how obscured it is from both themselves and others. Remember the 'Birdman of Alcatraz'? Stroud, I believe was his name. He had a fondness for the birds that would come into his cell. It was probably the one thing that he allowed his inner voice to be present in.

M: Yes, now that I think about it. So it's back to my concentration exercises and breathing.

B: Good luck and keep after it. It is well worth the effort.

M: I'm beginning to see that.

## CONVERSATION EIGHT

M: Greetings once again.

B: And likewise. I do look forward to our visits.

M: How are things going, now that the media and the world has discounted your presence as not being what it once thought it to be? They believe you to be a fraud.

B: It is as I expected, and it gives me a significant amount of free time in which I can do what it was that I came to accomplish.

M: And what is that?

B: Talking with you and a few others who are truly seeking the truth and the way to it.

M: I am honored that you continue to put up with my stupid questions.

B: My friend, there is no such thing as a stupid question. Only stupid answers. And you have yet to ask a stupid question.

M: Oh there are plenty of stupid questions in my mind at this point.

B: Try one.

M: When I try to perform a concentration exercise, I have trouble getting my mind to stay with what I'm concentrating on. It just won't shut up and do what I want it to. Is there any shortcut to this problem?

B: You might just tell it to shut up. This works in some cases where the shock of being told to shut up actually gets the

mind to quit for a while. Probably not long, but the shock value seems to work.

M: You mean just 'SHUT UP!'?

B: Yes. And you have to mean it.

M: All this time and all I have to do is tell it to stop?

B: Sometimes it works. I think that after your trying to concentrate on things, it may have some temporary effect, but there are no guarantees. The only long-term solution is practice, practice, and more practice. Go ahead and try it for a second. Just relax and close your eyes and just tell your mind to shut up.

M: [Pause] I'll be damned. It does stop for a second.

B: It does indeed. And in that second, you can point it back at what it is that you're concentrating on. Another way to get it to calm down is to imagine a blank seamless gray wall that encompasses your entire visual range. That's all that's there. This will quiet the mind as long as that is all that you let it look at. Just a featureless gray wall.

M: Amazing. Let me try that for a second. [Pause] I'm blown away. Those techniques do stop for an instant. But then other things come back in and kick it back into gear. Things like sounds and sensory inputs ... not to mention thoughts that run so fast that you can't really even tell that they were there.

B: You are indeed starting to see what the mind is doing. And the goal is to slow it down and be able to see how it progresses from one thought stream to the next. You will find that there are certain triggers in each one that fire off the next. And if you can backtrack far enough, you will begin to find what started the entire cascade to begin with. It is usually some event, thought, or memory that is

buried so deeply that you will not find it for a while. But as you untangle these threads, you will find some amazing connections that you never knew existed. Another amazing concept is that the mind itself can be considered one of the senses.

M: Whoa. Wait a minute. My mind is one of the senses?

B: Not directly in terms of the outside world, but internally, it generates concepts, thoughts, ideas and memories on its own. How many times have you found it looking at something in memory without a single trigger to set it off?

M: OK. So this happens. But one of the senses?

B: When you meditate, if you close off all the external senses, does your mind still run garbage?

M: Of course.

B: Then it has the same end result as a trigger from the outside world. It just starts up on something that it finds to play with. It has an equal basis for running on its own as if triggered by an external event. Look at it this way. A computer, when not having a program to run that you command it to, is running all kinds of other stuff in the background that you may not even be aware of. Like screensavers, backing up your drives, or running an internal memory check. The mind does the same kind of thing, but never checks the validity of what it is running.

M: So how does this quieting of the mind lead to enlightenment?

B: My friend, enlightenment is a state of bliss ... of having no negative feelings, thoughts, or ideas. It is not a physical place to be attained, nor is it a place that the 'soul' goes when this current incarnation of yours is over. It is a

place for the inner voice to have total control over what you do, what you say, and what you think.

This can be misconstrued to seem that you can then disregard all local and national laws and conventions under these conditions. It is not so. You still exist in the physical realm. It is only that you have taken all feelings about the perceptual universe and allowed them to leave. You form no judgments or conclusions except those that are dictated by your internal Buddha nature and your own personal experiences. This is true enlightenment. Much of that last statement may sound like total verbal chaos. But I cannot refine it any more than to say that enlightenment is complete peace.

M: That's a handful to accept all at once. So there's no heaven or hell? No afterlife? Nothing?

B: There is no hell save the one that we create for ourselves in our lives. There is no heaven to go to after this physical life is over. Neither of these exists for those individuals who choose to accept these concepts. For those that do not accept the practice, that is their choice, and they will live with their personal heavens and hells in this lifetime, even though their 'eternalness' is not to be.

M: But you're here again as a Buddha. Isn't this proof of reincarnation? Doesn't this prove that there is a soul and that it returns again and again?

B: No. While there are many who profess to follow the Dharma, the EightFold Path, and the Four Noble Truths, they also believe in their ancestors being able to guide them in their lives and actively pursue that belief. In my case, that is not true.

I am merely a person, not a Buddha, who sees the universe as it truly is, not what I would like it to be. I think there is a phrase for this ... ummmm ... 'taking it as it is, warts and all.'



The Buddha has not reincarnated because he never left. He is always here in the form of the Dharma. Each Buddha, if you wish to call us that, restates the eternal Dharma for those that choose to listen and are willing to enter the path to enlightenment. I ... I being the Dharma ... can only guide them in their efforts ... I cannot do it for them.

Inevitably, there are those who take from the Dharma what they want, and leave the rest. If they try to expound only that fragment to others, they may form cults and splinters that serve nothing but the fortunes or egos of those leading them.

The Dharma is complete, and it cannot be fragmented. It is universal and true and must be found and accepted by each seeker individually. Each seeker must ask for the information, and it cannot be spoon-fed to them. And they must progress at their own speed, not their guide's, if they have one.

M: Then you don't exist?

B: Of course, I exist. I am here. You can reach out and touch me. What does not exist is the Buddha per se and yet he does. There is no Buddha except in the sense that the truth of the Dharma flows through me for others to accept or not as they see fit. The Buddha is the Dharma and the Dharma alone. There may be thousands of Buddhas at any time espousing the Dharma in their own ways to seekers, but there is only one Dharma.

M: But why then do people worship statues of the Buddha if they know that that person can't help them?

B: That is a popular misconception about the Dharma. Probably they do not know that the statue or the thought of the Buddha it represents cannot do anything for them. To think that represents the passing of one's responsibilities for their own lives to ... who knows what. No statue, pseudo-deity or idea of an all-powerful, all-

seeing, all-controlling god is in reality going to help anyone ... especially since they exist only in the minds of those choosing to accept that way of thinking. Everyone can find the Dharma. You just have to know where to look, and quieting the mind gives us the freedom to find it.

M: That means that a lot of people, according to you, are totally on the wrong track here.

B: Whether it is right or wrong for them is up to them to decide. They are on the track that they think works for them at this time. Some are eventually disenchanted with the concept of religion, and turn instead to searching for the truth. It requires work and practice, but they can indeed eventually find it.

M: If I'm religiously oriented, then my destiny is ordained by that deity, isn't it? Don't I have any free will if I walk that path?

B: That is true. If you think that there is a supernatural entity that controls your entire life and promises you a heaven if you believe, and threatens you with a hell if you do not, then you have given up all independence and responsibility for your life. In that case, you believe that you are not responsible for your actions or beliefs. You blindly accept what is presented to you without question, and turn over your offerings to whatever denomination you happen to fall into. There are many who do believe in these concepts. It is unfortunate that they find the need to do so.

M: That's a pretty brutal indictment of religion in general. Many people do a lot of good for others through those organizations.

B: That is true. But those being helped are, in this case, not being responsible for helping themselves. I believe that

there is a saying ... 'If you give a man a fish, he is hungry again in a day or two. If you teach him how to fish, he will never be hungry again' ... I am sure that is not the exact quote, but it is close.

M: I've heard that argument before. So charity has no place in this world?

B: That is not correct. For those who give and help others, there is a great personal benefit. But the more that they do it, they discover that the need for their charity becomes greater and their resources become more limited. Read Richard Bach's 'Illusions', Chapter One. In some cases, people come to rely on that charity or help and lose the ability to fend for themselves. If you want any verification of this, look at the examples of Haiti after the earthquake or anywhere in sub-Saharan Africa where missionaries have done more harm than good. Is that beneficial in the long run?

M: It sounds like it, but I don't really know. So where does that leave us?

B: It leaves us with the only logical alternative ... to blend limited and temporary charity with education and training for self-sufficiency. If you create a dependent group, they will never do what they need to do ... survive on their own. Is this a good thing? What happens to them when the charity runs out and nothing is left?

M: So your motto here could be 'Help, but teach.'

B: Yes. Teach people to be responsible for themselves. It is the only long term way that people can become self-sufficient.

M: But I'm not self-sufficient. I can't grow my own food or build my own house.

B: But you are not relying on charity, either. Nor do you apparently require external spiritual guidance. This is the self-reliance that I was referring to.

M: That's true. So if I'm self-reliant by your definition, why do I need the EightFold Path or the Four Noble Truths or any of this?

B: Because you are unhappy and not satisfied with how you feel. You are searching for something more in your life, and you have an inkling that there is a way to achieve more peace in your existence. The Four Noble Truths and the EightFold Path are a way to achieve that peace.

M: OK, you've got me there. So by practicing quieting my mind and getting it to do only what I want it to, I will achieve peace?

B: Eventually, yes.

M: And how does quieting the mind make this happen?

B: As you quiet your mind, the things that alter your perception of the world outside yourself will stop making the real world sugar-coated ... or if you're paranoid, it will make the world less threatening. And how you view your world is what you base all of your interactions with it on. When your interactions become less acrimonious, you find your life more peaceful. Eventually you reach the realities of the universe and can surmount all of them by accepting them completely.

M: So if I quiet my mind enough, I can find the universal truths that philosophers have been seeking for centuries?

B: If you read them carefully, many of them already have found them. The problem is that they all have to speak those truths in terms that their populations and rulers will understand and accept. This makes it difficult for us

to resolve what they are, since we have no access to the local politics and customs that their writings refer to. Therefore we have to take them literally, which makes the truths they speak obscure and hard to find ... but they are there.

M: So what the Dharma is saying is the same as that of Aristotle or Plato or Spinoza?

B: Yes ... in a different place and time. And you can include Christ, Mohammed, and Moses in that group.

M: But they don't speak of suffering and how to eliminate it.

B: If you look deep enough, it is there.

M: Why is the Dharma different?

B: Because the Dharma provides a functional path to finding these truths for anyone that cares to make the effort. The others try to state these truths without preparing the individual for the acceptance of them. And without that preparation, the individual will probably reject them out of hand.

M: OK, I see your point. Where do I go from here?

B: Continue on with what you have been doing. Learning how to control your mind is the key to seeing these other things.

M: What is the next step in learning this?

B: When you have sufficiently started to find what is triggering the mind into these unwanted concepts and projections, then you start examining the outside world without any prejudices or foregone conclusions.

M: Could I have an example?

B: You see someone that you recognize. Immediately all the previous interactions with this person come to the forefront of your thinking, and you put yourself in a mode to counter what is going to happen if it is bad, or to enhance what is going to happen if it is good. But you have no idea what is really going to happen. You are going on projections based on previous experience which may not be correct for this situation.

M: So if I see that a car is about to go out of control and hit me, I should just let it?

B: That is not what I said at all. Do you know that the car is going to be out of control? Maybe, but not yet. As the situation of the car progresses, you can see that you are about to be hit. Then and only then can you take action. But if you observe the car driving erratically but it may not be heading in your direction, you probably should not start running yet ... it may go where you're running to, in which case your decision early on will get you hurt.

M: I think I see what you're talking about. So by quieting my mind, I'm not totally throwing away the experiences of my life, but making them available to me for making judgment calls when I need them. I guess it's the concept of the logical choice at the right time, rather than a knee-jerk reaction.

B: Precisely. And the more you practice it, the easier it becomes. Tamping down those 'knee-jerk' reactions is what the practice is all about. Doing that requires that you see what those experiences generate in terms of what is presented to you and the choices that you are given by your mind. Just because that seems to be your only option does not mean that it is.

M: OK, time for me to go back and start to rummage around in the basement of my mind, I guess.

B: Interesting metaphor, and quite true. Much of what you find will only be the result of digging deep into the memories and experiences of a lifetime. But once you find that, it becomes easy to recognize and give credibility to ... or not.

M: Oh gee ... thanks. That's really definitive.

B: Do you want another truth?

M: Sure.

B: Everything that I have said may be wrong.

M: Huh?

B: You have to evaluate what I have told you for yourself and yourself alone. I know that when you do so honestly, you will see that what I have said is true for both yourself and the universe.

## CONVERSATION NINE

M: After our last conversation, I went back and did some reading on various ways of quieting the mind. There are a lot of different approaches, aren't there?

B: Yes. Each person that finds a way to do so, tries to make it viable for everyone else as well. That is why you find so many different approaches.

M: But how do I know which one is the right one?

B: You try some that seem to have merit for you and see if they help.

M: But isn't there some standard way of going at this from the standpoint of the Dharma.

B: Of course. But it depends on who tells you so. The original method is probably more difficult than others, and requires an immense amount of effort and perseverance.

M: How do I find the time to do that kind of work on my mind?

B: You do not find the time, you make the time. There will always be something else to do or entertain yourself with. The mind will always take the easy way out, and convince you that there is something much more fun and easier than doing this kind of work.

M: I can believe that. I'm finding that there are far too many distractions to being quiet for my life now. At least I'm recognizing them.

B: And are you pulling your mind back to what you were doing when they occur?

M: Sometimes. Occasionally, the input requires an immediate response, and I have to break off my quiet time.



B: Just what is so urgent that you have to break out of your contemplation of your mind?

M: The telephone, my partner, the dog ... things like that...

B: And how many of these are so utterly important that you have to acknowledge them at that instant?

M: Sometimes they just won't let you alone and you have to acknowledge them.

B: Ah, so it's the repetitive requirement that causes you to interrupt your contemplation? Or is it because other people and beings want your attention?

M: A little of both, I guess. But a partner can be quite insistent.

B: Yes, but that again is a test of how far you have delved into your mind. In all of these cases, what should be happening is that you accept the sensory input, whatever it is, and store it until you can reach a point where it can be acknowledged.

I admit that a partner who is insistent on their needs is difficult to ignore, but on the other hand, they should respect you enough to give you the time and space to do this important work for yourself.

M: I can't argue with that. But it's a difficult thing to do. And many times you pay a price for not dealing with the outside world. For instance, the dog wants to be walked, or the cat needs to be fed. Or my partner wants to know what I want for dinner ... things like that.

B: And are all these things that you mentioned not something that you could have taken care of prior to your starting to work on your mind in quiet?

M: Ummmmmm .... yeah, I guess so. I never thought of it that way.

B: That is what I meant when I said that you have to make time for this. Part of that making time is to take care of anything that would interrupt prior to starting.

M: That makes sense. But some things don't play by those rules. Suppose there's a fire in the house. Or that there is an emergency with the child. I can't ignore those.

B: Believe it or not, there are those who enter into meditation so deeply that even these events would not bring them back to your version of reality. But for the time being I will grant you that there are some things that need your attention immediately.  
The long term result, however, is that you can take care of almost all of them in advance. There are in reality very few things that you need to break your meditation for. You may not think that this is true, but you will find that it is.

M: I'll have to take your word for it for the time being. So how do I structure the meditation at this point in my practice?

B: One of the first steps to doing this is to start on what are called the "Four Contemplations." These are broad groupings of things to meditate upon and concentrate on their merits and demerits.  
First, Contemplation of the Body. This forces the mind to focus and see in reality the aspects of the body you possess, both good and bad. It is an in-depth examination of the reality of your body in its current form in this instant of time ... what it is, not what you would wish it to be.  
Second, the Contemplation of Feelings. Here we start to delve into how the mind 'feels' about things. This is where we generate a feeling to go along with any

experience ... either good, bad, or indifferent, and learn to recognize them and their effects on our judgment.

