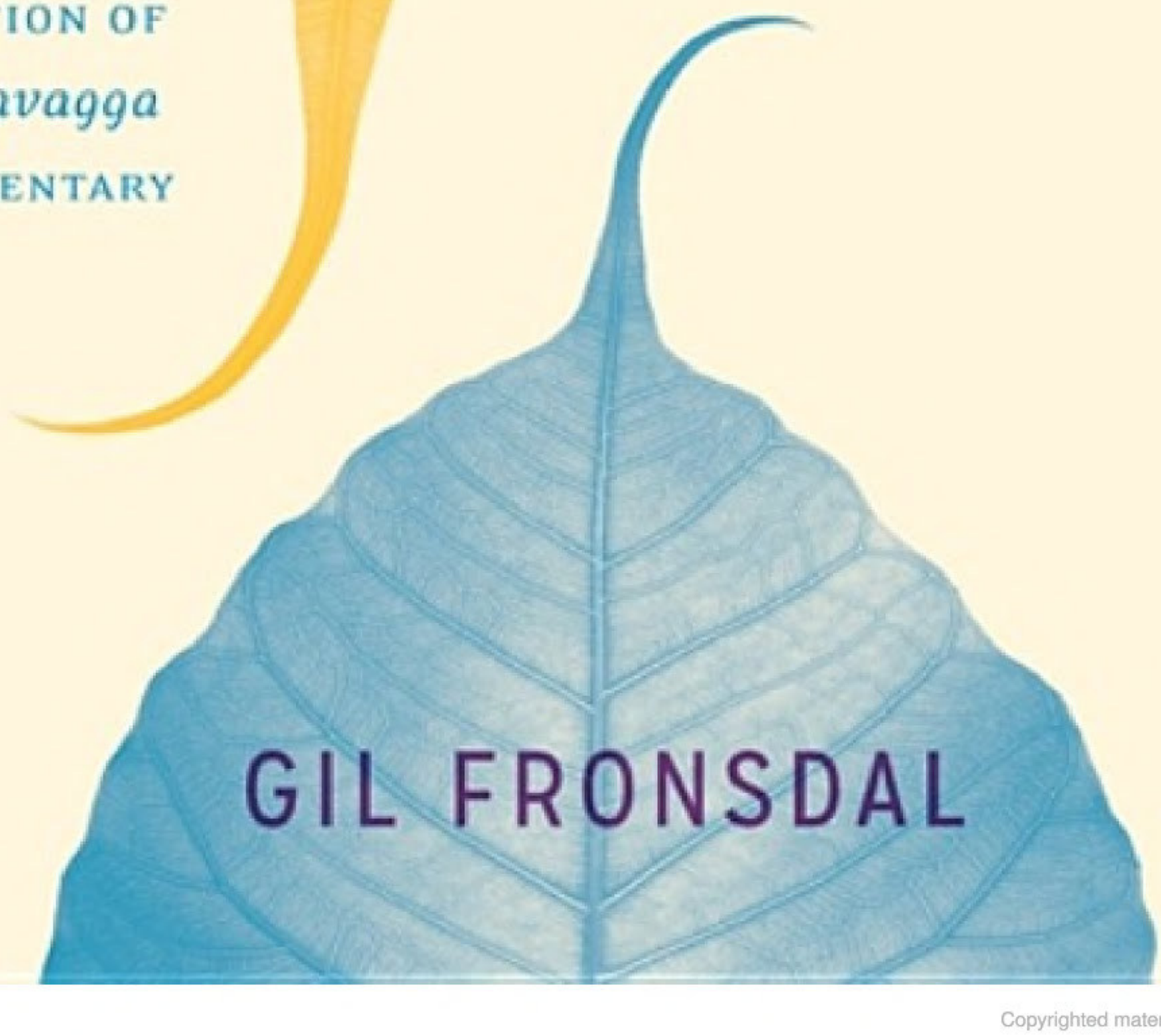
# The Buddha *before* Buddhism

WISDOM FROM THE EARLY TEACHINGS

A TRANSLATION OF THE *Aṭṭhakavagga* WITH COMMENTARY



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# Contents

# Preface

This book is a translation of a collection of ancient Buddhist poems often considered to be among the Buddha's first teachings. The anthology's original title, the *Book of Eights,* suggests something about the format of the poems, but it gives no hint that the text contains a radical message that differs significantly from standard presentations of Buddhism. Nor does the traditional title indicate that the book's teachings offer people a provocative challenge to live a life of deep, abiding peace. The peace that this text holds at its center is one to be experienced here and now, without any reference to the ultimate metaphysical and religious realities often taught as fundamental to Buddhism. In this text, reality is not divided into a conditioned, worldly realm and an unconditioned, transcendent realm far removed from the contingent world of ordinary human life. Instead, the teachings point to a peace that can be found in this life in this world. References to rarefied states of mental attainments—usually associated with meditation adepts—are also absent from this text, except perhaps in one enigmatic statement (verse 874).

As a longtime Buddhist practitioner, I am inspired by the directness, simplicity, and immediacy of the vision pointed to by these poems. Some Buddhist teachers have suggested that what is presented here is the view of the world as seen by someone who is already

enlightened and that the *Book of Eights* represents the perspectives of those furthest along the Buddhist path. Whether this is the case or not, I believe the text teaches a possibility that is available to anyone. I hope this translation helps open up this possibility.

In translating the text, I attempted to understand its teachings as intended by its author(s), trying to be as aware as possible of the biases and modern ideas I naturally carry with me. The purpose for doing this translation work was intensely personal in that I wanted to be challenged by these ancient teachings. I also hoped my own understanding of Buddhist teachings would improve through a closer look at some of its earliest texts.

To arouse interest in a translation of one of the oldest surviving Buddhist texts, I decided to call this book *The Buddha before Buddhism*. I hoped this title would raise a number of questions—most prominently, what might the Buddha have taught after his awakening but before he and others organized and systematized his teachings into what is now identified as Buddhism? Here, in an incipient stage in the development of early Buddhism, can we identify the Buddha's most essential message?

# Acknowledgments

In the years that I have studied and translated the *Book of Eights,* I have been inspired and supported by many people. I thank David Chappell, who introduced me to this text in my first graduate course in Buddhist studies. Jan Nattier's translation of a few of the discourses from the anthology gave me my first orientation for studying the text in Pali. Jan's ongoing encouragement and guidance throughout the project have been invaluable. I am also grateful to Grace G. Burford for her book *Desire, Death, and Goodness: The Conflict of Ultimate Values in Theravada Buddhism.* Her study on the *Book of Eights* inspired me with new perspectives for reading the text.

I am very grateful to Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Andrew Olendzki, and Diana Clark for checking my translation against the Pali original. I thank Bhikkhu Bodhi for his comments on my translation of "The Eightfold Discourse on the Ultimate." The suggestions and corrections from these scholars have been as humbling as they have been invaluable.

