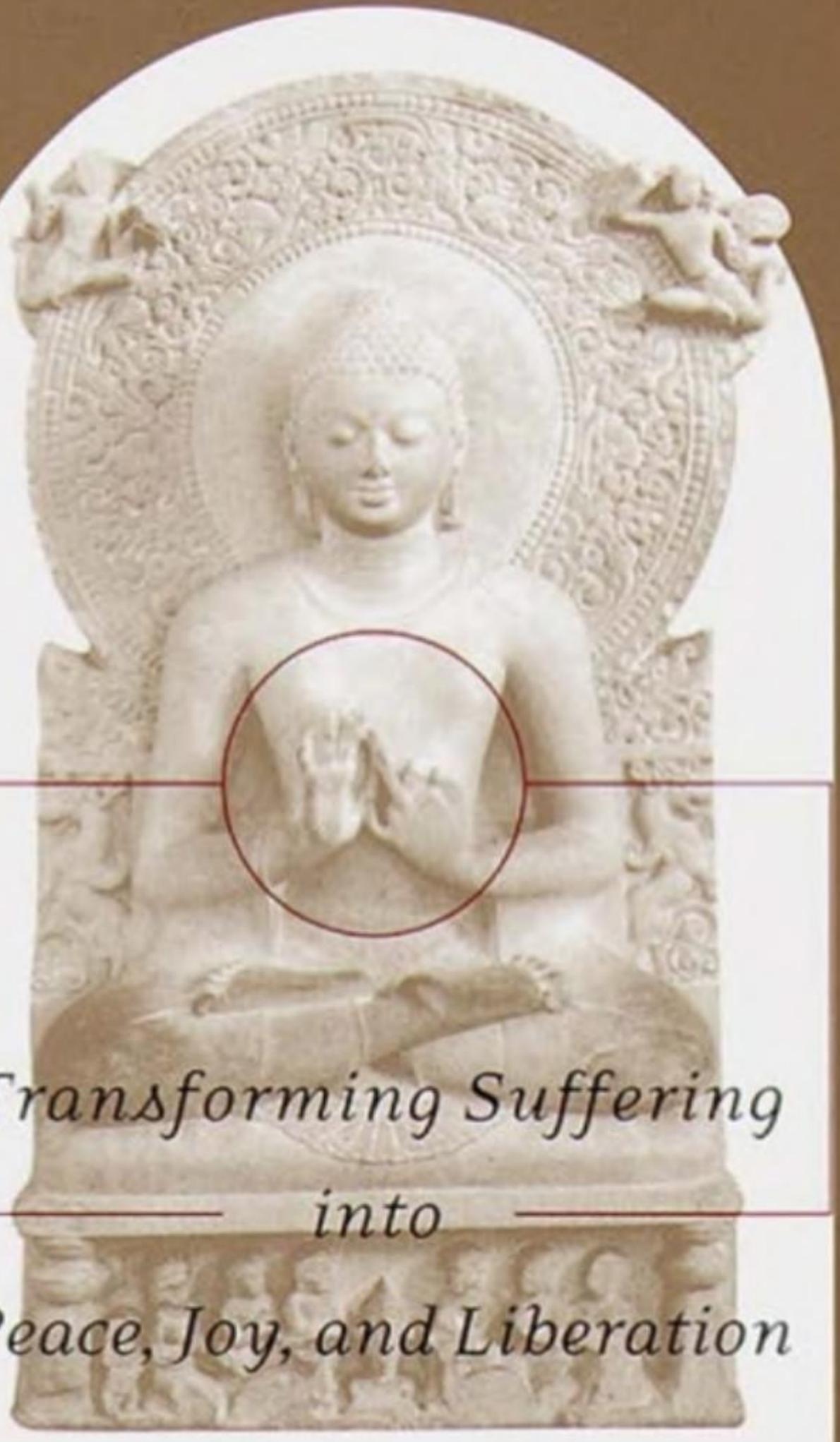
The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching

"Thich Nhat Hanh writes with the voice of the Buddha."