Third, there is the Contemplation of the State of Mind. This is where you learn to recognize the product of your mind in response to the sensory inputs. It involves what your mind produces when stimulated by an event or sensory input. It combines the actual event and the feeling about it to produce a cognitive result that is presented.

Fourth, there is the Contemplation on Phenomena. Now this does not mean phenomena in the usual sense, but merely situations or cumulative events. Everything is a phenomena in itself ... nothing extraordinary. It is a process of evaluating situations combining all the factors that result in your looking at things outside of yourself.

These do not have to be dealt with in any particular order, but many people find that taking them in this sequence is more logical for them. I'd suggest that you try the Contemplation of the Body first.

M: OK, how do I do that?

B: This is using the powers of concentration that you have honed so far to examine your own body, for both good and bad traits.

You have already started with the 'Breathing Exercise.'

M: I have. And it is not as easy as it is described.

B: Appearances are deceptive. If done correctly, this exercise is one of the most insightful of all.

M: So I concentrate on the breath. Then on my heartbeat. Then what?

B: Begin to look at how they all go together to form the whole of the body. Become aware of every facet of the body, both good and bad. Accept all of them as being a part of that body, without any bias or attachment to them. Consider them just as they are ... not as you would like them to be.

M: You keep saying that you have to see things as they truly are, not as you would like them to be. And it seems to apply to almost all things that you talk about. Is this a theme in your teachings?

B: It does not apply to almost all things ... it applies to ALL things that exist. You cannot truly become cognizant of the world outside yourself without seeing things as they truly are ... without bias or preconceived notions.

M: OK, some time ago, I remember you saying this about people in an airport, and making judgments about where they were from and what they did for a living. Was this wrong?

B: It was not wrong, because there was no right or wrong unless you wanted it to be right or wrong. These people just are. If you wish to play a game in guessing these things about them, so be it ... you'll never know for sure unless you were to ask them, and I doubt you would do that. So the point of the exercise is moot. It proves nothing because you can never verify your assumptions.

M: Then the airport exercise is for nothing?

B: Correct. All you can do is accept what you see without reservation and make no assumptions unless you have other data to go on. But it is an excellent exercise in that you learn not to make assumptions about people. All you have is your projections, which may be wildly inaccurate.

M: Doesn't that go against basic human nature?

B: Probably. But the objective here is to eliminate all those false assumptions that your mind gives you even when you do unconsciously ask for them. The mind must do what you want it to do, not what it wants to do.

M: Change of subject. You said earlier that every action I voluntarily took had karma attached to it. Could you explain that a little further?

B: Certainly. There is a fundamental principle in this practice that all things in the universe are interconnected ... from the sub-atomic to the galactic. This in theory means that everything that you do has an effect on the rest of the universe ... whether cosmic or infinitesimal.

There is a related science-fiction story about a time traveler who goes back to the age of the dinosaurs, and despite taking all precautions against modifying anything in that prehistoric time, inadvertently kills a butterfly. They return back to the present to find that their world has changed dramatically in many respects ... all due to that one event.

While this is a logical progression in the modification of time tracks, there is an equivalent parallel in the real time of our existence. Everything you do affects something else. When your action is involuntary, it does not generate any cosmic force along with it ... there was no intent. However, when you do it voluntarily with intent, there is a cosmic force generated into the universe that rides along with you, and creates situations for you similar to those you voluntarily started. This is called karma.

There is some question as to whether there is karma that carries over to others when you are deceased. Some of the followers of the historical Buddha at that time tried to extend this concept, not knowing of the principles of genetics and inherited personality traits. I do not think he ever intended for this to be so, because it was just being used for each individual as an illustration. Karma

does exist, but probably only for the individual, and it probably dissipates on their death. That individual may inspire others to do as they did, but each of these other people will generate their own karma for their own reasons.

One other thing about karma. It may be that it is not cosmic at all. It may be that you violate your inherent Buddha Nature and it is that violation that carries forward and makes you pay for that volitional action later on.

Which of these theories is correct is pretty much irrelevant, however. It is the result that matters, not how you got there.

M: But doesn't it matter how you got to that result in order to know how to resolve it?

B: No, as long as you know how to prevent the final result. The analysis is pretty much irrelevant, except from a curiosity standpoint.

There is a story about a warrior who is shot by an arrow. An underling comes along and offers to remove the arrow and save the life of the warrior. The warrior objects, saying that before it is removed, he wants to know who shot him, where the arrow was shot from, what kind of arrow it was, and so forth. In the process, the warrior dies. The concept, of course, is that if you over-analyze the problem, you may worsen the result. Just do what is necessary to solve it, and move on.

M: So does karma exist, or is it just something to scare people with ... much like heaven or hell?

B: It exists. And it operates for each and every one of us until we clearly see the world as it is, and create our actions to prevent bad karma from being generated.

M: So every voluntary action generates karma?

B: Yes, with emphasis on the word 'voluntary'.

M: How about the example of the person who does something with the expected end result of gaining personally but appearing to be generous and good?

B: If the action was good but gained the person status or position as the end result, it would depend on whether or not someone else was diminished in the process. This is where the whole idea of interdependence of all things comes into play, and the end result may generate unintended consequences.

M: So as long as my actions are involuntary, there is no penalty or reward? I'm confused.

B: Again, all actions carry some karma. Reacting in an inappropriate way to a situation without thinking it through does carry negative karma. If it is an involuntary action in say, self-defense, and you used more force than was necessary to save yourself, then there can be negative karma generated, even though there was no apparent voluntary action involved.

M: I guess it's safer to assume that every action carries a karmic value, then.

B: It is probably safer. Evaluating your external world correctly will minimize the problems that you generate for yourself in your life.

M: So if I evaluate all my actions in light of both what the real world requires, and what my Buddha Nature requires, then I will hopefully generate only what actions are necessary for the situation, and neither under-react nor over-react. That makes sense.

B: I do believe you understand that concept. It is a tough one to grasp in its entirety. Many people are taught by

various societies that there is both victim and perpetrator. In actuality, neither exists, since neither properly evaluated the correct response to their perceived outside world and both its karmic and actual results.

M: That's a difficult one to swallow. If there is no perpetrator and no victim, how can a society function?

B: It is society that generates these definitions for their own purposes. If everyone lived by the precepts in the Moral Disciplines and followed their Buddha Natures, there would be no need for words like justice, victim, or law at all, for that matter.

M: Somewhat of a utopian ideal, however.

B: Yes, it is. Human nature is difficult to overcome, and probably all of mankind will never adhere to such precepts and ideas. Therefore societies and legal systems will continue to flourish. But those individuals that do adhere, will find peace, happiness and contentment for themselves alone. Others will have to do the same for themselves ... or not.

M: As usual, much to think about. My time is up. I shall see you again.



## CONVERSATION TEN

M: In our last conversation, we spoke of the various things to meditate on and the difficulty of finding both the time and space for doing so. In thinking about it, living in the city doesn't leave much room for such meditation, does it?

B: Let me start with a little history.

In the beginning, things were much simpler. Nature was never far away, and the forest was only a short walk from your dwelling.

In addition, the historical Buddha was only teaching his first disciples, who already had the time to listen and meditate as they wished, since they were the Brahmins and ascetics, and of the highest caste in India at the time.

These two factors made it easy for his disciples to take as much time as they required for meditation and thinking. Subsequently, when his teachings gained broader acceptance, people found (as you have) that meditation wasn't as easy to come by if you had the social requirements of having a family, making a living and so forth.

This is where the monastic tradition came from. It became necessary to give non-Brahmins the place and the time to meditate; hence the isolated monasteries and the orders of monks and nuns. They then have the opportunity for the isolation and proper space in which to meditate if they choose to make a commitment of that kind. They are reliant on the goodwill of the people for their sustenance and thus have no need to produce anything for their existence.

M: But isn't this a form of being a parasite on their society?

B: Far from it. In return, they teach the Dharma as their order sees it, and pray for the well-being of the people that support them. Or they may be totally self-sufficient in the

more remote parts of where they live. They, in their own way, give as much as they are given and perhaps more.

M: OK, so they have the luxury of having the peace and quiet to be able to meditate. Most of us in this modern age don't have that kind of luxury to do so, much less take the time for it.

B: This is one of the great tragedies of the present time. However it is still possible, although at a cost to the seeker of solitude. There is not much space close in to where people work and live where one can be alone. Some seashore and some wilderness areas still are available, but even there it becomes difficult to find peace and solitude.

M: I tried that up in upstate New York a while back, but it was difficult to escape the airplanes and to get far enough away from cars and people to not be distracted.

B: It is a problem, yes, but not an impossible one. Have you had much luck with the Contemplations on the Body that we spoke of last time?

M: Yes and no. I find that my best times are very early in the morning, about two o'clock when there are minimal distractions. But even then, my mind just rebels at the idea that it has to concentrate on just one thing. It keeps jumping to other things that it associates with what I'm working on.

B: That is a common problem. Getting the mind to stay focused is one of the major problems with concentration and meditation. Is it getting any easier?

M: Boredom is the major problem. Just concentrating on one simple thing for a long period of time can be boring to my mind, and it starts to try to find other things to play with.

B: And then you do what?

M: As you suggested, I gently bring it back to what I was concentrating on, and try to make it stay there.

B: Good. That is the way that works best. Have you had any success in making it just quiet down totally?

M: Again, as you suggested, just mentally yelling at it sometimes will get it to stop for a short time, but it then takes off and starts up again. But it seems that the intervals of silence are getting longer.

B: That is good. I realize that the boredom is a major factor to active minds. But it is equally interesting that when you do get it to focus on one thing and concentrate all your energy on that singularity, that you find all kinds of details about it that would have totally escaped your view otherwise.

M: Yes, that's true. But it is just for a few moments, and then the mind takes off again.

B: You might try this:

When this happens, bring your focus back to the thing you are concentrating on, and then shift it to another part of the body, doing the same intense analysis on that. Good and bad. Pretty and ugly. Helpful or not helpful.

M: That may help. But I wonder about another question that has come to mind. Why is it that most people are so afraid to be alone with just themselves?

B: For the same reason that you are having difficulty with working on your mind. The world, and not just the modern one, has never allowed for people to take time to get used to being with themselves alone. As you have found, being alone with yourself can be a frightening thing for lots of people. Discovering what you

really think and act on can be really disconcerting and many cannot handle that.

M: I can see where that could be a problem.

B: It is far easier for people to keep all their thoughts externalized for the most part, and keep the inner things hidden, even from themselves. It is far easier to gather together with other like-minded individuals, profess to agree with whatever faith or cult has brought them together, and hang onto the idea that their thoughts and ideology will give them solace. They cling to an idea of joining their ancestors in an afterlife, and they claim a supernatural deity in common. They share this trait with the least civilized tribes in the Amazon rainforest, although the circumstances and secondary ideas vary. We are a tribal species, even at our most sophisticated levels of society. If you do not believe this, just go to a local sports bar during football season on a Sunday afternoon, and watch the tribal warriors rooting for THEIR team ... even though they have absolutely no connection to that actual team structure. None of this makes sense when you are alone with yourself and deal with your mind. Much of what your mind brings up in quiet times is in conflict with what you profess to believe in religion and morals, and it is far more comfortable just to not think about it.

M: I can see where this might be a problem for a lot of people, particularly those who profess to be even moderately religious.

B: Precisely why the Buddha tried to avoid the stigma of religion in his teachings. The Buddhist teachings only work their magic if we do not regard the people teaching them as anything but a teacher ... not a god or a representative of a god. But unfortunately, people do have a tendency to elevate both the religion's original proponent as a god and the

teachings emanating from them as gospel. They then elevate secondary teachers and 'prophets' to the same status. It is unfortunate that none of these will get them what they are looking for.

M: I think that most people feel that they can more associate with teachings that are given them as absolutes ... which from what you have told me, they are not.

B: Yes and no. Everyone has their own path, and take slightly different paths and time-lines to assimilate the impact of the teachings on themselves. Yet the goals and the processes to achieve those goals remain steadfast. A teacher of the original ideas that the Buddha proposed over two-thousand years ago cannot give you the answers that you are seeking ... just the way to find your answers. They exist only in your personal world, and work for you alone.

M: That's unfortunate, because even with the limited time that I've spent looking at this philosophy has given me a degree of calmness that I have not experienced before. People are starting to ask me what brand of tranquilizer I'm taking.

B: And you will have to endure that even more as time goes on, so long as you progress along your path.

M: Oh, I don't mind, I regard it as a compliment. It's even funny sometimes listening to them as they try to not couch it in terms that they think may be too personal.

B: As time goes on, you'll find that you enjoy your solitude more than social gatherings, and the number of people that you can stand to be with and call friends will shrink to only a few.

M: That's already starting to happen. And it's okay. Actually I'm beginning to enjoy not having to put up with what I

now see is unnecessary chatter about things that don't matter. My quiet times become more necessary and solitude is becoming a much better friend.

B: And how do you feel about that?

M: It's OK. I don't mind. It leaves me more time to do what I need to do without interruption ... both my writing and meditation.

B: Getting back to your concentration exercises, you might now start to broaden your field of things to concentrate on. This will also help to dispel the boredom that your mind keeps coming up with.

Starting with the breathing exercise, shift to other parts of the body, and then to a single object in the area, not just the body. Just one item in the room.

Concentrate on it, looking at it, turning it around in your mind, examining all its facets, its form, texture, color and composition in as much detail as you can muster. But do not get wrapped up in anything but what your senses are delivering to you. When these come up, just acknowledge them and return to the primary contemplation object.

Form no assumptions, no ideas about it, no history, nothing except the object itself as it is in this instant.

M: So I can start to go outside the body for this?

B: Yes, after you have gotten to a point where you can do this for a considerable time. And once you have examined this object in as much detail as you can, you can also start to include how you feel about it. None of its history or its past, only and specifically how you feel about it. That will be positive, negative, or neutral. Yes, I know, there is degree associated with these feelings, but for the time being, just identify these general categories.

You will find that the mind will try to amplify those feelings with history and ideas, but here is where you must reject that and cause the mind to concentrate on

just the object and the broad categories of how you feel about it.

M: That's interesting, because I have seen that the mind will try to add all kinds of things onto the basic object ... much of which may not be either relevant or correct.

B: That is precisely why you do these exercises. The result we are aiming for is to force the mind into the process of providing only what it knows to be true through observation, not what it has heard or read or learned from other sources unless you specifically ask for it.

M: But isn't some of this other stuff relevant? Otherwise why remember it?

B: Some occasionally is. I am sure you will agree that the idea that a stove is hot and can burn you is a valid concept. This, however, is empirical data that you have learned for yourself. I know of almost no one that has ever really learned about a hot stove without being burned or close to it at some point in his or her early life.

M: OK, so empirical data that you learn for yourself is valid?

B: Again, yes and no. Not entirely. As an example, making an assumption that someone who is a different race than yourself is out to harm you is never entirely valid, even though you may have had an experience where such an event happened. But to make a blanket assumption that anyone of that skin color or religion is guilty before the fact of trying to harm you, is of course invalid. You must examine all your empirical data for factual basis, and not any conclusions that may have been made previously.

M: So things that I have assumed and that the mind generates in response to sensory inputs have to be thrown out?

B: Again, not entirely. I am pointing out that a stove may be cold, or that different race person is not interested in you at all. But you must identify as much as you can about the situation without any bias or preconceived notions about the situation before making a conclusion. Far too often, you act on incorrect data and make a decision that does more harm to both you and your surroundings than good.

M: So how does this identification of feeling enter into this?

B: Feeling generates much of what we call the 'flight or fight' reflex reaction to situations. What controlling feeling does is allow you to disconnect those two things ... feeling and object. The feeling is almost always based on either history or preconceived ideas about something. A good example would be trying to pet a wild raccoon. While it may appear to be cute and cuddly and you feel warm feelings towards it, chances are it would react violently and try to bite and claw you. It only takes once for you to learn that this is not a great thing to attempt. Of course, if someone has a pet raccoon that has been tamed, then you have to modify your responses.