Diana Clark and Carol Ghigliari both provided expert editing of the entire book. Without their generous help, the text wouldn't be as readable as it has become. Andrea Fella provided important editorial suggestions on the translation of the poems. I am very grateful for their contributions and their warmhearted support.

I am also grateful to the pioneering scholarship of

those who previously translated the text into English. Their careful work at deciphering some of the difficult passages made it possible for me to make my own translation. In particular, I wish to thank K. R. Norman and Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

I would like to reassure all those who have supported me in this project that any errors in the translation are my own.

# Introduction

The *Book of Eights*, or *Aṭṭhakavagga,* is a relatively small anthology of sixteen poems tucked away in a larger anthology that is itself relegated to yet another anthology, the canonical group of texts known as the *Minor Collection* (*Khuddaka Nikāya*). Perhaps because of this inconspicuous placement, the *Book of Eights* has not received the attention it deserves for containing a unique and, for some, a very inspiring presentation of important Buddhist teachings. Here we find the Buddha's teachings pared down to their most essential elements, free of the more complex doctrines often associated with Buddhism. The *Book of Eights* gives the impression of containing the seeds that grew into the fully developed early Buddhist teachings in India.

What may be perplexing to many is that the *Book of Eights* does not espouse a religious doctrine that exists in opposition to other doctrines. Nor does it put forth a teaching that is meant to be seen as superior to other teachings. In a manner that challenges the religious beliefs of many people—including many Buddhists—the text explicitly denies the role of ultimate religious "truth" and "knowledge" in attaining personal peace.

Instead, the text points to a direct and simple approach for attaining peace without requiring an adherence to any specific ideology. The possibility of this peace is what guides the teachings and practices in the text. The value of these teachings is not the

profundity of their philosophy or their authority as "scripture"; rather, they are valuable for the results they bring to those who live by them. Instead of doctrines to be believed, the *Book of Eights* describes means or practices for realizing peace.

The goal put forth in the *Book of Eights* is described both in terms of the states of mind to be attained and the mental activities to be abandoned. Peace and equanimity are the most common descriptions of what is attained,[1] and clinging, craving, being entrenched, and quarreling are the activities most frequently said to be abandoned.[2] There is a clear relationship between the states to be attained and the activities to be let go in that to experience peace for oneself, one must release one's clingings. The person who realizes this is called a sage, or *muni,* an ancient Indian designation for a wise or holy person. In much later Buddhist literature, the Buddha is referred to as Sakyamuni—that is, "the Sage of the Sakya [Clan]."

While the attainment of peace is often referred to in personal terms, the *Book of Eights* also places its teaching in the context of social strife. This is seen dramatically in the opening of "The Discourse on Being Violent" (Chapter 15), where the Buddha recounts his dismay at the quarrels and conflicts he witnessed in his own society. In "The Discourse to Pasūra" (Chapter 8), the Buddha is keenly sensitive to the suffering that comes from doctrinal conflicts between rival religious groups. Many of the poems in the *Book of Eights* emphasize that a sage does not get involved in these interpersonal and interreligious conflicts. Because the book frequently discusses social conflict and the avoidance of such conflict, the teachings not only point to the possibility of personal peace, but they also suggest the possibility of peace between people as well.

Remarkably, the teachings in the *Book of Eights* are presented without recourse to many of the standard, systematized teachings associated with early

Buddhism. No mention is made of most of the familiar numbered lists such as the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path—teachings that are often considered to be the essence of Buddhism. Nowhere in the text does one find the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the four *jhānas* (concentration states), the Five Aggregates, the Three Characteristics, the Seven Factors of Awakening, or the Three Refuges. Also missing are the teachings that modern audiences often find the most confusing, such as the concepts of not-self and an unconditioned reality that transcends ordinary life. The common Buddhist concerns of rebirth and ending the cycles of rebirth are primarily discussed in terms of what non-Buddhists believe. The *Book of Eights*' emphasis is on overcoming any longing for any form of future rebirth. In contrast to later Buddhist teachings that are predicated on the belief in rebirth, the *Book of Eights* presents a path of practice—attainable in this lifetime—that appears free from concern with multiple lives.

The absence of standardized and systematized teachings is one reason the *Book of Eights* is easy to overlook. It doesn't provide numerical lists or easy quotes to illustrate the teachings found in introductory-level books on Buddhism. The text can also be dismissed if one is looking for a devotional-based orientation to Buddhism and the Buddha. In this text, the Buddha does not appear in superhuman forms or with supernatural powers that would inspire devotees. Nowhere is he called "the One Who Is Thus" (*tathāgata*), a title frequently associated with him in other early scriptures. Even the title of Buddha is rare, occurring only once. Furthermore, only once in the verses is he referred to by the illustrious title "the Blessed One" (*bhagavant*).

Because the teachings of the *Book of Eights* differ from what is generally understood to be the Buddha's message, a few scholars have suggested that it was not originally a Buddhist text. These scholars believe that one or more converts from another religious group may

have brought the text along when they joined the Buddha's order. Because the text was seen as compatible with early Buddhist teachings, it was accepted into the Buddhist canon.[3]

However, the more common theory among Buddhist scholars is that the *Book of Eights* is a Buddhist text that was composed early, perhaps originating in the first years of the Buddha's forty-five-year teaching career. It is fairly common for these scholars to assume the *Book of Eights* is among the earliest surviving teachings of the Buddha.[4] The lack of systematized, numerically ordered teachings is taken as evidence of its early composition. The ancient poetic meter in which some of the verses are composed further suggests an early date, as do some of the unusual and archaic words and word forms. The lack of any reference to settled monastic life also suggests that it may have been composed soon after the Buddha's awakening, while he and his monastic followers were peripatetic mendicants.

The most compelling evidence for the antiquity of the *Book of Eights,* however, is the fact that it is mentioned by name in three ancient Buddhist scriptures. We can at least conclude that the *Book of Eights* predates these canonical texts. One of them provides a lengthy commentary on a verse explicitly identified as coming from the *Book of Eights*.[5] In nearly identical passages in the other two texts, the Buddha asks a monk named Soṇa to recite the Dharma—that is, the teachings. Soṇa does so by reciting "all sixteen parts of the *Book of Eights*."[6] The Buddha then congratulates Soṇa for his clear, well-delivered recitation. From this reference, it seems that the *Book of Eights* was already assembled at a very early date into the sixteen chapters we have today. It also shows that the anthology existed as an independent work at that time.