—Sogyal Rinpoche



Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy, and Liberation

THICH NHAT HANH

The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching

TRANSFORMING SUFFERING INTO
PEACE, JOY, & LIBERATION:
THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS,
THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH, AND
OTHER BASIC BUDDHIST TEACHINGS

Thich Nhat Hanh

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To the reader:
Unless otherwise noted, the terms that appear in parentheses throughout the text are in Sanskrit. Sanskrit has been transliterated informally, without the diacritical marks. The ṣ and ś have been written as sh. Sanskrit and other foreign terms are italicized the first time they appear, and definitions are provided at that time. Textual sources are provided in full the first time they are cited; after that, only author and title are noted.

Contents

PART ONE	*The Four Noble Truths*	
1.	Entering the Heart of the Buddha	3
2.	The First Dharma Talk	6
3.	The Four Noble Truths	9
4.	Understanding the Buddha's Teachings	12
5.	Is Everything Suffering?	19
6.	Stopping, Calming, Resting, Healing	24
7.	Touching Our Suffering	28
8.	Realizing Well-Being	41
PART TWO	*The Noble Eightfold Path*	
9.	Right View	51
10.	Right Thinking	59
11.	Right Mindfulness	64
12.	Right Speech	84
13.	Right Action	94
14.	Right Diligence	99
15.	Right Concentration	105
16.	Right Livelihood	113
PART THREE	*Other Basic Buddhist Teachings*	
17.	The Two Truths	121
18.	The Three Dharma Seals	131
19.	The Three Doors of Liberation	146
20.	The Three Bodies of Buddha	156

21. The Three Jewels 161
22. The Four Immeasurable Minds 169
23. The Five Aggregates 176
24. The Five Powers 184
25. The Six Paramitas 192
26. The Seven Factors of Awakening 214
27. The Links of Interdependent Co-Arising 221
28. Touching the Buddha Within 249

PART FOUR *Discourses*

1. Turning the Wheel of the Dharma *(Dhamma Cakka Pavattana Sutta)* 257
2. The Great Forty *(Mahacattarisaka Sutta)* 263
3. Right View *(Sammaditthi Sutta)* 271

Index 277

Figures

1. The Four Noble Truths 10
2. The Twelve Turnings of the Wheel 30
3. The Interbeing of the Eight Elements of the Path 57
4. The Six Paramitas 193
5. Seeds of Mindfulness 208
6. The Interbeing of the Ten Links When Conditioned by Deluded Mind 246
7. Ten Links: The Two Aspects of Interdependent Co-Arising 247

The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching

PART ONE

The Four Noble Truths

CHAPTER ONE

Entering the Heart of the Buddha

Buddha was not a god. He was a human being like you and me, and he suffered just as we do. If we go to the Buddha with our hearts open, he will look at us, his eyes filled with compassion, and say, "Because there is suffering in your heart, it is possible for you to enter my heart."

The layman Vimalakirti said, "Because the world is sick, I am sick. Because people suffer, I have to suffer." This statement was also made by the Buddha. Please don't think that because you are unhappy, because there is pain in your heart, that you cannot go to the Buddha. It is exactly because there is pain in your heart that communication is possible. Your suffering and my suffering are the basic condition for us to enter the Buddha's heart, and for the Buddha to enter our hearts.

For forty-five years, the Buddha said, over and over again, "I teach only suffering and the transformation of suffering." When we recognize and acknowledge our own suffering, the Buddha — which means the Buddha in us — will look at it, discover what has brought it about, and prescribe a course of action that can transform it into peace, joy, and liberation. Suffering is the means the Buddha used to liberate himself, and it is also the means by which we can become free.

The ocean of suffering is immense, but if you turn around, you can see the land. The seed of suffering in you may be strong, but don't wait until you have no more suffering before allowing yourself to be happy. When one tree in the

garden is sick, you have to care for it. But don't overlook all the healthy trees. Even while you have pain in your heart, you can enjoy the many wonders of life — the beautiful sunset, the smile of a child, the many flowers and trees. To suffer is not enough. Please don't be imprisoned by your suffering.

If you have experienced hunger, you know that having food is a miracle. If you have suffered from the cold, you know the preciousness of warmth. When you have suffered, you know how to appreciate the elements of paradise that are present. If you dwell only in your suffering, you will miss paradise. Don't ignore your suffering, but don't forget to enjoy the wonders of life, for your sake and for the benefit of many beings.