M: So you're saying that the only thing that I can accept for certain is my own empirical data from my senses, and the history resulting from that?

B: Precisely. And it also requires that you disconnect any feelings that you have for whatever your senses have delivered to you. They can still be allowed to be there, but they must be disconnected from your evaluation process. You may feel sympathy for someone else but you do not act on that alone. There may be other circumstances that enter into the situation which sympathy would negatively impact. Acting on the feeling alone is never the right thing to do.



M: But I've heard before that a 'gut feeling' that people get about a situation is the right thing to act on. In fact, I think you said as much earlier in our discussions.

B: Yes, and I said at the time that you could have an intuition that a situation was either good, bad or indifferent. This was merely a way of restating the same principle in a different way. You will find multiple instances of this throughout the teachings, where the Buddha used 'expedient means' to get the point across to those who needed them.

M: Ah. So does that mean we're now in the process of beginning to do what you have said before, of looking at things as they really are, not what we want them to be.

B: Correct. This begins the process. But there is far more than just feelings that the mind generates along with the identification of the object.

M: I'm sure there is. I'm already seeing that some of what I think about my world isn't really what's true. Much of it is assumptions or things that I've heard from others or read somewhere.

B: For the time being, we must limit ourselves to just the objective evaluation, and the feelings that we generate towards it. When we get into more advanced concepts with the mind, there will be other things to consider, but for now this is enough. It is necessary to see correctly what the situation is, rather than what we think it should be.

M: So I should never take anyone else's word for any situation or person?

B: I believe that there was a late twentieth century saying ... "Trust but Verify." This is equally true for dealing with the mind.

M: OK. So I can accept another viewpoint, but I'm required to verify its accuracy for myself?

B: Yes. That is the concept in a nutshell. Other ideas and concepts from others, and even from your own mind's generation have to be run through a gauntlet of checking their truth before using them to form a plan of action of any kind.

M: That makes it a lot clearer. I thank you for the clarification.

B: You are welcome. Any time.

## CONVERSATION ELEVEN

M: In our last conversation, we were talking about starting to see things as they really are, not as we would like them to be. Why is this so essential?

B: You have just asked one of the most fundamental questions in the Buddhist Practice.

It leads back to the concept of Right View, which is part of the Wisdom section of the EightFold Path. This is a subject that many people have a great deal of trouble with.

M: I can see why, if it is connected to the question of reality.

B: Let me go back and try to explain a little more in detail.

The Four Noble Truths contain the essence of the entire practice. The EightFold Path is the means to understand completely the Four Noble Truths.

Right View is both the beginning and the end of the EightFold Path.

M: How can something be both a beginning and an end?

B: Because it is ... mainly in degree, but also in the viewpoint.

We begin with Right View to allow us an overview of the road ahead, and serve as guide to direct our journey.

There are actually two forms of Right View ... the Mundane Right View, and the Superior Right View. The kind we are concerned with at the outset is the Mundane Right View.

This first incarnation of Right View involves the understanding of kamma (*karma*) and the idea of karmic actions.

If you remember from earlier, karma is the result of voluntary action. It can be good, bad, or indifferent. The Buddha described it as wholesome or unwholesome. Voluntary actions that do harm to yourself and others are regarded as unwholesome, and those that help yourself and others in a positive way are called wholesome.

Let me quote from Bikkhu Bodhi's text, "The Noble EightFold Path."

... we find that kamma is first distinguished as unwholesome (*akusala*) and wholesome (*kusala*). Unwholesome kamma is action that is morally blameworthy, detrimental to spiritual development, and conducive to suffering for oneself and

others. Wholesome kamma, on the other hand, is action that is morally commendable, helpful to spiritual growth, and productive of benefits for oneself and others.

M: That seems pretty straightforward. You could use that definition for any description of morality for the most part.

B: And it is indeed that. But defining it in terms of kamma (karma) is unique to Buddhism. For the time being, I will use the term 'karma' instead of 'kamma' because it is better understood in the Western World.

If you recall, we talked briefly about the Moral Discipline group of the Path, that being Right Action, Right Speech, and Right Livelihood.

M: This is the part about no killing, stealing, incorrect speech, and what to do for a living?

B: Yes. The foundation of karma is linked to how we conduct ourselves in the outside world. For each of the parts of the Moral Discipline section, we have real actions related to them that are external to ourselves.

Each of these actions is generated by a thought prior to our performing them. That thought has roots, which are wholesome or unwholesome. Negative thoughts have roots based on greed, aversion or delusion. Positive thoughts are the inverse of this.

M: I remember the greed part, but aversion and delusion?

B: Very well. Just to refresh your memory, I shall quote from Bikkhu Bodhi again:

... The most basic defilements are the triad of greed, aversion, and delusion. Greed (*lobha*) is self-centered desire: the desire for pleasure and possessions, the drive for survival, the urge to bolster the sense of ego with power, status, and prestige. Aversion (*dosa*) signifies the response of negation, expressed as rejection, irritation, condemnation, hatred, enmity, anger, and violence. Delusion (*moha*) means mental darkness: the thick coat of insensitivity which blocks out clear understanding.

Defilements are the same as root passions or emotions. As you can see, these three root causes for action are all negative, and

produce negative karma when the actions that they generate go forth into the external world.

They have counterparts of positive causes. Bikkhu Bodhi again:

The three wholesome roots are their opposites, expressed negatively in the old Indian fashion as non-greed (*alobha*), non-aversion (*adosa*), and non-delusion (*amoha*). Though these are negatively designated, they signify not merely the absence of defilements but the corresponding virtues. Non-greed implies renunciation, detachment, and generosity; non-aversion implies loving kindness, sympathy, and gentleness; and non-delusion implies wisdom. Any action originating from these roots is a wholesome kamma.

M: So I can counter the unwholesome karma by generating positive karma?

B: In a way. You have to understand that karma which is generated by a volitional action with the roots we have talked about, will manifest itself at some point in the same manner that it was created. It might be compared to the physics concept of kinetic or potential energy. If you generate kinetic (dynamic) energy, and then store it (potential), when it returns to kinetic, it manifests in the same manner in which it was created. If you stretch a spring, then hold it ... that is potential energy. You put forth the energy to stretch it, and holding it stretched keeps that potential energy in the spring. Once you release it, the spring returns to its original form, releasing the energy in the form of momentum.

Karma may be seen in much the same way. Generating karma is the active part, and it is thrown into the universe. Once it returns, it possesses the same energy and direction with which it was originated.

So karma, when it returns, possesses the same ethical qualities as when it was generated.

M: Finally that all makes sense. I think I understand now.

B: There is one more thing about karma that you need to know. It is something that may not be evident immediately. The timeline for it returning is not obvious. And it is open to question as to whether it spans multiple lifetimes or not.

M: We talked some about this before. But how does this relate to Right

View?

B: You now have the idea behind Mundane Right View. It is the principle of karma. Understanding that and using it is the fundamental concept of Mundane Right View.

M: That's it? That's all there is to Mundane Right View?

B: Well, the devil is in the details, as they say. Understanding it logically is one thing, and putting it into practice is another. At this stage, realizing that karma is the 'stick' for compliance with the Moral Discipline parts of the EightFold Path is the major objective. It is much like divine wrath over on the religious side of the moral world. 'God is going to get you for that!' Except that God is not a factor here ... only yourself and the karmic boomerang.

M: Interesting connection. You said that there was another type of Right View?

B: Yes. The Superior Right View only occurs when you totally accept and understand in depth the concepts of the Four Noble Truths. This means that you not only accept the truth of their statement, but understand implicitly their meaning within your own life. This comes later in the process. There is a lot to do before then.

M: OK. I'll accept that ... So the Four Noble Truths are at the basis of Right View?

B: Yes. Actually they are at the heart of the entire EightFold Path. Right now you have only a foggy view of what they mean, even though you may subscribe to their truthfulness. Later on in the process, you will find an intrinsic and intuitive understanding of them that goes much deeper than the concepts you now possess.

M: I think I conceptually get them at some level. But I'm still having trouble with the 'all is suffering' part. I understand that if you accept that everything is suffering, then the other three Truths follow. But I guess I'm hung up on the 'everything' part.

B: That is easy to do. We all like to think that we're happy and going through life without a care. Unfortunately, that is not the case.

Let us look at this a slightly different way.

If we say that everything is impermanent, then nothing lasts. Since nothing lasts, everything is changing ... from the instantaneous to the almost forever. But changing it is. Nothing is permanent.

M: I get that conceptually, but how is that related to suffering?

B: Since nothing is permanent, then at some point we have to lose things or people or they change into something that we no longer can have or want. This can be not only physical things, but ideas that we have or concepts that we hold dear or even people. It even applies to our concept of self and the 'soul'.

M: Hold on. OK, everything changes. That I get. Everything external to me changes. And I may not get to keep these external things. Or even internal things. But I was always brought up to think that there was something more than just the physical me. I was taught that there was an 'immortal soul' that went off into the great beyond when the physical body gave out. Are you telling me that there is no such thing?

B: I could tell you that, but chances are that you would reject it because you want to believe the opposite.

But let us do a logical exercise.

You will admit that there is nothing permanent in our external universe or in our minds. The external is always physically changing, and we are always mentally changing. Is this correct?

M: I suppose so.

B: Why would there be something immortal or permanent or eternal if nothing else in our external universe or our minds is? We have said that there is nothing permanent. Period. Right?

M: But it has been proven that there is a thing called entropy where matter changes into energy, and visa versa. It is never lost. Isn't this a form of an eternal situation?

B: I never said that the energy/matter was ever lost. I merely said that it was eternally changing. As someone said once ... 'The only thing constant is change.' In fact, it is the ONLY constant in the universe

... including ourselves.

M: But isn't the concept of the soul outside of the realm of the physical universe? Couldn't it exist in some other dimension?

B: I suppose it is possible, but we cannot yet prove that. If you wanted to believe that, you would have to take it on faith. And I believe you told me that you could not take the dogma that you were given in your early religious training, and stopped going to church because they required you to take this on faith. Is this not correct?

M: Uh... yes. But the idea of not having a soul is something that is hard to take at this point.

B: I am just trying to show that if you look at the world the way it is, and look into your mind the way it is, you are forced to admit that neither has any permanence. The world is constantly in flux and changing, as is your mind.

You are forming new ideas, new theories, new appreciations, and discarding old ones all the time. There is no bedrock base theory or example that you can find to show permanence.

If this is true, then what evidence can you give that something is present that violates everything that you claim to agree with. The only way that you can believe in an immortal soul, is to make an exception to the impermanence that you see in all things and yourself. And if you make that exception, then there must be other exceptions, and the entire idea goes out the window. It is no longer a constant.

By the way, if you can find an exception to the law of impermanence, I really would like to hear it. I have asked this question for years and yet to have a valid answer.

M: I go back to the idea of entropy where there is no destruction of the matter/energy of the universe. It is eternal as far as we know.

B: Perhaps. But the forms in which it occurs are constantly changing, and that is what we in our physical universe and our minds have to deal with. It may be true that the matter/energy combination is infinite in longevity, but its forms and appearances in what we have to deal with are constantly impermanent.

The historical Buddha had no idea of entropy, hence he never had



the opportunity to address this. He was focused the universe as he saw it at the time, which still holds true to our existence today.

M: You have a knack for logically tearing apart my ideas. I can logically agree with you, but my mind is yammering at a staggering rate.

B: As it will on a number of issues yet to come. Do you agree that there are no exceptions to impermanence?

M: Logically, yes. But I would like to think that there is some legacy to my life.

B: Oh, there is. If you follow the path and become enlightened, your example will cause others to alter their behavior and thinking as well. And this will begin to impel others to search for the path. This would be your legacy.

M: My thoughts just keep pretzeling. True, I said that I agreed with the concept of impermanence, and yet here I am trying to make an argument for something that I would have to take on faith, and yet I have said that I take nothing on faith.

B: I can commiserate with you on that. I went through the same convolutions years ago, before I truly understood most of the teachings.

Let me quote once again from Bikkhu Bodhi with something that may shed light on this part of the subject.

What we are, the Buddha teaches, is a set of five aggregates—material form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness—all connected with clinging. We are the five and the five are us. Whatever we identify with, whatever we hold to as our self, falls within the set of five aggregates. Together these five aggregates generate the whole array of thoughts, emotions, ideas, and dispositions in which we dwell, “our world.”

We want to hang onto these five aggregates because they seem to represent solidarity and permanence in many instances. But since they are impermanent, when they change we suffer because we wanted them to stay the same. The idea of 'self' being permanent in light of the fact that all the factors that make up 'self' are impermanent causes a paradox that has to be resolved. Many

people cannot resolve it. And since the 'soul' is part of 'self', then how can a 'soul' be permanent, when all the factors that make it up are impermanent?

M: I'm going to have to really mull this one over. It throws a monkey wrench into a lot of long-held ideas.

B: I am sure you will resolve it.

M: You and the Bikkhu have spoken of the five aggregates. Could you go into a little more detail on this?

B: Certainly. The five aggregates consist of material form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. You usually only get to see the last two in operation, if then. Material form is the senses, including the mind. You gather sense information and store it. Then the mind adds a feeling to that sense information ... good, bad, or indifferent. Perception then comes along and conglomerates the sense information and feelings into an identification of an object or event that the senses are picking up. Mental formations combine perceptions with archive experience to form a unified concept of what you are getting from the senses. Consciousness is the evaluation of those mental formations that leads to action. Note that the mind itself can come up with sense information as in memories that will trigger the entire chain as if an actual sense triggered it. This leads to sleepless nights and lots of unnecessary roughness in your head.

M: Wow. It's a five-step process. I never thought about it that way before. And the idea that the mind can trigger the entire process on its own is ... well, mind-boggling.

B: Again, it is true, as you will find out, once you have time to think about it.

Most of the suffering that we endure is unnecessary and totally useless. I think that you are beginning to see that.

M: No kidding. It has opened up an entire new way of looking at what

I'm doing with my life already. And it gives me a lot of things to think about and accept eventually. Nothing that you have said so far has been proven wrong.

B: Because it is not. It is truth. The dharma is truth.

And one of the things that the historical Buddha stressed is that you have to question everything that you learn in this practice until you understand for yourself that it is true. Nothing can be taken on faith as true until you yourself can understand that it is. Everything that I have said may be wrong for you, or it may spur you on to work on it until you understand it. There is nothing taken on faith in this practice.

M: I'm beginning to understand that, although the possibility that everything you've said might be wrong also requires that I prove that it is wrong ... which I cannot do.

B: Even those of us that have made progress on the path must question everything that we do and say. It becomes easier the longer that we do it, but there is still that nagging doubt occasionally that this practice doesn't work. But then we think about it, and the doubt goes away. While we do not believe that we have faith in it, we have certainty that what we are doing is right for us.

M: Couldn't that certainty be called faith?

B: Some might, but it would not be true, because in our case, we have proven to ourselves that this is true ... and we are not taking it on faith. There are those that say that they have certainty in supernatural beliefs, but they have never proven the factuality of those beliefs. We in the Buddhist practice have. It is logically derived.

M: Wait a minute. A devout Moslem or fundamentalist Christian would tell you that they have proven for themselves that what they believe in is actually true.

B: Unfortunately, what they have done is to convince themselves that what they have faith in, is concretely true. And if they choose to believe that, it is all right because it works for them. However, if they look at the reality of what they believe, they will

find that their 'truths' are unprovable, and that it is unsupported faith that their beliefs are based on.

In our practice, each element of the Four Noble Truths and the EightFold Path is proven to ourselves until we know for certain that an empirical look at what we believe is backed up by actual proof from our own lives.

M: I don't know whether to thank you or swear at you for giving me another sleepless night. But I think I'll thank you.

B: I appreciate your interest. It is seldom that someone asks so many in-depth questions that require me to answer to the best of my ability.