## Preserving the Dharma

The *Soṇa Sutta* is also significant in providing evidence

of the ancient Buddhist practice of using poetry to preserve, learn, and disseminate important teachings. A close connection between Buddhist teachings and poetry has existed from the very beginning of the religion. The ancient Buddhist scriptures state that the Buddha's first words after his enlightenment were expressed in verse.[7] These scriptures contain hundreds of poems and thousands of verses used to convey the teachings. Some of the poems stand alone, as they do in the *Book of Eights.* Other poems appear either interspersed in prose passages or, emphatically, at the end of prose teachings as a way to reiterate an important teaching.

The earliest surviving reports of how the Buddha and his disciples intentionally preserved and transmitted his teachings depict them using poetry. The story of Soṇa's recitation of the *Book of Eights* is an example of how verse was an accepted, perhaps even expected, means of conveying the teachings.

The *Book of Eights* has, within itself, evidence that it was recited. A quarter of the way through the twenty verses of "The Discourse on Being Violent," the existing text has an ancient editorial addition indicating that the verses should be recited. This was likely a communal recitation following the recitation of the opening verses by a single chanter.

It is safe to assume that any teachings that were intentionally composed, memorized, and recited as poetry were particularly valued by early Buddhists. Rather than relying on modern interpretations for what may have been these important teachings, the poems give voice to something the early Buddhists emphasized themselves.

In addition to the *Book of Eights,* the early scriptures contain a poem called "An Auspicious Day" and another anthology of poems called the *Book of the Way to the Other Shore* (*Pārāyanavagga*) that canonical evidence suggests were also used for memorization, recitation, and teaching by the Buddha's followers. Together with

the *Book of Eights,* these texts all reveal a common doctrine that is distinct from the standard presentations of early Buddhist teachings. All three of them also functioned as liturgy for recitation, verses for instruction, and means of preserving important teachings. The significance given to these poems is also seen in the reference to laypeople who had memorized either parts or all of the two anthologies. For example, according to the *Nandamātā Sutta,* a laywoman named Nandamātā recites the *Book of the Way to the Other Shore* to herself.[8]

"An Auspicious Day" is found in the *Middle Length Discourses,* one of five large anthologies of scriptures attributed to the Buddha and his immediate disciples.[9] The popularity of this poem is suggested by the fact that it occurs nine times in four different scriptures (texts usually referred to as *suttas,* or "discourses") in this anthology.

Two of these discourses also contain commentaries on the poem, evidence that the Buddha and his monastic disciples used the poem as a basis for teaching. The explicit expectation that the Buddha's monastic disciples should memorize it further suggests that "An Auspicious Day" functioned as part of the disciples' education. Here is the poem:

AN AUSPICIOUS DAY

Don't chase the past
 Or long for the future.
 The past is left behind;
 The future is not yet reached.

Have insight into whatever phenomenon are present,
 Right where it is;
 Not faltering and not agitated,
 By knowing whatever is present
 One develops the mind.

Ardently do what should be done today—
 Who knows, death may come tomorrow.

There is no bargaining with Mortality
And his great army.

Whoever dwells thus ardent,
—active day and night—
Is, says the peaceful sage,
One who has an auspicious day.

Except perhaps for the reference to Mortality's great army, the teachings in this poem are remarkably timeless. They are as relevant to us in the modern world as they probably were when they were composed twenty-five hundred years ago. The poem contains no ideology, sectarian beliefs, or reference to divine or supernatural realities. Instead it emphasizes attaining insight into the immediacy of one's present experience, an activity that gives one an "auspicious day." The reference to a "peaceful sage" suggests that peace is the desired attainment.

Because "An Auspicious Day" is a single, short poem, we shouldn't use it alone to come to conclusions about early Buddhist teachings. However, together with the *Book of Eights,* the poem begins to reveal a pattern in the kind of teachings the early Buddhists memorized, recited, and taught one another.

This pattern is also seen in the *Book of the Way to the Other Shore.* The simplicity and directness of this anthology are represented by the following verses:

Subdue greed for sensual pleasure.
See renunciation as peace. Let there be nothing
You take up or reject.

Let what was in the past fade away,
Make nothing of the future.
If you don't cling to what is in the present,
You can wander about calm.
(verses 1098–1099)

The teachings in the *Book of the Way to the Other*

*Shore* are related to those in the *Book of Eights,* as they too lack the systemized, analytical, and numerically organized teachings that are commonly associated with the Buddha and early Buddhism. Both texts emphasize attaining peace through not clinging to anything. Both refer to the person who does this as a sage (*muni*).

While the *Book of Eights,* the *Book of the Way to the Other Shore,* and "An Auspicious Day" are doctrinally distinct from what is found in many of the other early Buddhist scriptures, we should not assume they were outliers without any central importance. The evidence suggests the opposite; the stories of people memorizing, reciting, and explicating these three works suggest that they had an active role within early Buddhist communities. In fact, it may well be that these teachings lay at the heart of the earliest tradition. Many of the rest of the surviving teachings could be considered elaborations, adaptations, and digressions from these early foundational teachings.

## Four Themes of the Book of Eights

Four basic themes are prominent in the teachings in the *Book of Eights*: letting go of views, avoiding sensual craving, the qualities of a sage, and the training to become a sage. The first two themes are the behaviors most associated with peace and nonclinging. The last two refer to the person who has attained these ideals and the practices that led to their attainment. Not all of these themes are in every poem, and some poems emphasize them more than others do.

### *Letting Go of Views (Chapters 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 11, 12, and 13)*

The predominant teaching regarding views is the importance of not clinging to any opinions, philosophies, doctrines, or religious teachings. This includes views about ultimate religious truth. The text teaches that to find peace, a follower should shake off

every view without embracing or rejecting anything—this includes views about views. A number of verses are critical of any assertion that one's own religious beliefs are the truest or best, while others' are inferior.

For many readers, this seeming no-view teaching is a radical message. It undermines the importance of doctrines that underlie many religious traditions, including some Buddhist ones. The teachings in the *Book of Eights* provide no support for the idea that one should believe teachings just because they are found in certain Buddhist texts.

The poems include many examples of the problems that arise if one clings to views: attachment to concepts leads to debates and quarrels; it causes one to seek praise and leaves one feeling depressed when one's opinion is refuted; it causes one to swing between feeling high and low, depending on whether one is praised or criticized; and if clinging to views does bring a type of peace, it turns out to be an unstable one. Overall, the *Book of Eights* emphasizes that clinging to views does not lead to reliable peace.

Finally, the goal of practice is often described in terms of letting go of views. Those who have realized the goal—the sages—are not attached to views and so avoid debates, quarrels, and any conceit that their views are better than others. Letting go of their attachments, sages have no need for any doctrine in terms of theories, abstract concepts, or beliefs. With no reliance on such doctrines, the wise person does not oppose anyone else's doctrine. This is stated explicitly in the following verse:

> They are not an enemy to any doctrine
> Seen, heard, or thought out.
> Not forming opinions, not shut down, and not desirous,
> They are sages, wise ones who have laid their burden down.
>
> (verse 914)

The text does not explain what the "burden" is; in context, we can assume it refers to some attachment a person clings to and carries unnecessarily. "The Discourse to Māgaṇḍiya" (Chapter 9) contains a story of a person for whom the idea of letting go of religious views and theories is confusing. Because most religions are based on a particular doctrine, what are the faithful left with when they lay down their views? How can one hold a belief that's not in opposition to the doctrines of others?