M: It must be my journalistic mind that does that.

B: Or your inquisitive inner being. Take care.

## CONVERSATION TWELVE

M: I am so looking forward to these talks. Each time I go away with both more understanding and more questions.

B: It is good that you have questions. I hope that you are also challenging that which you understand so far. It is important that you work with both the questions and the challenges.

M: I have plenty of both. It seems that for every bit of understanding, I come up with at least as many questions and challenges.

B: It is all part of the process.

M: I was reading more of Bikkhu Bodhi's EightFold Path, and I'm getting bogged down in the idea of Right Intention. Can you give me some insight into this?

B: I will try.

Right Intention is a link between Right View, which we discussed earlier, and the Moral Discipline parts of the Path.

If you do not have the right view of the world, it will color your intentions about how to deal with it, and the actions influenced with these intentions. If you act externally, it is driven usually by an intent. That intent is in turn influenced by your views of what the real world does and looks like.

Right Intent consists of three parts, Intention of Renunciation, Intention of Good Will and Intention of Harmlessness.

Intention of Renunciation deals with those views and thoughts that are generated by desire. It boils down to the concept of wanting more than we need, and the lust and obsession of getting more. We cannot repress this aspect of our minds, hence we have to deal with making it renounce and eliminate these desires that lead only to harm for ourselves and others.

M: Easier said than done, I'm sure.

B: No one ever said it was going to be easy. This goes against our nature. We are wired at birth to have these desires and the requirement for more of almost everything. But in that acquisition of 'more', we run headlong into the social constructs and others

who are desirous of the same thing. Since there is usually a limited supply of that which we desire, it leads to conflict. If we only take what we need, and not more because we can, we alleviate the conflict.

The Intention of Renunciation is designed to counter this tendency to acquire more than we need. Bikkhu Bodhi says it in a nutshell:

The tool the Buddha holds out to free the mind from desire is understanding. Real renunciation is not a matter of compelling ourselves to give up things still inwardly cherished, but of changing our perspective on them so that they no longer bind us. When we understand the nature of desire, when we investigate it closely with keen attention, desire falls away by itself, without need for struggle.

The way of the world is desire and the accumulation of 'more'. This only leads to suffering and pain when the desire is not fulfilled or, once fulfilled, it changes or is lost.

M: That's an interesting way of putting it. So if I can keep from desiring more than I need for my survival, I'll get more enlightened?

B: Perhaps a little. But the goal here is to keep from having your actions in the outside world lead to conflict and suffering for yourself or others. Remember that we are at this point trying to stop our views of the world from influencing our actions and that to do this, we have to actively look at what desire does to us in terms of influencing our actions.

M: So we're shining a light on why we do things? And altering how we do them when we see?

B: Partially correct. But we are not dealing with the fundamental views of reality quite yet ... we are just keeping them from acting out and causing us grief.

M: OK, I believe you said that there were two more Intentions here.

B: Yes. We have spoken about the first one, the Intention of Renunciation which dealt with desire and lust. The second one is the Intention of Good Will. This Intention counteracts the basic tendency of Ill Will. Ill Will is the result of hatred, anger, jealousy and a host of similar intents based on

aversion ... which is a whole host of these negative intents. In this Intention, to counter aversions, we substitute Good Will for the Ill Will. In Biblical terms, it would be to 'love thy enemy', or in a more mundane idiom, to kill your enemy with kindness ... although there is still an element of hatred in those statements. Substituting Good Will for Ill Will means seeing that your hatred or disgust or whatever will get you nothing but results from your actions that are negative and cause you suffering. True Good Will means realizing that Ill Will is running and intentionally substituting positive thoughts about that which you are intent on hating or angry at. This can be realizing where the other person or thing is coming from, and appreciating that viewpoint, as an example.

M: And the third?

B: The third of the Intentions is the Intention of Harmlessness. This one is the projection of harm onto someone or something else because of our own violent or angry thoughts. In a way, it is a subset of Ill Will, but this deals with the emotional side of the anger and violence that we sometimes generate in our minds against others. In this case, we actively substitute doing no harm, and indeed substitute loving kindness and compassion for those that our violent thoughts are directed against.

M: That is a tough one to deal with, since you are usually in the heat of the emotion precisely at the time you need to deal with it.

B: Precisely. And the meditative process will eventually see these things and allow you to break that cycle of view/intent/action.

M: I think I'm beginning to see the chain of events here. If my view of reality is flawed, then my intent to act on anything may also be flawed, hence the action will be wrong.

B: Precisely.

M: But in order to alter my view of reality to 'reality' itself, I don't see yet.

B: That will come in time. There are other parts of the Path that now come into play. While some say that all the parts of the EightFold

Path are equally at work in this process, others have suggested that you have to start somewhere and there may be a logical sequence to study it.

Starting with Right View that deals with the intellectual analysis of the Four Noble Truths, we then progress to Right Intent, which begins to alter our intentions when the mind comes up with actions based on Right View.

The Moral Disciplines come into play simultaneously here, in that Right Action, Right Speech, and Right Livelihood modify our dealings with the outside reality and, because of this more harmonious interaction, allows us to more accurately see what we're doing.

The ones that we have not spoken of yet, are the Concentration section, consisting of Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

M: If I remember Bikkhu Bodhi rightly, I've begun to stick my toe in the water on these, I think.

B: Yes. The exercises such as the Breathing Exercise are indeed a step into these three areas. But it is only a step. Your focus will shift as you progress. And the idea that all eight parts of the Path interact will become clearer as you progress.

M: Could you give me an overview of the Concentration Division?

B: Certainly. We start with Right Effort.

Any action requires effort. That effort can be either negative or positive. Negative energy fuels negative actions that cause karma, while positive energy funds positive actions relating to generosity, understanding and liberation from suffering.

This positive energy to progress with other parts of the Path is especially important. It must be based on Right View (or at least your concept of what the Four Noble Truths truly mean) and Right Intention, which at a current superficial level, allow you to modify your behavior ... while not yet discovering and working on the root causes of why the mind views reality the way it does. At this point we are just trying to halt or modify the process of root/intention/action.



M: So Right Effort is involved in getting the energy to support the rest of the Path?

B: Yes, while Right Mindfulness directs us to the point at which we should focus our minds, Right Concentration allows us the laser focus on what the mind is doing at the root levels of its actions ... those that cause us to generate actions to begin with.

M: It truly is Science of Mind, isn't it.

B: It really is. There are psychological principles involved in this practice that the psychology people are only now coming to grips with ... but which devotees of the Buddha have known for two-and-a-half millenia. They find it almost amusing that modern psychology is only now getting around to seeing the mind as they do.

M: But the psychologists are looking at it from a different viewpoint ... one where experiment and theory prevail, not what they would call superstition and religion.

B: They may approach it however they please, and call it what they want. It does not alter the fact that what they are finding out, Buddhist practitioners have known for a long time ... although they may not express it in the same terms. It still arrives at the same conclusions.

M: Well, the goal of modern psychology is to give people a happier existence, isn't it?

B: Presumably. But it leaves much to be desired at its present level. And there is as much dogma and overlay in psychology as there is in religion that in many cases results in poor outcomes, and psychotropic drug solutions. Buddhist practice, however, 'cuts to the chase' and provides a clear and viable method towards that happier existence they speak of.

M: It doesn't sound like you have much regard for modern medical science.

B: It is not that I do not appreciate modern medicine. It helps immensely with fixing or alleviating what ills befall the body.

I do have reservations, however, on trusting medicine to ever fix the mind from the outside. They may alter it medically, but it is usually temporary and does not provide the in-depth solution to finding that happier existence. Being drugged does not alter the basic mind patterns that caused the unhappiness to begin with.

M: I think I agree with you that any permanent solution to finding happiness is altogether internal to the mind and its perceptions of reality.

B: It can happen permanently no other way.

M: You speak as if the psychological profession is almost irrelevant.

B: I did not say that. I merely said that practitioners of Buddhism had a better way of accomplishing the happiness that people seek. For some people, who do not want to put forth the effort, psycho-pharmaceuticals are the answer. Others just want absolution for how their thought processes work from their therapist.

M: How do you regard other scientific inquiry, then? Is it necessary for us to do research at all?

B: Most scientific breakthroughs are the result of curiosity or obsession for finding out how things work and why they do what they do. From a Buddhist perspective, much of it is irrelevant to what the practice requires. While many of the comforts that we enjoy today are the results of someone's obsessive curiosity or just plain accident, they do not truly impact the work that we do on our own minds with this practice.

I have no problem with science and research. I just consider it a sidebar to getting to the problems of what we do to ourselves in our minds. That is what is ultimately important.

The Buddha stated that it was unimportant to think on issues that were unanswerable (at least to him.) Such things as 'Do I exist?' or 'What happens to me when I die?' are exercises in futility, since there is really no answer and contemplating them would be a waste of time, leading to no improvement in your happiness.

M: So all of science you consider to be a sideshow?

B: In a manner of speaking, that is true. Why? Because it is of no real benefit to us making ourselves internally happier. In many cases, the science merely leads to more questions that it answers. How the universe began is not as important as how I view the reality that I have to deal with every day and how to make my mind allow me to be happy.

M: So as a profession, science would not be a livelihood that many Buddhists would take on?

B: I did not say that. What profession people choose is their own doing. What I did say was that science is incidental to Buddhist practice. That is all.

<pause>

Actually, that is not all. If that science is directed at areas that will harm people or lead to their destruction, then the precept of Right Livelihood comes into play, and it would violate the EightFold Path's practice.

M: But some would say 'Well, if I don't do it, someone else will, and I won't get the recognition or the fame or the money that goes with the discovery.'

B: Ah, do you understand what you just said? You just negated your own premise.

M: Huh?

B: By justifying it for fame and money and recognition, you just put the results of the science for the individual into greed, pride and desire.

M: Oh, I guess I did. But those things are what drive many people to do this work.

B: And this work, when directed at negative impacts for humanity, falls into these negative reasons for doing it. If it is a conflict within the individual, then they should find another line of work ... not succumb to the siren call of money and fame.

M: That's a very moralistic view of it. Not many people would be able to

do as you say.

B: Let me ask you a question, then. How many wars have been started by Buddhists? How many times can you recall that Buddhists have done things that impacted humanity negatively?

M: I'd have to look at that. I suspect that your question implies that there are very few if any at all.

B: Precisely. But that moralistic view which you say that we possess is the very thing that makes my preceding question so relevant. I would propose that it is religious or political ideology that has driven most if not all of the wars and conflicts on a national scale throughout history. For some conquerors, it is just plain lust for power and greed that drive them. But in all these cases these are not things that true Buddhist practitioners would do. While Buddhists will defend themselves, they would never start a war.

M: That is something that I have thought about before and wondered about ... without the Buddhist perspective, of course. It is a telling statistic about the wars started by Buddhists, however, if proven true.

B: As I said many times, challenge everything that I am telling you. Do not believe any of what I have said until you prove it for yourself. If you disagree with the war premise, go and check it out yourself. I will not take offense if you do ... indeed, I will praise you for doing so.

M: That's one of the things that attracts me to this practice at this point. It is the challenge of never taking things on faith that intrigues me. That concept is so totally lacking in most major religions.

B: I hope that you are not including the Buddhist Religions in that statement. While some Buddhist sects diverge into what many would call religion, they only do so to provide a path back to the basic teachings that we have been talking about.

M: I think I understand that. But we have diverged away from the discussion of Right Effort.

B: We have and we have not.

Right Effort must be directed at supporting the EightFold Path, not detracting from it. Right Effort provides the energy to support Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration, which follow.

M: So Right Effort has to be channeled into positive support for the Path, not diverted to negative emotions or processes. That gets back to Right View and Right Intent, doesn't it?

B: It absolutely does. Using Right Intent to modify actions requires Right Effort to make sure that we provide the energy to do so. All the intent in the universe is useless without the energy to carry out that intent. Just make sure that the intent and the energy are directed positively.

M: I think I begin to understand. I will have to go back and reread Bikkhu Bodhi once more ... which I am sure will lead to more questions. Thank you again for your time and expertise.

B: It is my pleasure. I am here as long as you need to talk.

## CONVERSATION THIRTEEN

M: It is good to see you again. I am enjoying these visits more each time that we get together.

B: It is my pleasure as well. It is a rare pleasure to find such an inquisitive mind.

M: I can be no other way. But I do have some questions that are not directly related to what we have been speaking of, but, I guess, are quite related. At some point, we spoke of the inter-relatedness of all things, and I was wondering if you could talk a little more about that.

B: Of course. That all things are inter-related and intimately intertwined is probably the most fundamental of concepts in the Buddhist practice.

It comes from a realization not just at the intellectual level, but from the innermost part of our being that we are all not only interconnected in a spiritual sense, but in a physical sense as well.

As Carl Sagan said many times, "We are all star stuff." That is totally true. We are made up of the same atoms and molecules and atomic particles as anything else that you can name. We absorb and send off energy waves; we see light photons that are emitted from other things; and we sit on top of an organic food chain that starts with bacteria that eat the raw materials of which the earth is made. How can we not be interconnected?

M: There are those that claim that man ... or humans ... are created by a God and therefore not subject to this inter-connectedness. We're special.

B: Any logical thinker will put this myth to rest. We are born much the same as any other mammal on the planet. We follow the almost similar process of egg to entity to death as any other life form. If there are those who want to believe in divine right of dominion and superiority, that is their right, but everything around them is disputing this idea every second of their existence. We are geared from conception to follow most of the same rules as every other living thing on the planet. We are born, we die, we get sick, and we eat like every other thing on earth. How can we not be interconnected and directly and intimately tied to every other thing on this planet? It makes no sense to think otherwise.

M: Well, they claim that if God could create us, he could have made all the rest of this to make us feel as if we evolved, but in reality the entire universe may be less than six thousand years old.

B: And this is based on what?

M: As I understand it, by calculating the times given in the Christian Bible for the lifespans of various people going back to Adam and Eve.

B: And the Bible is based on what?

M: As I understand it, the word of God, as shown to man.

B: Is man fallible?

M: Of course.

B: And the Bible is infallible?

M: So it is claimed.

B: So we have man, who is fallible, writing down what they think God has revealed, and that becomes infallible?

M: That seems to be the sequence.

B: And you do not see the oxymoronic value in that statement?

M: I'm just pointing out what others believe. It isn't my personal belief.

B: And I am thinking that you are invested at some level in this concept, otherwise you would not be bringing it up.

M: I suppose that if you held my feet to the fire, I'd have to agree with you on that, although I'm not a religious person by any means.

B: I understand, and did not mean to back you into a corner. But if you take the infallibility of the Bible as true, then you have to get into the realm of faith to explain much of what is contained therein.

Buddhism allows no such ... how do you say ... 'wiggle room.' We are required to analyze and prove any concepts that we accept. There is no room for faith. All that we are taught must survive the harsh light of reason and become for us our personal tenet of understanding. Even the words of the Buddha must be proven by each and every believer for themselves to be effective.

The mind is lazy. It would much rather take things on faith than having to reason them out for itself. But that is one of the problems with the mind. It also accepts a lot of other garbage as faith or verbatim as well. Religious concepts are but a part of what it takes in and uses to create delusion, ignorance and desire.

M: Aren't we taking on faith that the Four Noble Truths are correct when we start on this path to enlightenment?

B: Ah ... you have me there. But in order to truly accept the Four Noble Truths, you have to prove them to yourself. If at the beginning, they sound reasonable, then you are accepting them not blindly, but you have done a preliminary evaluation and found them to be rational. Granted, you may not understand the intricacies of their meaning, but it is not acceptance by blind faith.

I would say that if Buddhism was analogous to geometry, perhaps, that you could say that the Four Noble Truths, and the EightFold Path as well, are theorems that have to be proven by a set of repeatable, logical steps ... each of which can be justified and accepted. And the EightFold Path, if followed, can be proven to provide a documented route to happiness.

M: That's interesting. Buddhism analogous to geometry.

B: It is indeed. But it is just as systematic and just as provable through logic and scientific query principles. It is why it is called the Science of Mind.

M: So the rest of this religious stuff is bunk?

B: Far from it. For many people, religion is a necessity in their daily lives. It provides guidance; it keeps them on a 'straight and narrow' path without which they would swing wildly in their behavior in the world and society. It is religion that in many parts of the world prevents society from devolving into anarchy and violence. It is hardwired into most people that there is always a bigger dog out there somewhere that will exert dominance over them if they screw up ... pardon the vernacular.

M: But you're saying that this is not the case; that they're not really happy; and that the cycle of suffering can be broken, even for them?

B: Absolutely. But breaking that orthodoxy of faith is extremely difficult if there have been years of indoctrination and they are surrounded by others all saying the same thing.

M: That's a tough one. I seem to recall a phrase from somewhere ... "Blinded by faith." That seems to fit here.

B: It does indeed. Or "None are so blind as those who will not see."

M: Very apropos. From interconnectedness to faith in ten minutes ... that's what is called a 'wide ranging conversation'.

B: But those two ideas are not very far apart ... or we would never have logically gotten here. As an aside, there have been medical and psychological studies on Buddhist monks using brain scans. There is verifiable proof that the brain changes its modes of operation dramatically when the monks went into a meditative state.

M: And this proves ... ?

B: Only that there is a significant calming of the mind activity in meditation. I believe that this is the 'quieting of the mind' that Buddhism requires for getting to Nirvana and the peace it represents.



M: And how about reincarnation? I believe that the historical Buddha believed in reincarnation and the return of karma to future beings.

B: And you would be entirely correct to think this. However, there is a difference of opinion about whether it was the result of not understanding the inheritance of DNA in regards to personality traits, or that reincarnation actually exists.

M: But if I recall correctly, the historical Buddha said, or at least implied, that you could be reincarnated as a newt, or a mole, or another human.

B: And you would be correct in recalling it this way.

In trying to read the earlier sutras, prior to the Lotus Sutra, you have to remember that the historical Buddha was using something called 'Expedient Means.' This is where you tailor a concept of the teachings in terms that the people that you are teaching will understand, using metaphor and hyperbole. In reading the original sutras, you also have to understand the context of the people and civilization in which they were being taught. If you do not give this credence, much of the time you will misinterpret what the sutra is saying. In many cases, the local religion prior to Buddhist influence was based on ancestor worship, and it was probably simpler to get the point across and use their previous belief by couching it in terms and metaphors that they would readily understand.

If you want to call it co-opting the existing religion or belief structure so as to get them on the path to enlightenment, that is probably accurate.

A classic example of this would be Tibetan Buddhism, which incorporates not only ancestor worship, and reincarnation, but incorporates many of the previous aspects of the previously existing Tantric religion such as household gods and demons.

M: So, if I'm hearing you correctly, anything goes if it gets the point across?

B: In a nutshell, yes. But if you are trying to explain something to people with limited knowledge and time to understand your explanation, you have to use what you have available and put it into terms that they will understand. In this respect, the Buddha was a remarkable communicator and debater.

M: No question there. But as for reincarnation?

B: It is my belief in this day and age, that what the historical Buddha was seeing was inheritance at work. This would be the passing along of not only DNA qualities from parent to child, but including the attitudes and traits of those parents that got them into a negative karma situation to begin with. If you do not understand that link and passing down of inheritance and viewpoints, then it becomes easy to mistake those traits and personalities as returning karma.

If karma does exist beyond one's lifetime, which may or may not be true, it may seem also that it is highly unfair to the recipient ... who may be blissfully unaware that they bear the brunt of someone else's actions. Is it just the

personality of the recipient to begin with that is causing them so much suffering, or is it returning karma? I cannot be sure.

M: So the historical Buddha was ignorant of the interplay of parent and child? I somewhat doubt that.

B: And I happen to agree with you that he probably understood that very well ... but chose to explain it in the vernacular of the time and place. And also remember that none of this was written down at the time of the Buddha's life. It was quite a while later when it was codified and recorded.

Not to say that the early teachings were incorrect, but we have to remember the example of the early Christian church in dealing with the Gnostics, and trying to standardize the faith.

In this case, they made subjective judgments about what gospels to put into the standardized Bible and what to leave out. Who is to say that the Gospel of Judas or the Gospel of Mary Magdalene is not as relevant as Matthew, Mark, Luke or John? Just because it presents a different light on how things happened, does not negate their validity. Remember that they too were not written down until many years later after Christ's death, and couple that with the problems with eyewitness testimony, and it is not surprising that the varying views and indeed varying descriptions of the same event surface in different documents.

M: OK, I think I begin to understand this. Correct me if I'm wrong. Buddha understood the parent/child relationship and inheritance, but his listeners weren't ready to hear that, and wanted to cling to their ancestors and the concept of reincarnation and past-life karma coming back to haunt them.

B: Correct. In another way, it is possible that people substituted karma for the wrath or reward from a supernatural deity. In both cases the result is the same. Either you did something wrong (or right) and God is punishing you for that sin (or rewarding you for that action), or you are inheriting karma. It is a way of explaining the unexplainable.

Before you catch me on this, I will not deny that karma exists, contrary to what others may say or believe. It does exist, at least in the current lifetime, for sure. There is no doubt about that.

But in any case, the Buddha was an expert at co-opting what people believed, and weaving the Buddhist philosophy into their existence without destroying their existing belief structures in the process. In doing so, and using expedient means, he was able to get people to elevate themselves to a better existence for themselves.

M: I have also heard people say that Buddhism is a negative philosophy and the concepts are all downers. It restricts people from doing things that they desire to do.

B: Nothing could be farther from the truth. In fact, I think the happiest people in the world are Buddhists.

What could be negative about releasing your happiness from the cloud of negativity and ignorance that causes you suffering?

M: But you are demolishing many hard-won beliefs and ideas in the process. That in itself can cause suffering.

B: I believe the expression is: “No pain, no gain.” But is it pain when you eliminate the splinter from your finger? You might feel an instantaneous hit of pain when it is removed, but the long-term result is a finger without that pain and suffering. In addition, if you left it there and it got infected, the pain and suffering probably would get worse. It is likewise true of mental constructs and ignorance.

Personally, I remember the suffering that I have felt at various times when I found that cherished beliefs that I had held for years had to be given up, because they were based on ignorance. When I saw that they were invalid, there was a feeling of “why did I not see this before?” accompanied by a feeling of almost embarrassment of myself to myself. That is not to say that the emotional component of those beliefs was not still there somewhat, but that I had isolated it from my decision-making process.

But the relief of finally causing the removal of something that had caused me pain for years and the joy of having achieved that positive outcome quickly overcame that embarrassment.

M: Wow. I just hit on that idea. I'd never thought of it that way. By taking away the blinders, you can see ways of doing things that cause you less pain, or give you much more happiness.

B: One thing to remember here is that there are as many versions of the practice of Buddhism as there are practitioners of it. Each person has their own path to follow.

There will be vocal adherents of the monastic tradition, as well as others who prefer to just do meditation and deal with the real world with jobs, families, and social lives. Just as the Christian religions proselyte for followers, so do Buddhist sects. Each claims to be the only true path, and you have to pick the one that best suits your needs. They all have their strengths and weaknesses. If any one practice works for the individual, go for it.

M: Then none of the sects are wrong?

B: This is true. They all serve a purpose. Of course, that purpose may be to serve as a bad example if they have large turnover or do not serve the ends that their practitioners require and they have promised, in which case they will eventually cease to exist.

All of the Christian sects are correct, too, to their followers. As long as it works for them, I have no problem with it.

M: So is there a true version of Buddhism?

B: It depends on who you talk to. I prefer to think of the fundamentals of the practice as laid out by the historical Buddha as the closest thing to what he taught.

But I am not saying that you could not become enlightened through Zen practice, or Pure Land, or Nicherin's version. They all have their adherents and all claim that they can eventually lead the practitioner to the state of Nirvana. It has to have worked for some; otherwise the sects would die of attrition.

M: And which is it, a religion or a philosophy?

B: Again, it depends on who you ask, and what they believe.

By some definitions, it appears as a religion, because of the ceremony and chanting and ritual. To others, who study the sutras and do not partake of the ceremony, it is a philosophical practice to achieve enlightenment. But it is all part of the whole.

You could look at it as a continuous spectrum of people becoming involved at the ceremonial level, becoming interested in the underlying principles and teachings, and eventually breaking out into their individual practice as the Buddha originally intended. Remember, he said numerous times that he only taught the Bodhisattvas.

The religious aspects are necessary for some people to become a part of the Sangha (or community) and participate on a mass level. If they believe in what it does for them, perhaps they will become motivated to study the sutras. Once that happens they may go on to the singular practice.

M: So once again it is a chain event.

B: Yes. Some people shortcut the process and get hooked just reading the sutras for curiosity, and start practicing what they read. Others never get beyond the group religious aspects.

M: It is amazing that it can be perceived as both.

B: Because it is both at certain points. It is perceived to be only a religion from outside the practice; because the individual practitioners are hidden from public view by choice ... they seek solitude and meditative space away from any glare of publicity of any kind.

M: But the training is so valuable, it should be made more available.

B: Leading a horse to water is fruitless, unless the horse wants to drink. The religious side of this is the part you refer to. It provides the initial impetus to drink. After that it is up to the horse.

M: It is so sad that the public perception of Buddhism is so different from the reality.

B: Yes. The public never sees much of us, because we do not proselyte for the most part. And when we do, it is never in a public forum ... it is between individuals recommending that a friend or relative investigate the practice. We do not go on television and preach what we believe ... for the most part, seeing video of monks or lay people chanting for two hours would probably turn people off. Equally boring would be explanations of the EightFold Path or the Four Noble Truths ... unless people were ready for it, which most are not. Some sects have great temples with gilded roofs, but for some reason, the public for the most part ignores them and goes on about their business. Most people prefer to have their religion spoon-fed to them with infallibility woven into the mix. It makes for less confusion.

M: That's true. I've seen a few magnificent temples around the country, but I've never had the inclination to investigate further for some reason.

B: And here you are finally investigating in the most unlikely of settings ... a modest hotel room.

M: In the second chapter of the Lotus Sutra that I read recently, the Buddha says not to rely on the dogma, ceremony or teachers. So why do so many do exactly what the Buddha says not to take to heart?

B: There is a manuscript called "Handbook for Mankind" by Bikkhu Buddhadasa. Let me read a few paragraphs from him that highlight the problem.

<pause>

"Buddhism" means "the Teaching of the Enlightened One." A Buddha is an enlightened individual, one who knows the truth about all things, one who knows just what is what, and so is capable of behaving appropriately with respect to all things. Buddhism is a religion based on intelligence, science and knowledge, whose purpose is the destruction of suffering and the source of suffering. All paying of homage to sacred objects by means of performing rites and rituals, making offerings or praying is not Buddhism. The Buddha rejected all this as foolish, ridiculous and unsound. He also rejected the celestial beings, then considered by certain groups to be the creator of things, and the deities supposed to dwell, one in each star in the sky. Thus we find that the Buddha made such statements as these:

"Knowledge, skill and ability are conducive to success and benefit and are auspicious omens, good in their own right regardless of the movements of the heavenly bodies. With the benefits gained from these qualities, one will completely outstrip those foolish people who just sit making their astrological calculations." And: "If the water in rivers (such as the Ganges) could really wash away sins and suffering, then the turtles, crabs, fish and shellfish living in those sacred rivers ought by now to be freed of their sins and sufferings too." And: "If a man could eliminate suffering by making offerings, paying homage and praying, there would be no one subject to suffering left in the world, because anyone at all can pay homage and pray. But since people are still subject to suffering while in the very act of making obeisances, paying homage

and performing rites, this is clearly not the way to gain liberation." To attain liberation, we first have to examine things closely in order to come to know and understand their true nature. Then we have to behave in a way appropriate to that true nature. This is the Buddhist teaching; this we must know and bear in mind. Buddhism has nothing to do with prostrating oneself and deferring to awesome things. It sets no store by rites and ceremonies such as making libations of holy water, or any externals whatsoever, spirits and celestial being included. On the contrary, it depends on reason and insight. Buddhism does not demand conjecture or supposition; it demands that we act in accordance with what our own insight reveals and not take anyone else's word for anything. If someone comes and tells us something, we must not believe him without question. We must listen to his statement and examine it. Then if we find it reasonable, we may accept it provisionally and set about trying to verify it for ourselves. This is a key feature of Buddhism, which distinguishes it sharply from other world religions.

M: Wow. That's a pretty powerful indictment against the cults and sects that Buddhism seems to have become. Would the historical Buddha condone this if he were present in this day and age?

B: If I were to venture a guess as to how the Buddha would react, I would probably come down on the side of the original teachings as the guide for everything else. But if those offshoots work for some people, it is their right to pursue them. But the Buddha's words seem to contradict the ceremonial aspects of the philosophy. But again, it has its place in the sequential nature of bringing people into contact with the philosophy through the backdoor of religion, and then leading them into their own investigation of the teachings ... hopefully to the end of enlightenment, leaving the ceremonial end of it along the way.

M: It is totally incongruous. The greatest truths of the universe, and they appear to me in a chain hotel and not a gold-leafed temple. Go figure.

B: It just goes to prove that the best things in our existence are usually found in the most humble of surroundings.

M: I can attest to that. Now I must go back and study some more.

B: Enjoy and challenge.

## CONVERSATION FOURTEEN

M: And once again, I find myself here with questions.

B: Most excellent. I hope I can help you find your answers. Where did your mind run astray this time?

M: I was trying to fight my way through the Concentration Division of the EightFold Path. I got bogged down in Right Effort ... in the whole area of Arising States. Can you clear this up for me?

B: I can try.

Right Effort, you might think, involves throwing yourself headlong into meditating and following the historical Buddha's teachings to the letter. Neither could be further from the truth.

First, the name is somewhat misleading. Probably it should not be Right Effort, but Right Acquisition of Mind States. In other words, recognizing and dealing with the states of mind when you encounter them.

There are four Mind States or 'Efforts' that are laid out here.

First, the prevention of unwholesome mind states from arising.

Second, the deletion of unwholesome mind states that have arisen already. Third, to encourage and promote wholesome mind states, and fourth, to encourage wholesome mind states to be more present.

As in the Second and Third Noble Truths, the first two Mind States are the inverse of the second two. The first two deal with the subversion of unwholesome mind states, and the second two with the flipped versions ... that being wholesome mind states.

M: OK, but could you define what the Buddha meant when he was talking about wholesome and unwholesome mind states?

B: Certainly. The unwholesome mind states are usually defined as *sensual desire, ill will, dullness and drowsiness, restlessness and worry, and doubt*.

M: These seem fairly straightforward. Why do they have to be emphasized so strongly with their own place in the EightFold Path?

B: Because as in all things in Buddhist practice, the reality of what they

are is never clear on first encounter.

Let us look at them in detail.

Sensual desire you might first think of as the lust for another person or sexual pleasure. But it is far more than that. It encompasses any form of sensual pleasure that does you harm, either physically or mentally.

Sensual pleasure can be such diverse things as being a collector of potato mashers for which you have absolutely no use, or being a gourmet and delving into every known eating pleasure known to man. It can be the obsession with owning and racing cars or horses, or it can be the drive to create the most beautiful orchid.

M: Wait a minute. So all these things are bad? What's the problem with collecting potato mashers or eating too much?

B: The problem is not with doing these things ... the problem erupts when they take possession of you to the exclusion of all else, and become unwholesome drivers of your life.

The car aficionado that abandons their family to pursue their dreams of having the 'most' something in a racecar is allowing an unwholesome mind state to run their lives.

The potato masher collector that takes inordinate time away from their livelihood in pursuit of a rare item is allowing an unwholesome mind state to run their lives.

The gourmet that allows his obsession with exotic food to totally alter his lifestyle in a manner that eventually leads to ruin.