The *Middle Length Discourses* answers these questions in a text where the Buddha states that his teachings are not the basis for debates and disagreements. Composed in prose rather than verse, the first part of this discourse, the Honeyball Sutta, shares so many concepts and so much vocabulary with the *Book of Eights* that the two were un-doubtedly composed in the same milieu. The discourse begins with a man named Daṇḍapāṇi aggressively asking the Buddha to explain his teaching. It may be that Daṇḍapāṇi was interested in engaging the Buddha in a debate, an activity the *Book of Eights* considers pointless. Daṇḍapāṇi was left silent and bewildered when the Buddha replied,

> Such a teaching with which one does not quarrel with anyone in this world . . . [a teaching where a person] who lives uninvolved with lust and who is free of doubt, worry and craving for any existence does not cling to concepts. This is what I teach.[10]

Rather than teaching a doctrine that can be debated, the Buddha here teaches the importance of not clinging to concepts. In other words, he is not interested in doctrines as much as how people relate to them. Freedom isn't found through doctrines, though it does require not clinging to them.

After the Buddha explains his teachings, Daṇḍapāṇi leaves without saying anything further. However, some

of the Buddha's monks ask him to elaborate on his statement. The Buddha then states,

> As for the basis on which conceptual differentiation, concepts, and conceptualizations occur, if there is nothing there to delight in, to welcome, or to be bound up with, this is the end to the obsessions with lust, aversion, views, doubt, conceit, ignorance, and the desire for becoming. That is the end of resorting to weapons, arguments, quarrels, disputes, accusations, divisive tale-bearing, and false speech. This is how malicious, unskillful states cease completely.[11]

The assumption in this statement is that if one looks underneath concepts at what they represent and finds nothing to be attached to, then one would not have any obsessions or tendencies toward unskillful states. This is described in terms of no longer getting involved in conflict. As with the *Book of Eights,* the Honeyball Sutta has a keen interest in preventing interpersonal conflict.

Attachment to views and doctrines is an obstacle to peace. When the attachment leads to conflict with others who hold different views, interpersonal peace is lost. When the clinging brings mental agitation, inner peace is absent. For the *Book of Eights,* one of the important means to peace is to give up clinging to views and doctrines, especially the beliefs about ultimate religious truths, experiences, or realities.

### *Sensual Craving (Chapters 1, 2, 7, and 9)*

The issue of sensual desire and sensual pleasure is another of the primary themes in the *Book of Eights.* In a sense, this theme is the entry point into the text as it's the subject of the first discourse in the collection, the *Kāma Sutta.* Anyone familiar with the renowned Indian sex manual with the same name, the *Kāma Sūtra* (*sūtra* being the Sanskrit word for the Pali

equivalent, *sutta,* or "discourse"), will be struck by how distinctly these two texts stand in contrast to each other. The Sanskrit text teaches how to maximize sensual pleasure, while the much shorter Buddhist text teaches the dangers found in the *greed* for sensual pleasures.

Through this greed, one will "be overcome by weakness, crushed by dangers, and penetrated by suffering as water penetrates a cracked boat." Sensual craving involves greed for anything experienced through the five physical senses. The poem lists an extensive range of items that can be the object of sensual desire, including "fields, property, cows and horses, servants, women, relatives."

The spiritual life championed by the *Book of Eights* is one that is not tied to the world of sense pleasure. As long as one is entangled in this world, one will not be free. In the language of the text, mental seclusion (*viveka)*—an important concept in early Buddhism—depends on letting go of sensual desires. For a modern English-speaking audience, the importance of this word might be better understood if *viveka* were rendered as "independence" and the sage as becoming independent of sensual desires.

The theme of avoiding sensual craving is sometimes stated in strong terms, for example in this verse from the first chapter:

> Sidestepping sensual desire
> —As one would the head of a snake with one's foot—
> Is the mindful one, who,
> While in this world, steps beyond craving.
> (verse 768)

Readers might conclude that the *Book of Eights* has an excessively negative view of sensual pleasures. However, I believe the main emphasis is not the pleasures themselves but rather the way people are caught up in sensual pursuits. The text describes this

entanglement in many ways—such as being tied to, bound to, greedy for, intent on, and infatuated with sensual pleasures. If one is to reach the goal of the Buddhist path, one must no longer be in the grip of such pursuits:

> A person, ever mindful,
> Therefore turns away from sensual desires;
> Abandoning them, one will cross the flood,
> Like bailing a boat to reach the far shore.
> (verse 771)

The attachment to sexual intercourse is singled out as a particularly strong form of sensual desire. The entire "Discourse to Tissa Metteyya" (Chapter 7) is devoted to discussing the dangers that come with being addicted to sex. Perhaps surprisingly, given the strong emphasis on being independent without clinging to anything, most of the dangers mentioned have to do with receiving other people's disapproval.

It is not just attachment to sex that is to be avoided; the "Discourse to Tissa Metteyya" explicitly counsels celibacy. For this poem, the dangers of sexual activity are avoided by not engaging in sex. It is possible that these teachings are based on the premise that it is not possible to engage in sexual activity without having some attachment. To be free of attachments thus means becoming celibate. For modern lay readers, celibacy may be challenging and unwelcome. However, rather than rejecting this teaching outright, laypeople could be inspired to explore any attachments or cravings they might have regarding sex.

### *Description of the Sage (Chapters 4, 6, 9, 10, 13, and 15)*

A third theme in the *Book of Eights* is the qualities of the sage. Due to the sage's proficiency in realizing peace, he or she is often referred to as "a skilled person" or "expert" (*kusalo*). In that sages are wise,

they are also referred to as “the wise one” (*dhiro*), “the learned one” (*pandito*), and “one of much wisdom” (*bhuri paññño*). With the shedding of attachment, this person is also called “the cleansed one” (*dhono*). In some passages, the word *brahmin* is used to describe the sage. At the time of the Buddha, brahmins were a hereditary social class that considered itself superior to all other classes. In using the title for a sage, the text is appropriating or redefining the term so it no longer refers to the social class. A “true brahmin” is someone who has let go of all of his or her clinging.

In many passages describing the goal of peace, the *Book of Eights* emphasizes the skillful sage’s behavior rather than an attainment distinct from how he or she lives. For example, with the possible exception of the enigmatic verse 874, the text does not mention any singular attainment or transcendent and extraordinary states of consciousness. No mention is made of psychic powers such as the divine eye or the divine ear that are important in other early Buddhist discourses. Rather, the text enumerates the ethical behaviors in which such people would or would not engage and the qualities of inner virtue or character they would possess. In this way, the religious goal of the texts is always described in ordinary human terms, not in mystical, transcendent, or metaphysical terms.

The most common attribute associated with a sage is peace (*santi*). Such a person advocates peace, sees and knows peace, is at peace, and is peaceful. The sage is also tranquil, still and unmoving, unshakable, and equanimous. Though peace is clearly an attribute of sages, they do not *depend* on peace or intentionally take it up. This is because sages do not depend on or take up anything; instead, they let go.

These designations and descriptions of the adept suggest qualities that can be discerned in oneself and that are directly relevant to how one lives one’s life. They do not suggest that the sage has psychic or supernormal powers or has attained transcendent

realities removed from this world. Instead, they point to a pragmatic, observable mode of being in the world.

A significant attribute of skillful sages is their ability to know and see—sometimes they are called the "ones who know." They do not see the nature of ultimate reality or some form of ultimate consciousness. Rather, sages know and see the ways in which people struggle. They know what is not harmonious and what is dangerous. They know the problems that come from pride and holding on to opinions. They see how people selfishly thrash about, get elated and deflated in their disputes, speak with arrogance, and cling to teachings. By having insights into these afflictive states, a wise person knows not to get involved with them and to let go of them. The appendix of this book gathers quotes of many of the positive references to knowing and seeing in the *Book of Eights*. Seeing these excerpts together provides an overview of how important these activities were for the composers of the text.

Being at peace and having overcome cravings, sages become independent in knowing the Dharma through their own direct insight and experience. They don't depend on anything, including doctrines, precepts, and religious observances.

In discussing the sage, the *Book of Eights* does not use the more familiar words or titles that are common in other, probably later, Buddhist texts. For example, in contrast to many of the canonical Buddhist discourses, nowhere in the *Book of Eights* is the ideal person called an *arahant*. Literally meaning a "worthy one," this title refers to the notion that the ideal person is worthy of respect and offerings. *Arahant* is therefore a description of how the sage is to be treated by others. All the words used to describe the ideal person in the *Book of Eights* refer to his or her personal qualities. The emphasis is on the character and behavior of individuals, not on what or how the person is in relation to others.

Also absent is any reference to people being stream-

enterers, once-returners, and nonreturners. The terms *once-returner* and *nonreturner* refer to the concept of rebirth. Once-returners have attained such a degree of spiritual liberation that they will only be reborn as a human being one more time. Nonreturners, having a higher degree of liberation, are not reborn again as humans. Instead, after death, they appear in a heavenly realm where they attain their full liberation. Because rebirth has no role in the teachings of the *Book of Eights,* it's not surprising that the concepts of rebirth are not used in reference to accomplished practitioners, those people who are referred to as peaceful, wise, learned, skilled, and cleansed.

### *Training (Chapters 14, 15, and 16)*

A fourth theme of the *Book of Eights* is that of training, or the practices conducive to peace and becoming a sage. While all the chapters of the *Book of Eights* discuss what someone on the path should and should not do, the last three chapters give the most attention to this theme.

The *Book of Eights* focuses on fundamental, personal, and psychological transformations for which individuals are personally responsible: "Train fully in your own release" (verse 940) and "A monastic wouldn't seek peace from others" (verse 919). The text provides no help from gods or external forces. To many modern readers, this will be less of a revolutionary message than it probably was in the Buddha's time.

In focusing on cultivating behaviors and virtues, the *Book of Eights* rarely mentions specific techniques or practices. Stated differently, the text doesn't emphasize religious practices that can be seen as steps toward attaining the qualities of the ideal person. Furthermore, it explicitly and provocatively says that religious observances and practices in themselves are not adequate for becoming a person at peace. Rather, it encourages people to simply behave like the ideal sage.

There is no sharp distinction between the means and the goal in the *Book of Eights*. That is, the personal qualities of someone who has attained the goal are the same qualities one is to cultivate when training for the goal. One trains by being what one is to become. If the goal is to be peaceful, the way there is to be peaceful. If the goal is to be released from craving, the way there is to "train to subdue their cravings" (verse 916). In this way the achievement of the goal is not radically distinct from what led to that achievement.

The emphasis on training in chapters 14, 15, and 16 is different enough from the themes of the earlier chapters to give the impression that the former were composed within a different context, perhaps for a different audience. They may have been composed later than the earlier poems, and their placement at the end of the anthology gives some support to the idea that they were added last. Whereas the earlier poems give no indication of the existence of a Buddhist monastic community, chapters 14 and 16, in particular, are explicitly directed toward monastics.

## Purity versus Peace

While peace is the most commonly mentioned Buddhist goal in the *Book of Eights,* "purity" (*suddhi*) is the most frequent word used for the goal of non-Buddhists. There are no references in the text to suggest that the Buddha explicitly approves of any statements that define purity as the ultimate goal.[12] Of the twenty-three uses of the word *purity,* ten occur in descriptions the Buddha gives for beliefs non-Buddhists have about their ideal goal.[13] In five other occurrences, he uses the word in response to what others say or ask about it.[14] While he does not explicitly reject the concept, it is not how he prefers to describe the goal. In one verse where the Buddha is willing to use the word *purity* in relationship to the ultimate goal, he only explains what purity is not. But then he seems to drop the reference to purity as he goes on to say that the goal is attained

through letting go (verse 839). In one other passage, he seems to accept purity indirectly as a label for the goal but only by again describing it as the absence of grasping (verse 876).

The Buddha's strongest affirmative reference to purity is in verse 834, where he describes himself as pure. Except for this, nowhere does the *Book of Eights* directly discuss the Buddhist goal, or the qualities of someone who has attained that goal, in terms of purity. In fact, a sage doesn't wish for purity (verse 813), doesn't have "wishes for 'purity' or 'impurity'" (verse 900), and doesn't see anything in terms of "absolute purity" (verse 794). It would seem that the sage should let go of any concern with purity.

As already noted, the Buddha's preferred way of referring to the ideal goal is peace (*santi*). He commonly describes those who have realized this goal as peaceful.[15] They are "peaceful among those not at peace" (verse 912). They know that release—that is, being free of clinging—is peace (verse 933).

This contrast between the uses of *purity* and *peace* represent a difference in religious goals and values between the Buddha and other religious practitioners of the time. It also suggests that to better understand the *Book of Eights,* we have to understand the religious context in which it was composed.

## Religious Context for the *Book of Eights*

The first generations of Indian Buddhists lived in an environment heavily defined by the religious beliefs, practices, and values of the brahmins and the renunciants. As with the early Buddhist literature in general, these two types of religious practitioners are mentioned repeatedly in the *Book of Eights*.[16] While ancient Buddhists commonly distinguished themselves from the brahmins and renunciants, they also shared many ideas with these fellow religious practitioners.