The orchid grower that is totally absorbed with creating the 'best' orchid to the exclusion of all else in their lives.

M: So it is a question of degree?

B: Not really. It is the whole concept of sensual pleasure, which is driven by greed, or gluttony, or the need to have 'more' of everything. It is pride that requires you to be the 'best' in whatever you try to do and, unchecked, will drive you to ruin when you cannot accomplish it. It is a sense of superiority that pervades your thinking, that you know in your mind that you are the best and no one will surpass you. As logic will tell you, there will always be someone better than you eventually, and that superiority you profess will be shattered when someone proves you wrong or not as great as you thought you were.



All of these are unwholesome mind states, regardless of the degree. After all, the goal here is to be as happy as we can be, but these mind states ultimately detract from that internal happiness ... because there will always be 'one more mountain to climb' or 'one more river to cross' in pursuit of that perfection that you are chasing.

Remember that all things are constantly changing.

The market for collectible cars may tank, and leave you with a group of cars that are now creating a drag on your finances.

An orchid fungus can wipe out your entire arboretum.

The value of your potato masher collection could go to minimum, when someone with a bigger collection dumps them on Ebay.

The gourmet's tastes may get jaded and their aspirations for more exotic food be dashed because of extravagance ruining their finances.

In all these cases, the unwholesome states have led to unhappiness.

M: Ah, OK. So the unwholesome states are always unwholesome?

B: Yes.

M: The other four ... are they equally as unwholesome? I think I understand this one now.

B: They are equally unwholesome, for their own reasons.

Ill Will equates to hatred, dislike, anger and a whole host of other negative emotions.

Dullness and drowsiness keep us from doing much to help ourselves. This could be seen as the inverse of the excess in sensual pleasure.

Restlessness is a detriment to doing anything that requires us to concentrate and be focused on something that we are doing. Worry goes right along with this in its ability to detract us from doing what we need to.

Doubt is probably the most insidious of all of them. It prevents us from doing things that we should, just because we do not think that we are capable of doing them. Or, in the case of the mind itself, doubting that the principles that we are talking about even exist.

M: That's a pretty long list of things that most people would consider part of life.

B: Precisely why they are not happy and keep making themselves unhappy.

M: But you'd think that the person who has made millions of dollars and spends it on cars, would consider themselves happy.

B: You could, and they probably do. But consider that your tastes in 1933 roadsters change, and that 1946 Bugatti racer is shown at the Concouers de Elegance at Pebble Beach. Your appetite is now whetted in a different direction because of that particular vehicle. It will cost millions for you to find one like it and do the restoration. To do so, you will have to part with some of the collectible cars that you love, and that will cause you suffering.

M: OK, I see your point. Since your tastes in cars are constantly evolving, the pain comes when your change results in parting with things that you have grown to love.  
But I would question the underlying reason for having a collection like that. Is it just having them to look at or drive, or is it the adulation that you get because you have something that other people want?

B: It can be one or the other, or both. In any case, it is an excess. I doubt that the world will beat a path to your door because of your exotic collection of potato mashers, but if you are obsessed with them, that does not matter much.  
If you want the world to beat a path to your door to see your orchid collection, then it would be the adulation that you seek.  
It is the 'why' of the obsession and drive to excess that is important.  
It is important to note that the other four in excess ... or at all, for that matter, intrude in this area as well.  
The orchid collector could hate their competition. Dullness and drowsiness could impede their ability to produce that 'best' orchid. Restlessness and worry about the next flower show can cause havoc with their thinking. And doubt about their ability to produce that prize-winning orchid could cause their whole world to collapse.

M: They really are detrimental to your mental health, aren't they?

B: They certainly are. And that is why the Buddha places such importance on them and the necessity of eliminating them from our minds.

M: I begin to see that. So the entire practice is based on these precepts?

B: That and the Four Noble Truths, and the rest of the EightFold Path.

M: Since I don't know at this point that any of this is true, should I believe or hold faith that it works?

B: No.

M: NO?

B: No. Belief in something is only a form of faith, and the teachings do not allow for faith.

M: But that's asking me to know before I know.

B: Do you know truth when you see it?

M: Of course not, until I prove it. To do otherwise would be to take it on faith.

B: Thus arises the apparent conundrum. In actuality it is not as much of a conundrum as you may think.

Bhante Ralpola Rahula, in his manuscript "What the Buddha Taught" says the following:

It is always a question of knowing and seeing, and not that of believing. The teaching of the Buddha is qualified as *ehi-passika*, inviting you to 'come and see', but not to come and believe.

If you come and believe right away, that is faith. If you come and see, it means you have tested what you are given for yourself and have accepted it as fact through analysis and whether it is rational and reasonable to you.

As for 'knowing before you know', almost all of it you already know, but do not know that you know it yet. It is one of the paradoxes of this practice that much of what you learn here, are concepts that you already know, but your overlays have prevented you from seeing. It is one of those 'AHA' moments, where you look at something and say to yourself, 'Why did I not see this before?'

M: I have experienced that with some of these concepts. It's like understanding something that you have always known, but never paid attention to. And when you finally see it, it's somewhere between previous stupidity and a miracle.  
It is altogether too easy, however, to fall into the trap of pride of knowing these truths, and feeling pride and superiority because you do. These truths are meant to be savored and enjoyed just as they are, and not used as a prop for feeling superior.

B: Precisely. Defining things such as the defilements is elemental to seeing the truth. We skip around the edges a lot in many ways when it comes to our happiness, and try to indulge ourselves in things and people that let us escape from ourselves. What we do not see is that our true happiness lies in that very thing that we are trying to escape from through distractions.

M: Distractions are so easy to come by and so hard to discard.

B: Exactly why we have to train the mind to not be distracted easily.  
That is where we come back to the idea of recognizing the underlying reasons why we do things, and concentrating the mind to do away with those reasons. The mind will do almost anything to avoid looking at itself. But look at itself it must.

M: That almost sounds paradoxical when you say that the mind looks at itself.

B: It is not really a paradox, but the terminology might leave that impression.  
What actually is the case is that the mind is divided into two or more parts. Not physically, but functionally. There is memory; there is the analytical part; there is the conjectural part; there is the perceptual part, and there is the conscious part. Does this sound familiar?

M: Absolutely. We've dealt with this before. These are the five stages of the mind working to provide us with identification and action alternatives.

B: Excellent. You are learning. That is exactly what they are. But we are defining them now as distinct parts of the brain, as opposed to stages in mindwork to provide us with these finalized concepts. They may not be found in the same place in the brain for each individual, but the distinctions functionally are there.

M: I think the brain scientists have already said that there are many distinct parts of the brain ... but I don't recall that they define them this way.

B: They are looking at concrete evidence for division, where it does not exist. Brain tissue is brain tissue ... parts of which are evolved to deal with perceptions ... beyond that, it is difficult if not impossible to differentiate the various functions that our practice deals with. Can we define this to a distinct part of the brain and say with certainty that this little wrinkle on this lobe concerns us with combining memory with analysis? Not yet, and perhaps never. You may isolate these functions for one single individual, but my thought is that it cannot be defined as such for all human brains.

M: So the thought patterns become different for each person, since their brains configure differently.

B: Yes. And that is why there are different interests, personalities, goals, and perceptions. The filters are defined differently for each and every person.

But there are certain things that we come back to in Buddha's teachings that are universally true.

We can say with certainty what makes us truly happy at our core being. We can say with certainty that if we can become calm and serene without letting the external world ratchet up our anger and anxiety factors, we are much happier. It is this underlying happiness that the Buddha's teachings are all about.

It has nothing to do with legacy or having or doing in this lifetime. It has everything to do with being happy.

M: Let me guess. In that there is nothing constant but change, the more that we get away from things that keep changing on us, the happier that we will be.

B: That is a fair way of putting it. The whole of the practice is devoted to seeing what we are doing to ourselves. It is through our diversions from assessing that negative impact that our minds have on our happiness, that causes us suffering.

M: Again, it's a matter of eliminating the negative parts of our lives and allowing the positive factors to come through.

B: Yes. As an example, I believe you said at one point you have cats, correct?

M: Yes. Two.

B: How do you enjoy them?

M: Strange question. I don't understand. I enjoy their company; I enjoy their quirkiness and their personalities.

B: And is enjoying them a single method or feeling that you get from them? Does your enjoyment vary?

M: Oh, I see. Yes. Sometimes I really enjoy their antics and company ... other times it's a nuisance.

B: So it varies.

M: Yes.

B: Why?

M: Why does it vary?

B: Yes.

M: I guess it varies with my mood. Sometimes, when I'm busy or anxious, they're a pain in the butt. Other times when I need company and a little loving, they're absolutely enjoyable.

B: You see that your interaction with your cats is exactly what we are talking about when we talk about happiness.

M: I'm not quite sure yet.

B: If you are in a good mood and nothing is really bothering you, your enjoyment of your cats is great, but if you are anxious about something else, your happiness with them is overridden by your anxiety and suffering. This is a good example of the larger scale of dealing with the way that the mind keeps us from being happy.

M: Ah. We come back to the coalmine analogy of stripping off the overburden rock to get to the coal. In this case we strip out the things that make us unhappy, so that we can see the happiness that was there all the time.

B: Precisely. I could not have said it better myself.

M: But you have.

B: <laughing>

I think at this point that I should quote the first chapter of the Dhammapada, which talks about the mind and choices that we make.

#### I . Choices

We are what we think.

All that we are arises with our thoughts.

With our thoughts we make the world.

Speak or act with an impure mind and trouble will follow you as the wheel follows the ox that draws the cart.

We are what we think.

All that we are arises with our thoughts.

With our thoughts we make the world.

Speak or act with a pure mind and happiness will follow you as your shadow, unshakable.

"Look how he abused me and hurt me, how he threw me down and robbed me."

Live with such thoughts and you live in hate.

"Look how he abused me and hurt me, how he threw me down and robbed me."

Abandon such thoughts, and live in love.

In this world hate never yet dispelled hate.

Only love dispels hate.

This is the law, ancient and inexhaustible.

You too shall pass away.  
Knowing this, how can you quarrel?

How easily the wind overturns a frail tree.  
Seek happiness in the senses, indulge in food and sleep, and you too will be uprooted.  
The wind cannot overturn a mountain.  
Temptation cannot touch the man who is awake, strong and humble, who masters himself and minds the dharma.

If a man's thoughts are muddy, if he is reckless and full of deceit, how can he wear the yellow robe?  
Whoever is master of his own nature, bright, clear and true, he may indeed wear the yellow robe.

Mistaking the false for the true, and the true for the false, you overlook the heart and fill yourself with desire.  
See the false as false, the true as true. look into your heart.  
Follow your nature.

An unreflecting mind is a poor roof.  
Passion, like the rain, floods the house.  
But if the roof is strong, there is shelter.

Whoever follows impure thoughts suffers in this world and the next.  
In both worlds he suffers and how greatly when he sees the wrong he has done.  
But whoever follows the dharma is joyful here and joyful there.  
In both worlds he rejoices and how greatly when he sees the good he has done.

For great is the harvest in this world, and greater still in the next.  
However many holy words you read, however many you speak, what good will they do you if you do not act upon them?  
Are you a shepherd who counts another man's sheep, never sharing the way?  
Read as few words as you like, and speak fewer.  
But act upon the dharma.  
Give up the old ways –

Passion, enmity, folly.  
Know the truth and find peace.  
Share the way.

M: Thank you for sharing that with me. It really does encompass all the things that you have been talking about.

B: It is one of the truest statements of the practice that I have ever found, outside of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path.

M: Oddly enough, it brings to mind the popular quote from a few years back called the Desiderata.

B: There are many similarities. This brings me back to what I said in a previous meeting ... that almost all faiths and philosophers arrive



at the same conclusion, but get overlaid with dogma and hierarchy that obscures the message. The Desiderata is amazingly similar to the first chapter of the Dhammapada in that respect.

M: I'm really going to have to think about this one. I thank you for helping me with this. My cats thank you for helping me with this.

B: They are just as much a part of this world as you are. Enjoy them.

## CONVERSATION FIFTEEN

M: The chapter from the Dhammapada that you spoke of at the end of our last conversation has been running through my thoughts ever since. 'You are what you think'.

B: It is one of the ultimate truths.

M: Could you explain a little more?

B: Certainly. It is quite simple. Without your thoughts, what are you? Is your body still you? Is all your property still you?

M: No, I suppose not. But I've always thought that I could be 'somebody' or 'something'. Something better than what I thought I was inside.

B: Again, you destroy your own argument. "I've always thought ..." This is the ultimate paradox.  
You cannot be anything but your thoughts. Certainly, you could be an executive with vast power and wealth, but without your thoughts, what would that mean? It would mean nothing, since your thoughts are what propelled you to that pinnacle of success. Without them, all the rest is an empty shell that collapses under its own weight.

M: I can't come up with a counter for that one. So all the adulation or praise or wealth means nothing without your thoughts to appreciate them?

B: How can it?

M: I'm asking.

B: Of course it cannot. How can you appreciate or want that adulation, praise, and wealth without the thoughts behind their meaning? It is an impossibility.

M: I guess I get back to the soul or the afterlife here, then, don't I? Or maybe wanting to be acclaimed for a legacy ...

B: If you want to, but in actuality, here in the real world, that has no

impact or validity. When you live, your thoughts are what motivate you, and when you are dead, those thoughts cease at the moment of death. If you want to believe in an afterlife or a soul or whatever, then you now enter the realm of faith, since there is no proving or disproving its existence.

In reality, man has created God, an afterlife, and all that dogma to satisfy the unanswerable question of 'Why am I here?'. If I can make some supernatural being responsible for my existence both here and in the afterlife, then this explanation satisfies me as to that question. But then you have to either answer or ignore the question, 'If there is a supernatural being that controls and creates, where did they come from?' This is another unanswerable question that takes you even further down the rabbit hole ... to paraphrase from "Alice in Wonderland."

M: So if these questions are unanswerable, why do we persist in trying to answer them?

B: Man is naturally curious. In pursuit of satisfying that curiosity, we find that we make up stories or hypotheses to answer the unanswerable questions. We can define the physical reality we perceive, from the internals of the atom to the furthest reaches of the universe, but we always come up with the question of what is beyond the limits of what we see. It is much like driving an automobile at night, and wondering what is beyond the scope of our headlights. If we install brighter lights, we see more, but we can never see far enough to satisfy our curiosity. In daylight, we ask what is beyond the horizon.

M: Wow ... from the universe to what I am. It is hard to swallow that my thoughts are all that I am, even though the logic is impossible to argue with without having faith enter into the picture.

B: Precisely the problem, and precisely why using faith to describe either ourselves, our perceptions, or the universe is unproductive, and why the historical Buddha advised us to never take anything on faith, even his own teachings. We must prove for ourselves what is true for us, and that only.

M: And that proof evaporates when we cease to exist?

B: How can it not? If it is true that we are our thoughts, and our thoughts cease when we cease to exist, then it must be that the proof that you speak of is a thought as well, and must evaporate as well when that existence ceases.

M: But the proof and truths are constant and unchanging, aren't they?

B: They are, but they must be realized and accepted by each individual, one at a time. The truths are eternal, but exist only as thoughts in each person that sees them. If they were a non-thought, inherent part of every human being, then much of our dealings with each other and the world at large would be quite different. But it is not, and each of us has to realize these proofs and truths for ourselves. Most never do, and do themselves harm by creating suffering for themselves.

M: It is amazing and difficult to accept for some reason that 'We are our thoughts.' But the logic is beyond any question.

B: That is because you still have a desire to be something beyond yourself. The key word here is 'desire'. If you aspire only to be happy, it simplifies things.

M: That's a tall order. I've always been taught to aspire to great things, to be something to be proud of. And here you're telling me that the only thing worth going after is my own happiness. I don't even know yet what will bring me that.

B: You will in time. But those aspirations that you were given, probably were not yours to begin with. They are probably generated by your parents, your religious upbringing or society in general.

M: Probably so, but it's still a hard road to accept, that these have no personal validity.