Brahmins were a hereditary group that considered themselves the superior social class. Some were

wealthy landowners, and others were the priests responsible for preserving their sacred teachings and conducting rituals. Purity was a central concern of the brahmins, and the careful observances of rituals and social taboos were important means for attaining purity. The first poem in the *Book of Eights* lists the kind of possessions associated with wealthy people of the times, including rich male brahmins: fields, goods, gold, cows, horses, servants, women, relatives, and lots of sensual pleasures.

The orthodox brahmin priests adhered to the old Vedic religion based on the *Rig-Veda* and its commentaries, some of which date back before 1000 B.C.E. In the century or two before the Buddha, a new movement evolved out of the old religion and focused more on personal transformation and realization than the performance of rituals and prayers to the gods. The new movement seems to have been strongly associated with groups of renunciants. It often criticized, downplayed, or reinterpreted the rituals and symbols of the brahmins. An important body of literature for some renunciant groups was the Upanishads. These are sacred texts, some of which claim to contain teachings of particular sages who lived prior to the Buddha.

Renunciants were a group of diverse religious seekers who renounced ordinary, domestic lifestyles for lives of radical simplicity and poverty. The common Buddhist term for such a person is *samaṇa,* a word that may originally have meant "striver," but which I have rendered as "renunciant" to convey a characteristic feature of their lifestyle. Other translators have often translated the word as "ascetic" or "recluse." Most commonly, *samaṇas* renounced possessions and sexual activity. Because they lived without a fixed residence, they were sometimes called "homeless." While renunciants often shared similar lifestyles in giving up domestic life to become full-time religious practitioners, their actual beliefs and practices were quite diverse. Most commonly they were associated

with asceticism, meditation, and/or doctrinal speculation, with some specializing in one of these topics more than others.

Buddhist monastics belonged to this renunciant group, sometimes identifying themselves as *samaṇas,* but more commonly referring to themselves with as *bhikkhus.* Literally meaning "mendicant," *bhikkhu* refers to the practice of relying on alms for food and other necessities. The Buddha and his early followers shared many practices and ideas with other renunciants. One of the clearest ways to see this is through the ideas the Buddhist texts share with the early Upanishads.

Many concepts that are now identified as Buddhist were already current in these early Vedic treatises. This is especially the case with the *Upanishad of the Great Forest* (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*), a text that may been composed and **known** in the part of India where the Buddha lived. Consistent with early Buddhism, this Upanishad teaches the attainment of realization through letting go of all desires. Also similar to early Buddhism, it describes realization in terms of overcoming sorrow, delusion, old age, and death.[17] Furthermore, as in Buddhism, the *Upanishad of the Great Forest* espouses the idea of renouncing lay life to become a *bhikkhu.*[18] Its teachings on karma and rebirth are also similar to what is found in Buddhist texts.[19]

We see then that some Buddhist ideas are less a break from the earlier Upanishadic tradition than a continuation or modification of it. To highlight the distinctions without acknowledging the similarities obscures the context from which early Buddhist teachings arose. In relation to the *Book of Eights,* this means we can better understand some of its poems in light of the teachings of the Upanishads, especially the *Upanishad of the Great Forest.* This is particularly true for "The Discourse on Quarrels and Disputes" (Chapter 11), a text that is difficult to understand without the help of the *Upanishad of the Great Forest.* For

example, the answers the Buddha provides may use words and concepts in the way the Upanishadic interlocutor understands them, not the way later Buddhists did.[20]

## Buddhist Context for the *Book of Eights*

Chapters 14 and 16 of the *Book of Eights* are clearly placed in a Buddhist context in that they contain teachings intended for Buddhist monastics. This is particularly true in chapter 16 where the questioner is Sāriputta, one of the Buddha's foremost monastic disciples.[21]

The five verses attributed to Sāriputta contain different concepts and emphases than those found in the rest of the *Book of Eights.* In contrast to the Buddha's seeming reluctance to hold up purity as a desirable goal, Sāriputta asks what trainings one should undertake to purify oneself. In contrast to the here-and-now, this-world emphasis elsewhere in the text, Sāriputta mentions the unseen world of gods and heavenly realms. He also brings in a degree of respect, reverence, and praise for the Buddha not seen in the rest of the book. It is interesting that Sāriputta here utters the only occurrence of the title Buddha in the *Book of Eights.* Perhaps the verses attributed to him illustrate how the Buddha and his teachings were viewed by his disciples. As such, these verses may provide one example of how the Buddha's teachings were changed over time, first by his direct disciples and then by later followers. If we are interested in knowing what the Buddha actually taught, we have to be careful to distinguish his teachings from those of his disciples and from the later tradition.

We have one clear example of how one of the Buddha's preeminent monks interpreted a portion of the *Book of Eights.* In a collection of *suttas* called the *Connected Discourses,* a layperson recites a verse from the *Book of Eights* and then asks Venerable Mahā Kaccāna to explain its meaning. This verse, from a

poem called “The Discourse to Māgaṇḍiya” (Chapter 9), is as follows:

> Letting go of home,
> Wandering without a household,
> Not becoming intimate with villagers
> Free from sensual desire,
> Free of expectations,
> A sage won’t quarrel with people.
> (verse 844)

Mahā Kaccāna begins his explanation by interpreting *home* metaphorically, saying that if one has attachments to one’s body (*rūpadhātu*), consciousness will be stuck at home with the body:

> The body, Householder, is the home of consciousness; one whose consciousness is chained by lust for physicality is called one who wanders about in a home.
> SN 22.3; iii 9–10

Mahā Kaccāna goes on to state that if all attachments to physical experience are eliminated, consciousness will not be limited by anything and so will “wander homeless.” This same metaphor is then applied to feeling, perception, and mental formations: if one doesn’t cling to any of these, consciousness can also be considered homeless. Through this metaphorical interpretation, Mahā Kaccāna explains the first words of the verse so they are relevant for the layperson, meaning the householder who asked for the explanation.

Mahā Kaccāna takes a similar approach to interpret “wandering without a household.” *Household* is defined as sense impressions. Someone who is attached to sense objects “wanders with a household”; someone without attachments to sense objects “wanders without a household.”

Mahā Kaccāna provides descriptive explanations for

the remaining lines of the poem. For example, for the line, "A sage won't quarrel with people," Mahā Kaccāna states,

> And how, Householder, does one not quarrel with people? Here, Householder, one does not speak with such talk as, "You do not understand this teaching and discipline! I understand this teaching and discipline. Your practice is wrong. My practice is right. . . . I am consistent. You are not consistent. . . . Your doctrine has been refuted. . . ." In this way one does not quarrel with people.
>
> SN 22:3; iii 12

This same passage occurs nine other times in various Pali discourses. Most likely, Mahā Kaccāna is interpreting the poem according to current established Buddhist teachings of his time. Rather than presenting his own interpretation, he engages the practice of finding or making meaning through establishing a connection between one teaching and another.