B: That is because you accepted them without proof ... using faith. You never asked whether these were things that would make **you** happy ... you just accepted them verbatim and never questioned it. I am sure that you are now questioning them at some level, and will find that much of it is learned and inherited from outside yourself.

M: So how do I differentiate between what are “my” thoughts and those that I have just accepted as true for all these years?

B: You look at whether they cause you suffering or not. If it does not cause you or anyone or anything else to suffer, then it is probably a good thought ... if the contrary is true, then it is a negative thought, and will cause suffering to both you and others, and generate bad karma. It is just as simple as that.

M: That isn't going to work too well if I'm a psychopath.

B: True, but then again, they are never going to accept that what is in their thoughts is incorrect or outright wrong. It is then up to you to protect yourself from such a person.

M: So all the precepts of not killing, stealing or all that, are designed to keep me from causing suffering for myself?

B: You could look at it that way. But you also have to prove it to yourself that they are true for you personally. Without that proof, the only restraint is from a fear of punishment from outside yourself, and that is not happiness, it is paranoia.

M: Are there any exceptions to the precepts that make sense? I'm thinking about the people that are averse to aborting babies, and in favor of the death penalty for heinous crimes at the same time.

B: That is hypocritical thinking. Any society of which I am a part generates rules, with punishments for the breaking of them. I personally have to abide by them, even if they contradict my beliefs if I want to continue within it. However, that does not mean that I cannot work to change the rules.

The hypocrisy that you bring up is an interesting one. If you are in favor of the death penalty, then you must be in favor of abortion. They are both actions of the society. If not, then the opposite must be true. If you accept the premise of not taking life, then you must be consistently against the death penalty.

The Catholic Church is one of the only religious entities that is consistent in this. They oppose the death penalty, and they oppose abortion. The squabble over abortion comes in defining when life

begins, which is another one of those unanswerable questions that are up to each individual to decide for themselves ... based on logic or faith or both.

The biblical adage of “an eye for an eye” is a very forceful rule for keeping a tribal society in line, but it is based on revenge for a “victim”, not a benefit to the society as a whole. Revenge is never a valid reason for returning the favor.

M: Justification is in the mind of the beholder.

B: What else is there?

In respect to revenge and the like, it is interesting to note that it is a legal tenet that the law is blind, and that you accept the idea that the society has taken over your revenge and done the work for you in terms of that revenge. You relinquish your right of revenge when the “law” takes over and attempts to use the society's rules to punish the 'lawbreaker' for you. In this respect, the fairly recent idea of 'victim's rights' entering into the legal process is an antithesis of the legal tenet of punishing the lawbreaker according to the law. What if the legal system is swayed by the 'victim's' statement and punishes an innocent person ... and it is that statement that pushes the verdict over the edge? Is this right?

M: If you run the legal system solely on logic, then you're right. But humans seldom run totally on logic. Even Spock from Startrek had an emotional side ... it was just suppressed.

B: Point taken. But the moment that we put pen to paper, and make rules for the society, that then becomes subject to the interpretation of lawyers and judges and juries. What did they mean when the law says 'this' or 'that'? The placement of a period or a comma in a rule may make the difference between guilt or innocence in the eyes of the law.

M: Then how do you maintain order? If the law is that nebulous, and subject to interpretation, what is the point?

B: The point is that every society must have some rules, based on commonly held beliefs. Killing, lying, stealing, and sexual conduct covers most of the tenets of any society, except perhaps in a tyranny where the ruler holds all the cards and changes them at a

whim.

We will probably never get away from the interpretation problem, nor from the tendency of the human race to try to avoid responsibility, but we have to try.

M: So the rules that the Buddha laid down are to keep order, not necessarily because they are universal truths?

B: The historical Buddha laid down these precepts so as to make it easier for his followers to find a calm place in their lives to further pursue their ultimate happiness ... their nirvana. It only goes to reason that if your external existence is calmer than it would be in an anarchy, then your internal existence will be also. The precepts provide the groundwork for anyone to get to work looking at their minds, and seeing the things that their minds do to them without their knowledge. Calming the external allows more time and less distraction so as to calm the internal.

M: Again, we're back to 'We are what we think.'

B: Yes. It is essential for us to see this, and work on eliminating those thoughts that are detrimental to our happiness. If we are what we think and only that, not to change those thought patterns is a sure road to maintaining our suffering, and limiting our happiness.

M: Eliminating those thoughts that keep us from being happy isn't for cowards, is it?

B: Absolutely not. Addressing the traps and pitfalls of the mind and what it does to us is the ultimate adventure. And the rewards when accomplished are phenomenal. Realizing that 'we are what we think' is a major accomplishment. Many people never do this.

M: I'm finding that some of what I think, I don't like very much. But rooting it out many times is almost impossible.

B: It is difficult. But when you get these negative thoughts, do you try to avoid them, or do you delve into them at the time?

M: Many times I just try to avoid them, since I don't yet know how to deal with them.

B: What many have found is that with these negative thoughts, if you do not avoid them, but mentally go over them again and again, they lose much of their shock and revulsion value. By repetitively mulling this over in your mind and hanging onto whatever experience is generating them, you begin to see that the feeling associated with the experience is just that and not necessarily related to that particular experience at all.

If you have experience "B", and experience "A" has also occurred and they are similar, the feeling from experience "A" may color the feeling about experience "B", even though they may not be related although alike.

M: Wait a minute. I think I've seen that. Where one experience will color the next one.

B: You undoubtedly have, and do. There is nothing like a bad morning to ruin your whole day, even though what happened early on has nothing to do with later on. But we let it do just that.

If we can break those links from experience to experience, and live in the moment without extrapolating ideas from elsewhere, we would live much happier lives.

M: So why isn't all this more popular with people in general?

B: Because you have to think and take responsibility for your own life.

M: It can't be that hard!

B: Much harder than most are capable of. You must remember that the historical Buddha said: "I teach only the Bodhisattvas." There was a reason for him saying that. That reason is because most people are not equipped to do this, and to try to teach the higher concepts of this practice to people that are unprepared for it is a waste of time.

The historical Buddha was brought up a Hindu, with all the multiple gods ... Shiva, Vishnu, and the rest. What he came up with was a variation on the Hindu theme, substituting the Gods external (big G) with the god (little g) internal. Much of the idea of meditation and karma is Hindu in origin ... it just takes a twist into Buddhist thought.



This gets back again to the idea of the religion to bring the uninformed up to a level where these advanced concepts can be utilized.

M: But I'm here. And I understand much of what has been taught so far.

B: As the movie Zen master would say ... "Patience, grasshopper." You understand much of what you have learned on an intellectual level. It remains for you to accept it into your life and utilize it to further your abilities to divorce mind from action. Living what you understand to be true is very much harder than just understanding it to begin with.

Resisting the comforting viewpoint of being a victim is a great one to use as an example. Victimization is such an easy trap to say, "Oh woe is me. Look at what someone did to me." In reality, as we have talked about before, there were many alternatives that you could have taken to avoid being a victim, but many people choose to take the easy way out.

M: OK, but still, there must be thinking people out there that could benefit from this.

B: Of course. Most people think. But with the hold that 'organized religion' has over the general population, it is difficult to avoid being 'brainwashed' by society and religion from the time that you are able to take in information. It is only if you are able to shake the concepts of religious thought, and substitute some rational ideas instead, that you begin to walk this path.

M: I admit that people are lazy, and will almost always take the easier way to work with something, and if there's lots of people doing the same thing, it's difficult to buck the tide. But if I can do this, and see that it will better my life, why can't lots of other people?

B: Because you came to it with an open mind. Try talking to a Catholic about the idea of 'no soul'. Or to a fundamentalist Baptist about there being no heaven or hell. You will find very quickly that their only response is anger for forcing them to question their core beliefs.

M: Been there, done that. It does invoke a rabid response.

B: Because they have convinced themselves that what they learned is valid, and there are enough penalties for disbelief to make them shudder at the idea that what they believe is not true.

M: I never understood the idea of a 'God' that required that all his creation sing his praises and that he would punish people for not doing so.

B: Again a creation of man. I once heard it expressed this way ... "Was Moses really a prophet, or just a highly skilled politician?" Did he really get the information and rules from the burning bush, or did he see that he needed to coalesce the tribes into a single unit by scaring them into submission to a set of rules. By the way, it must have worked ... Jews, Christians, and Muslims all toe that line to this day.

M: I see your point, but surely there are people out there who are yearning for something to better their lives that religion for them doesn't offer.

B: There are. But you have to remember that it is up to the individual to actively search this knowledge out. They may want it, need it, and require it for happiness, but until they expend the energy and effort to look for it, nothing will happen.  
In your case, I am not spoonfeeding any of this to you ... you are reading, thinking about what you read, and asking questions. This is more work than most people are willing to expend. Much of religion takes that responsibility away from you and places it in the hands of whatever deity you happen to believe in. And since people are lazy, they tend to take this path of least resistance.  
You have to remember that most people are not like you. In fact, there is no one just like you. Every individual must walk their own path, and there are only some guideposts, but never someone that will walk it either with or for you.

M: I am finding that to be true. And those guideposts are few and far between. But this is the only path that seems to be ultimately successful for becoming happy.

B: It is.

## CONVERSATION SIXTEEN

M: Again I arrive with questions.

B: I would suspect nothing less. What questions do you have this time?

M: Many, as usual.

B: Let us proceed.

M: What does the historical Buddha say about science and technology?

B: An admirable question, considering as how there was not much of that at the time that he lived. But he did provide an answer indirectly.

The fundamental focus of Buddhist thought is directed internally and not externally.

Therefore, any curiosity or endeavor outside of ourselves is not neither helpful nor not helpful. It just is.

M: So there is no particular emphasis either negative or positive in regards to technical thingies?

B: No. There are people that wish to make them their life's work, and that is good. There are others that make use of them for negative purposes ... and they will pay the price in karmic value coming back to them.

M: Hmmmmm. OK ...

B: Let me put it another way. Focusing on externals is counterproductive to the Buddhist practice. The energy and time examining something external to the detriment of becoming enlightened and happy seems not to be going in the right direction. Those who choose this are entitled to do so, but, in Buddhist opinion, they are working on something that will not enliven their lives and spirits.

M: I see where you're coming from, but aren't the gadgets and widgets that have been invented useful?

B: It depends on your viewpoint. If you were to ask a modern teenager if their lives are any better because of instant communication, they would say of 'course.' But if you probe a little deeper, you find instances of cyber-bullying, and taking advantage of people that have never seen each other face-to-face.

In fact, there is a school of thought that says that modern communication has degraded interpersonal relations to a large degree. Here is an example:

A businessperson is trying to negotiate a deal a thousand miles away. They pick up the phone and wind up in a shouting match over some minor detail, and the sale goes up in smoke.

If they had been constrained to writing a letter, or having to travel by rail to the other end of the country, there would have been time to think out the problems and the deal probably could have been made.

But the fact that it is possible for instant reaction to perceived slights that do not exist, impedes a lot of possibilities.

We are much better when we have to put to paper what we think and need to know, than when we talk off the top of our heads, so to speak.

M: That's an interesting concept. I can see where that could be true. Can you give another example of technology gone wrong.

B: That is easy. Take the advancements in weapons technology leading up to and including the atomic and hydrogen bombs. The world would be a much safer place if they had not been invented.

M: But there are a lot of peaceful uses for these devices. For instance, cancer treatments using isotopes; nuclear power stations; and irradiated food that keeps for years.

B: And for each of those, there is a darker side to their existence that can be pointed to.

The isotopic treatments pose a risk to the providers and if they are stolen or lost, a risk to the population at large, not to mention the production of a 'dirty' bomb that terrorists could use to scatter radioactive material over a wide area.

The risk that nuclear power stations pose is well known. The spent fuel has the potential of burning if the cooling water is interrupted,

and the fuel itself can be used for a number of ill-intended consequences.

Irradiated food is not well enough known to be able to determine the downside of their use. It is possible that the structure of the cells in the organic material could be damaged in such a way that it poses a long-term risk to humans.

These are the downsides to the technologies that you mentioned.

M: I suppose that there are risks to everything that is technologically driven. What about genetically engineered crops?

B: Again, the yields are significantly improved, and the resistance to pests and rot improves the amount of product per acre.

But many of these products are engineered in such a way that the farmer cannot store part of the crop for next year's seed because it will not germinate ... causing the farmer to go back to the manufacturer again and again for seed, at a handsome price.

Another problem exists when genetically engineered crops in one field pollinate a non-engineered crop next door. This causes hybrids that may or may not have the desired characteristics, and the manufacturers have in some instances claimed that the unintended pollination actually was covered under their patents and sued for improper use from the farmer with the affected crop.

M: Is there no thing that we have made that does not have a downside to it?

B: Probably ... I just cannot think of one at present.

M: So you're a Luddite?

B: Excuse me ... I do not understand the term.

M: A Luddite is an anti-technology person. One that believes that all technology is bad and should not be used.

B: Oh ... no. Far from it. I use the telephone. I sometimes watch television, although the content is marginally useful. I ride in automobiles and subways.

If the intent is the betterment of mankind for the technology, I have no objection to it. It is when it is used against other humans for

profit or power or greed that I have a problem with it.

M: So not all technology is bad.

B: Technology is a fact. It is the purpose for which the technology is used that determines its value.

As an aside, it is a sad commentary that much of the technology that is developed these days is for military or surveillance purposes. Modern emergency room medicine in large part owes its existence to battlefield medics and surgeons who treat casualties of war.

It is also a sad commentary that many of the military people that have been wounded in battle would not have survived those wounds merely twenty years ago. We have saved their lives, and given them a lifetime of pain and suffering instead. Many with traumatic brain injury will require years of therapy or lifelong care. I wonder what these people will be saying ten years hence about their quality of life.

M: I've heard that. But that's war. That's armed conflict. How do we avoid this?

B: You have to start with something akin to what the Buddha taught.

Most of these conflicts start over religious intolerance, population pressures or land boundaries ... or just plain power grabs for resources or land, not to mention the issue of just being pathologically power hungry.

If you can eliminate these practices, you eliminate most of the conflicts from arising to begin with. You must remember that Buddhism as a practice has never started a war.

M: Speaking of Buddhism as a religion, I'm still not clear about why the dichotomy between what you are teaching me, and the sects that promote the religious aspects.

B: That is a very interesting question.

Robert Heinlein, in his masterpiece "Stranger in a Strange Land" explains it better than I can. In this soliloquy, Michael Valentine Smith is explaining the structure of the organization he created to express his views based on Martian 'old ones' philosophy.

“ What I had to teach couldn't be taught in schools or colleges; I was forced to smuggle it into town dressed up as a religion - which it is not - and con the marks into tasting it by appealing to their curiosity and their desire to be entertained. In part it worked exactly as I knew it would; the discipline and the knowledge was just as available to others as it was to me, who was raised in a Martian nest.”

It is precisely for this situation that I believe that the original Buddha created the monastic orders and allowed the religious aspects of the practice to go forward. If all people were of the caliber of the Buddha's original disciples as Brahmin elders, there would be no need of the religious aspects.

M: So the religion is just a hook to the greater philosophy.

B: You might say that.

M: Is this true of other religions?

B: I cannot speak for them. They all have their own reasons for existence. It is not up to me to judge those. However, I choose to have reason and happiness as my goals in this lifetime, rather than try to work for an unproven afterlife.

M: So you would say that it is counterproductive to think on the issues of afterlife and deity?

B: Precisely. It is counterproductive and a waste of time to contemplate issues that cannot be proven to anyone's satisfaction without blind faith taking over at some point. It is the use of blind faith as an element of dogma that does not work under any rational belief system.

M: A pretty broad indictment.

B: It is, but it applies equally across all 'faiths' and 'religions'. Whenever the 'faith' requires unbending belief in something that is unprovable and is only conjecture, or requires adherence to a document whose authenticity cannot be proven nor authorship definitely established, it presents a rational problem. This practice requires the probing and evaluation of everything that is presented to us ... even the Buddha's own teachings. Remember that he

never wrote down anything. It was all the work of his disciples, done post-mortem.