These two explanations by Mahā Kaccāna represent two different interpretative approaches. The first is contextual and innovative in offering a unique, metaphorical explanation that made a passage relevant for his audience. The second relies on having a good grasp of a range of Buddhist teachings and then establishing a connection of equivalence between two different canonical statements and concepts.

A version of this second approach is found in the *Mahāniddesa* (*The Great Explanation*), an early canonical commentary that explains each word in the *Book of Eights* by listing synonyms. Here we see the introduction of concepts that are absent from the Buddha's teachings in the *Book of Eights*. For example, in the *Mahāniddesa,* peace (*santi*)—the primary goal in the *Book of Eights*—is discussed in terms of a "state" (*pada*) of peace. Repeatedly, the text describes this state with concepts such as "the state of shelter, the

state of safety, the state of refuge, the state of fearlessness, the eternal state, the deathless state, the state of *nibbāna*."[22] Not only do these synonyms introduce concepts that aren't in the *Book of Eights,* such as eternity and deathlessness, but they also discuss peace in abstract terms as if it can be distinguished from a person who is peaceful. Overall, the idea of an actual peaceful sage recedes from view in the *Mahāniddesa*.

The abstract concept of a state of peace does appear once in the *Book of Eights*.[23] However, it isn't the Buddha who uses this expression, but one of his questioners. This person asks the Buddha what someone needs to see to become free and achieve a state of peace. In his response, the Buddha does not answer the question as it is asked. He makes no mention of what one needs to see to be free nor does he refer to a state of peace. Instead he describes the actions one would or would not take to become free and the inner experiences one would feel. For example, one would subdue one's craving and not get attached to any teachings. A person who did this would be tranquil and still.

The Buddha's avoidance here of discussing the spiritual ideal in terms of abstract, impersonal states highlights the very different direction the *Mahāniddesa* takes in introducing concepts like eternity or deathlessness. It is an example of how later Buddhism began to emphasize the transcendent state of liberation rather than the eminent qualities and behavior of a person who is liberated.

## The *Book of Eights* in Action

An alternative to studying the meaning and interpretations of the teachings in the *Book of Eights* is to view the text as performative literature with aesthetic value designed to be recited and heard. In the early centuries of Buddhism in India, the teachings were not recorded in books. Instead they were

memorized and recited. When sacred texts are repeatedly recited or chanted, they tend to have a different effect than if they are simply read for their content. When people recite a text, they activate their memory and voice. When the text is a poem with a meter, as is the case for the *Book of Eights* in its original language (Pali), people could feel physically connected to the rhythm of the poem's beat. In public performances, the quality of the recitation can be an important part of conveying the teachings. That this was valued in the ancient Buddhist world can be seen in the Buddha's response to Soṇa's recitation of the *Book of Eights*:

> Excellent! Excellent! Monk, you have learned well the sixteen [part] *Book of Eights,* you have remembered it well, have borne it well in mind. You spoke them in a lovely way, with good enunciation, and faultless so to make the meaning clear.
>
> *Soṇa Sutta; Udana* 5.6

Some scholars of the *Book of Eights* have called these discourses "ballads" rather than poems because they believe that in the ancient world the poems were sung more than chanted.[24] This idea comes partly from a passage in the *Sutta Nipāta,* the same anthology that includes the *Book of Eights,* where the Buddha mentions that he "sang" (*gīta*) a particular set of verses found in the *Sutta Nipāta*.[25] While it is not clear that *gīta* should be understood as "singing" in our modern English sense of the word, the term *gīta* does suggest a performative role for these poems. The impact of the meter, metaphors, and dialogue all contribute to an overall aesthetic experience for an audience listening to the "performance."

The idea that these poems are carefully crafted compositions used for the purpose of teaching reveals a different dimension of the text than would be revealed if one only studied the content of the *Book of Eights.* By

the content alone, one interpretation of these teachings is that because they predominantly emphasize what one is to let go of and what one is not to do, they advocate nonaction and perhaps a radical noninvolvement in the world. But if the medium is part of the message, then these poems convey the value of composing, preserving, and presenting teachings for the welfare of others. In other words, the existence of these poems is evidence of a particular kind of engagement with the world.

Stories in the canon suggest that efforts were made to explicitly teach the *Book of Eights* to others. Specifically, two people in Avanti, a country in Western India far from the region where Buddhism was first established, are reported to have learned the *Book of Eights*. One is the layperson mentioned earlier who asked Mahā Kaccāna to explain verse 844. The second is the monk of Soṇa, who recited the *Book of Eights* for the Buddha only one year after becoming a fully ordained monk. Whoever taught these two people to memorize the *Book of Eights*—we can't know for sure, but most likely it was Mahā Kaccāna—presumably understood its teachings. Its thoroughgoing message of not clinging did not interfere with the effort to teach the text to others.

## Translating the *Book of Eights*

I started this translation of the *Book of Eights* twenty years ago as a way to study a few of its discourses. Over the years, I gradually came to translate all sixteen discourses. Once those translations were complete, I spent years editing and, at times, revising the translations. In doing this, I was influenced by the work and suggestions of other translators and scholars of early Buddhism.

An important motivation for this work has been to understand the ancient Buddhist teachings as they might have been understood at the time they were composed. Rather than looking through the lens of a

culture and a time far removed from those of the Buddha, I tried to interpret the texts in the context with which I believe the Buddha may have been familiar early in his teaching career. While I do not assume that I have succeeded at this task, the exercise itself has helped me to discover and put aside a number of modern interpretations about early Buddhist teachings.

As is the case for most translators, it is likely that my biases and cultural conditioning have influenced both my understanding and my translation choices. I don't underestimate the difficulty of understanding a culture from a time and place very different from my own. Undoubtedly I have not understood many of the nuances, references, and subtleties of meaning.

I have followed a number of principles in creating this translation. I have tried, to the best of my limited ability, to be faithful to the literal meaning of the Pali originals. At the same time, I also have tried to render the verses in English so they are easy to understand and pleasant to read. Finding the balance between being literal on the one hand and understandable and enjoyable on the other was never easy. One consequence of this choice was the decision not to try to replicate in English the meters in which the poems were composed.

The primary departure from a literal translation is the avoidance of the male pronouns by using gender-neutral words like *they* where the original text has "he." This required me, for example, to turn the occurrences of the singular "sage" into the plural "sages." In order to further produce a translation that was more gender neutral than the original, I translated *bhikkhu,* usually rendered into English as "monk," as the gender-neutral "monastic."

A translator often has a range of choices of English words to use for translating a Pali term. While a Pali-English dictionary may list several English words as meanings for the Pali, these words may each have

different connotations that tilt the meaning and the mood of the translation in one direction or another. For example, verse 935, which I have translated and formatted as

> Violence gives birth to fear;
> [Just] look at people and [their] quarrels.
> I will speak of my dismay
> And the way that I was shaken.

is translated and formatted by K. R. Norman as

> Fear comes from the [one who has] embraced violence. Look at
> people quarrelling. I shall describe my agitation, how it was experienced by me.[26]

Hammalawa Saddhatissa translates it as

> Fear results from resorting to violence—just look at how
> People quarrel and fight! But let me tell you now of the kind of dismay and terror that I have felt.[27]

And Andrew Olendzki, replicating the ancient eight-beat meter, translates it as

> Fear is born from arming oneself.
> Just see how many people fight!
> I'll tell you about the dreadful fear
> that caused me to shake all over.[28]

What I have rendered as dismay (*saṃvega*), Norman has translated as "agitation," and Olendzki as "dreadful fear." And what I have translated as "shaken" (*saṃvijitaṃ*), Norman has translated as "experienced," Saddhatissa as either "terror" or "felt" (it is not clear), and Olendzki as "shake all over." While all these words represent the meanings of the Pali words accurately enough, their use in the translations results in a very different effect. Presumably the word choice reflects

some understanding or preference of the translator. If this understanding or preference is used consistently throughout the translation, the sum total creates a different impression or tone from one version to another.

Sometimes I was reluctant to choose between different meanings, connotations, and moods provided by different English words. However, choices were made, and I am sure that my own preferences have skewed the translation more than I intended. My hope, however, is that my word choices point to the peace that is the goal championed by the Buddha and at the same time respect the ancient Buddhists who preserved and applied his teachings.

## Reading the *Book of Eights*

As is often the case with poetry, the *Book of Eights* can be read and interpreted in many ways. One way to read the text is with the intention of discovering exactly what the Buddha taught. Some people have done this by taking literally every word in the text as a recording of what the Buddha spoke. Others have engaged in "textual archeology," trying to recover the passages that can reliably be attributed to him. Searching for what the Buddha actually taught is sometimes guided by the wish to learn what a great religious figure thought about what might be ultimately true—such as the purpose of life, who we are, or the highest states of realization. The *Book of Eights* challenges this approach because it counsels against looking for ultimate truth.

It is possible that to settle on a single interpretation of the poems might not have been the original intention of those who composed them. Another approach is therefore to read the poems as having a range of possible meanings, interpretations, and applications, as Mahā Kaccāna does in his commentary on verse 844. Some of the wordplay that appears in the Pali version of the poems lends itself to multiple meanings, which

may not be apparent in En- glish. For example, verse 853 refers to the ideal sages as faithless and not freeing themselves from passion. In a conventional sense, this statement is surprising, perhaps even shocking, as faith is often seen as the foundation of a religious life, and freedom from passion is understood to be a requirement for spiritual freedom. However, the claim is not surprising if we realize that someone who has realized peace has no more need for faith in a path to peace. Those who are free of passion have no need to free themselves further.

For anyone interested in the peace advocated in the *Book of Eights,* one of the most productive ways of reading is to consider how the poems may be relevant in helping us to be more peaceful. Rather than agreeing or disagreeing with a teaching and rather than liking or not liking a poem, we can try to discover the particular circumstances where it may apply to us. For the purposes of peace, evaluating the text by personal preferences and opinions is less useful than doing the work to find how they might be of benefit to ourselves and others. Certainly there is no peace in arguing about the truth found in the *Book of Eights.*

## Notes

Text placed in parentheses indicates that the material represents an ancient editorial note preserved in the extant Pali edition. Text placed in square brackets indicates that the material is my addition to the translation added for the purpose of clarity.

The numbering assigned to each verse is based on the Pali language edition of the *Sutta Nipāta* edited by Dines Andersen and Helmer Smith (Pali Text Society, 1913, 1990). While this Pali edition starts its numbering of the first verse of the *Book of Eights* with 766, the Myanmar edition of the Pali text begins with 772. The numbers in the two versions thus differ by six.

CHAPTER 1

# The Discourse on Desire

## *Sidestepping Sensual Desire*

The *Book of Eights* begins, in its first chapter, with a teaching on the avoidance of sensual desire, greed, and craving. While "The Discourse on Desire" acknowledges that obtaining the object of one's sensual desire can be a joy, it emphasizes the piercing pain that can come when the pleasure fades away. Given this intimate connection between sensual desire and suffering, if one hopes to avoid suffering, one must avoid sensual desire. These ideas are presented in the poem through the use of strong and evocative metaphors. A dangerous snake is used to represent sensual desires. Water pouring into a leaking boat signifies the way greed brings about trouble and suffering. It is only by abandoning desire—bailing out the water—that one can cross the floods of desire to the safety of the far shore.

The metaphor of crossing occurs five separate times in the *Book of Eights*.[1] In this first occurrence, crossing is linked to safety. Safety does not come from fixing the leaky boat, because even if the boat is fixed, one remains in dangerous waters, subject to future challenges. Instead, safety is found by going beyond the floods—that is, by no longer having sensual desire.

The word translated here as "sensual desire" is

*kāma,* a word occurring six times in this poem, including in the title, the *Kāma Sutta*. The word has three closely related meanings: it can refer to desire in general, to desire for specific sense pleasures, or to the sense pleasures themselves—the objects of sense desires. Only by understanding the particular context in which the word appears can we know which of these three meanings are intended. All three are found in the *Kāma Sutta*. When referring to sensual desire, the word has such strong connotations that it could also be translated as "lust."

Ideas about *kāma* were important in ancient Indian religious teachings, although there was a general division between two distinct views. Some traditions embraced *kāma* as an important and appropriate pursuit of human life, while others taught that it should be avoided. The opening chapter of the *Book of Eights* clearly falls in the latter camp. When the poem states that worldly items such as fields, goods, gold, cows, horses, servants, women, relatives, and sensual pleasures bring troubles and should be abandoned, it was undoubtedly creating a clear contrast with the male brahmins, the upper class of Vedic priests, who considered these pursuits to be one of the goals of life.

The Indian division between those who viewed *kāma* as a valued part of life and those who denounced it can be seen clearly in the contrast between the opening chapter of the *Book of Eights,* titled the *Kāma Sutta,* and the better-known Sanskrit book with the same title (the *Kāma Sūtra*). The Sanskrit work teaches that the pleasures of the arts, including the sexual arts, are one of the three worthy goals of human life.[2]

In the "Discourse on Desire," *kāma* is something to be avoided. This teaching is not unique to early Buddhism; earlier ascetically inclined religious movements also emphasized avoiding cravings. For example, the ultimate goal in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*—described both as becoming immortal and attaining ultimate reality—is achieved when one is