The 'bottom line', as you call it, of this is that what works for you and makes you happier, that is great for you. Keep it up. But if you have nagging doubts, or there are parts of what you think you believe that just do not make sense, it is time to reevaluate them and find something that does ... or resolve your doubts by studying further.

M: But most people get brainwashed or just keep doing the same thing because they are socially drawn into the culture rather than the spiritual side of a religion.

B: Absolutely correct. Which means that there is some part of their being that is greedy for social contact ... whether that is for being esteemed by their fellow group participants, or because they do not like what they see when they begin to investigate what they are really all about.

A parallel comes to mind here.

Within the subculture of 'bondage and discipline' where sadism and masochism run unfettered, it is common lore that many of the 'slaves' of sadists are people in high places who have to make decisions that affect people's lives. They come into this lifestyle so that they can justify what they have done by suffering physically or mentally as the people that they have affected have.

M: That's a weird parallel, but I can see where you are coming from. But how else can these people gain some kind of equilibrium?

B: Easy and incredibly difficult at the same time.

The first step is the hardest. That is to be brutally honest with yourself about what it is that you are doing, and why you are doing it.

Second is to really get at the core of why you do the things that you do, and ask yourself if you really need to do them. Is it economic, or social, or just a reaction to things that have happened to you in the past.

Third, change how you think, and by doing so, you change how you act and what you need from the world.

Fourth ... happiness is the result.



M: You were correct about the incredibly difficult part. In my own looking at my life and mind, I have found parts of it that I really hate. But it is difficult to force yourself out of the ruts of behavior that keep you there.

B: Yes it is difficult. And most will not nor cannot do so. But Buddhist practice is not a communal effort, just as any other religion or practice is not. While they may devolve into social movements or structures, it is the individuals within it that make it up, and each one has the power to either opt in or out at any time. If they are in it to avoid themselves, or to participate in 'groupthink', they are in it for the wrong reasons.

M: Why does this happen?

B: We are a species that requires answers to questions. We are incredibly curious, and when we cannot find realistic answers to questions, we make up theories that become myth, legend, and religion.

Most religions use mythology and legends as 'gospel' to give people some hope that there is an 'afterlife'; that there is some justice in the world; that there are social rules that are immutable and given from 'on high'.

The truth of the matter is that we are a violent race, just as the entire universe of stars, galaxies and planets is a violent place. We are a product of that violence. There is no getting around that. It is not fair that people or animals are killed prematurely without living out their potential. But it is reality. I can be killed or die tomorrow without doing more to promote happiness in the world. I would regret that if I had that capacity after death. But the dharma would go on, and my passing would only be noted briefly, before the world continued.

M: But the Buddha is remembered two millenia after his passing. And Christ, Mohammed and many others are remembered for what they did.

B: There are exceptional people that provide variations of the same message to give people the tools to live better lives. They all said the same thing at the outset. But what they said was taken and amplified, added to, and altered to a point where it became not

only unwieldy but it detracted from the original intent. Those tools were originally adapted to the specifics of each group and had to work within the confines of that group's experiences and lifestyles. When the dogma was taken out of that group experience, it became irrelevant, because the conditions and beliefs were different. When it adapted, it lost some of the original intent. The experiences and thinking of the new group were totally different, and if they accepted the new dogma, it was with some reservations.

A parallel might be drawn from the Native American experience in the southwest United States. The Catholic missionaries to the area 'converted' the natives to Catholicism ... or so they thought. The natives merely accepted it as part of what they believed, while keeping all their native traditions, taboos, and religious aspects of their primitive belief structures. It is not uncommon on feast days, to see a Catholic mass in the church, with a native dance to the spirits and ancestors immediately following in the same sanctuary. The two belief structures live side by side.

One person told me that they were both insurance for the afterlife. Both were equally valid in their eyes.

M: Interesting. So all of this is to answer the questions that can't be answered?

B: Which, as I said before, is counterproductive, since there is no way to answer them satisfactorily. If we concentrate on what is answerable, and what we can realistically accomplish to make ourselves happier, it is far more productive to that happiness. That involves, of course, finding out what really makes us happy and getting rid of all the things that negatively impact our lives.

M: It all sounds so simple, put that way. But I know it isn't. But it has made a difference in my life so far. And all for the better. And to think it all had to do with one interview that I was skeptical about to begin with.

B: I am very glad that you have progressed, and I applaud you for doing so. If only I could get to more of the population to get them to examine their lives. I paraphrase here from Socrates defending himself at his trial for heresy. "The unexamined life is not worth living." He was right.

M: Again much to think about and mull over. Thank you.

B: By the way, it appears that I will have to leave and return to Nepal in the near future, so that it may be our last meeting next week.

M: I understand, although it makes me sad to hear that. I have really enjoyed these sessions.

B: I too, have enjoyed your questions. But you have progressed enough to be able to handle on your own from here on. Next week I will give you some guidance and fundamental truths that I have not talked about yet.

M: I look forward to it.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

M: I will refrain from questions at this time, since you indicated that you had other things that you wanted to talk about today.

B: It has been confirmed that I will indeed return to Nepal next week. So I will give you some fundamental truths that you will need to see for yourself.

M: As is always the case. No spoonfeeding.

B: Always. First, I appreciate your open mind and the work that you have put into approaching this subject. It is truly remarkable.

M: Thank you.

B: Next, there are two truths that underlay all the teachings of the historical Buddha. As is always the case, they will not become evident to you until the time is right, and you truly grasp their import and and importance in the grand scheme of the universe. First, the truth of equivalence. Everything is not only interdependent, but equal. There is no superior thing, nor inferior. All is equivalent.

I, as well as the smallest blade of grass, piece of gravel, or microorganism, have an equal right to exist and co-exist with everything else. Each has its place in the universe, or it would not exist. This is the first fundamental premise.

The second fundamental premise, which I believe we have talked about before, is that the only thing constant is change. Change is the only factor in the entire universe that is unyielding and unchanging.

Everything changes ... only the timescales are variable. A galaxy rotates and changes but the distances and time frames are measured in billions of light years and immense mileages.

An particle belonging to an atom may exist only microseconds, but it does exist and changes to something else.

M: This is the theorem of matter and energy being indestructible, and only changing from one to the other.

B: Yes, only Buddha discovered this over two millenia ago. His insight

into this predates modern physics by almost two-thousand years.

M: Accepting this is not hard on its face. But being able to implement the idea to its fullest is difficult from an emotional point of view.

B: Again, I marvel at your grasp of these ideas. Yes, that is the problem. We become attached to things or people or pets or whatever, and when they change or die or leave, we are saddened by the loss, even though it was inevitable.

M: And the idea inherent in the practice is to be able to mitigate that sadness ... that feeling of loss and the associated actions that we may implement?

B: Yes. The concept of Science of Mind in Buddhist thought is totally involved in this idea of quieting the mind, so as to be able to accept these fundamental premises at a very deep level in our lives. Accepting the idea that all things are equal is not one that most people can grasp very well. In fact, most religions teach exactly the opposite ... that man has dominion over the earth and everything is subservient to him. That is a most prideful and chauvinistic idea. It has caused more harm to more people and areas of the earth than any other one thing ... and can trace its descendent heritage to the colonial empires and the idea of Manifest Destiny.

M: Wow. This is where the colonists of Europe believed that they were enabled by God to take control of whatever territory they could find and grab.

B: Your history serves you well. It is indeed. But that is totally contrary to Buddhist practice. If everything is equal and has a right to exist, then I have no right to enslave or take property that does not belong to me. This is also, if you remember, one of the Action parameters of the EightFold Path ... not to take anything not freely given.

It is in this respect that the whole issue of non-violence comes up. After all, how can I be violent with my equal, unless that equal is trying to hurt me in some way? If I do so, indirectly I hurt myself, since we are all interconnected. It may be a distant connection, but a connection nevertheless.

As I have said before, no war or aggression has ever been started

by or used as a basis for conquest by Buddhist followers.

M: I've heard that before, and not just from you. Buddhists are noted for pacifism.

B: And now you know the premise behind that concept. The whole of Buddhist thought rests on these two basic premises and evolves from them.

It is the work that we do to quiet the mind and see reality as it truly is that enables us to understand these fundamentals and use them in our daily lives to unleash more happiness for ourselves. That is truly the Nirvana that we seek.

M: When I hear them explained this way, it seems so simple. And I wonder why most people never see them in this light.

B: Because they seek happiness outside themselves and rarely wander through their minds to see what they are causing by their own thoughts and actions. It is far easier to seek happiness out beyond our own sphere of consciousness than to try to find out what we do on our own to ourselves.

M: I can understand that. It takes courage to look at yourself 'warts and all.' And our egos take a severe beating when we do so.

B: But if you do this work, the rewards are incredible. The peace of knowing that you are not causing suffering and not suffering yourself, is something that can only be experienced and not explained.

M: I'm beginning to understand that. In my brief exposure to this practice, I find that I am calmer and less prone to blowing up in response to what goes on here in the city.

B: And as time goes on, you will be more able to be totally unperturbed by those minor occurrences that used to cause massive disruption in your life. They will seem almost humorous by comparison when you progress further in your work.

M: It's already happening. But it is also causing friction with other people when I don't respond as I used to. It would almost seem

that they don't know how to deal with me any more.

B: That is because they do not know how to deal with you any more. You are not responding in the socially acceptable manner to their stimuli. Therefore there is something wrong with you. But the inverse is true. You are fine ... it is they that have their stimuli reactions wrong.

M: I was told the other day that I was losing my mind for what I was doing and thinking these days.

B: They were right. You are losing your mind ... at least as you knew it. It is changing and growing, while their minds are stagnant and stuck in ruts so deep that they never even know that that is the case.

M: Taking this idea of equivalence to its ultimate extension, how am I supposed to live without destroying something?

B: As a human being, we do have physical needs for sustenance and shelter. Many try to avoid harvesting and eating anything that could possibly be sentient. But that theory does not leave them much choice beyond raw dirt these days, so we have to find some other alternative.

If man is at the top of the food chain, then the universe has somehow put us there, and given us the requirement of eating something that has already converted raw material into protein and fat and so on. If this is the way of the universe, and it seems that it is, then we should have no qualms about harvesting vegetables and plants for certain, and perhaps even animals if done humanely. If we observe the sentient ban, then we restrict ourselves to plant products ... which can be a viable way to live. We do indeed destroy things, and create others. But nothing is ultimately destroyed ... merely transformed into a different state. There is no ultimate destruction of matter or energy. Entropy is the word that describes it.

M: That is the scientific term, yes. I'm amazed that such a concept that has only been accepted in the academic community for less than two centuries was stated by the Buddha two millenia ago.

B: Much that the Buddha taught was overlaid by dogma and local mores and all that. Can you envision any European scientist accepting the word of a pagan non-Christian about much of anything ... even if the evidence was staring them in the face?

M: No, I suppose not. So we have to rediscover things that the ancients knew and used millenia ago.

B: It is not the first time nor the last that human hubris has caused the loss of knowledge that has to be rediscovered. Humans are still scratching their engineering heads as to how the Egyptians and pre-Incan people moved and carved large stone blocks to such exacting dimensions that you cannot insert a piece of paper in the joints between them. Or the close tolerances on stonework that involve making precise rectangular depressions that we would be hard pressed today to equal.  
There are many examples of this loss of knowledge.

M: So we have to keep reinventing the wheel because we don't want to believe that someone else has gotten a method to do something ... and we didn't invent it.

B: Sad but true. Hubris is a common failing in this species. We have an inherent need to be 'king of the mountain' ... I think that is the term. And in doing so, we create conflict and ill will. That in turn leads to retaliation and anger and all the rest.  
It would seem that there is little hope for the species unless they learn to curb these tendencies.

M: Personally, I think that organized religion is to blame for much of the strife that we see. I see the evangelical Christians urging the Jews in Israel to get tough with the Palestinians, in hopes of starting a major conflict that will weaken both sides to the point that the fundamentalist Christians can come in and claim the whole place for themselves.

B: I have seen that tendency and thought expressed. It also thrives in the Middle East where Shia and Sunni Islamists fight each other on a regular basis. It thrives underground in China, where organized religion used to be banned, but survived anyway ... fighting with other underground religious groups in the process. It



even survived in Northern Ireland between Catholic and Protestant Christians. It is endemic to the species, I fear.

M: Do you see a solution to this?

B: Of course there is a solution, but it is one that most people will never hear of ... let alone accept and practice.

M: Let me guess. The practice of Buddhism.

B: How did you know? <laughter> In reality, it is the only philosophy/religion that that I know of that has even the remote potential of reducing world conflict and bringing a modicum of peace to the world. But I fear that it will not have a chance, due to its requirement of personal responsibility and the fact that it would eliminate much of the bureaucracy and hierarchy that exists within each and every society.

M: So if it won't have a chance, why do you bother?

B: Buddhist practice is an individual endeavor, and the result is a more peaceful and happier individual. If there is even one person who could benefit from the positive achievements of this practice, I am obligated to give them the basics of the practice and encourage them to proceed. But once it is given, it is up to the individual to do the work in order to realize these goals of happiness and peace.

M: So it is not a worldwide effort?

B: It is and it is not. The practitioners of Buddhism are worldwide. There are individuals worldwide who try to expand the practice to those that ask about it. But it is the individual effort that makes it work. In that respect it is very totally local.

M: That makes sense.

B: Whichever brand of Buddhist practice makes sense to the seeker, then that is the brand that which will do the most good for the individual. It is up to that individual to investigate and select. For some, the religious aspects of the practice will start them down the road to eventual happiness and peace. For others, solitary

investigation and insight meditation will do the trick. And there is a wide variety of paths in between.

M: So what you are saying ....

B: I am saying that there is no worldwide mass effort to increase the number of Buddhist practitioners. I am saying that there are many practitioners worldwide ... individuals making the world better through their example and teaching. While it lacks the mass appeal of an evangelistic religion, it is managing to inculcate the ideals of the practice in almost all venues. And even the Buddha said that it was permissible to be both a Buddhist and whatever other religion you like simultaneously ... so long as the requirements of both do not interfere.

M: So I can be a Catholic and a Buddhist simultaneously?

B: Of course. The two practices do not interfere. Their basic goals are the same. Where the rub would come is in the questioning of dogma within the Catholic Church. But the basic aims and ideals of both organizations are similar, if the individual can bridge the gaps between the two.

M: Those seem to be pretty large gaps to bridge.

B: In many cases they are. But you have to remember that Buddhist practice did not start by dealing with the masses. It was taught originally to the Brahmins, who were the Hindu priest class. The two philosophies were not that far apart, and the Brahmins had the time to investigate, question and meditate. In our present day, I doubt that Buddhist religion per se will take off in the Western World. It is too permeated with Christianity and Judaism and Islam. But for those people that have found that those religions do not satisfy their needs, Buddhist practice will. It is these people that the practice is most effective for ... not for those who want spoonfed platitudes and rote dogma.

M: I can see where that would be true. It is sad that the vast mass of people will never get to hear this.

B: It would not work if they did. They are used to being handed these

dogmas on a platter, and not having to think about them. And since most people will take the easy way out, this practice is not for them.

M: Point taken. But it is still sad.

B: Yes, but the problem lies not in the practice but with human nature. The species is born with inherent traits of war, greed, anger and all the other emotions that Buddhist practice seeks to control for the good of both the society and the individual. When the individual is calm, serene and happy, it is a better place for not only them, but those around them as well.

M: I understand that you have to leave soon, and return to Nepal. I will miss these conversations.

B: As will I. But since you have recorded them, and will transcribe them, I am sure that having them available will fill the void at least partially. And there are others here that you can converse with.

M: I appreciate that. Have a safe journey, and if you ever return, I would appreciate having a few more of these talks.

B: If I return, I promise that I will find you and we will have more conversations. Namaste.

M: Likewise ... goodbye for now.