When I was young, I wrote this poem. I penetrated the heart of the Buddha with a heart that was deeply wounded.

My youth
an unripe plum.
Your teeth have left their marks on it.
The tooth marks still vibrate.
I remember always,
remember always.

Since I learned how to love you,
the door of my soul has been left wide open
to the winds of the four directions.
Reality calls for change.
The fruit of awareness is already ripe,
and the door can never be closed again.

Fire consumes this century,
and mountains and forests bear its mark.
The wind howls across my ears,
while the whole sky shakes violently in the snowstorm.

Winter's wounds lie still,
Missing the frozen blade,
Restless, tossing and turning
in agony all night.[1]

I grew up in a time of war. There was destruction all around — children, adults, values, a whole country. As a young person, I suffered a lot. Once the door of awareness has been opened, you cannot close it. The wounds of war in me are still not all healed. There are nights I lie awake and embrace my people, my country, and the whole planet with my mindful breathing.

Without suffering, you cannot grow. Without suffering, you cannot get the peace and joy you deserve. Please don't run away from your suffering. Embrace it and cherish it. Go to the Buddha, sit with him, and show him your pain. He will look at you with loving kindness, compassion, and mindfulness, and show you ways to embrace your suffering and look deeply into it. With understanding and compassion, you will be able to heal the wounds in your heart, and the wounds in the world. The Buddha called suffering a Holy Truth, because our suffering has the capacity of showing us the path to liberation. Embrace your suffering, and let it reveal to you the way to peace.

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[1] "The Fruit of Awareness Is Ripe," in *Call Me By My True Names: The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993), p. 59.

CHAPTER TWO

The First Dharma Talk

Siddhartha Gautama was twenty-nine years old when he left his family to search for a way to end his and others' suffering. He studied meditation with many teachers, and after six years of practice, he sat under the bodhi tree and vowed not to stand up until he was enlightened. He sat all night, and as the morning star arose, he had a profound breakthrough and became a Buddha, filled with understanding and love. The Buddha spent the next forty-nine days enjoying the peace of his realization. After that he walked slowly to the Deer Park in Sarnath to share his understanding with the five ascetics with whom he had practiced earlier.

When the five men saw him coming, they felt uneasy. Siddhartha had abandoned them, they thought. But he looked so radiant that they could not resist welcoming him. They washed his feet and offered him water to drink. The Buddha said, "Dear friends, I have seen deeply that nothing can be by itself alone, that everything has to inter-be with everything else. I have seen that all beings are endowed with the nature of awakening." He offered to say more, but the monks didn't know whether to believe him or not. So the Buddha asked, "Have I ever lied to you?" They knew that he hadn't, and they agreed to receive his teachings.

The Buddha then taught the Four Noble Truths of the existence of suffering, the making of suffering, the possibility of restoring well-being, and the Noble Eightfold Path that leads to well-being. Hearing this, an immaculate vision of

the Four Noble Truths arose in Kondañña, one of the five ascetics. The Buddha observed this and exclaimed, "Kondañña understands! Kondañña understands!" and from that day on, Kondañña was called "The One Who Understands."

The Buddha then declared, "Dear friends, with humans, gods, brahmans, monastics, and maras[1] 1 as witnesses, I tell you that if I have not experienced directly all that I have told you, I would not proclaim that I am an enlightened person, free from suffering. Because I myself have identified suffering, understood suffering, identified the causes of suffering, removed the causes of suffering, confirmed the existence of well-being, obtained well-being, identified the path to well-being, gone to the end of the path, and realized total liberation, I now proclaim to you that I am a free person." At that moment the Earth shook, and the voices of the gods, humans, and other living beings throughout the cosmos said that on the planet Earth, an enlightened person had been born and had put into motion the wheel of the *Dharma*, the Way of Understanding and Love. This teaching is recorded in the *Discourse on Turning the Wheel of the Dharma (Dhamma Cakka Pavattana Sutta)*.[2] Since then, two thousand, six hundred years have passed, and the wheel of the Dharma continues to turn. It is up to us, the present generation, to keep the wheel turning for the happiness of the many.

Three points characterize this sutra. The first is the teaching of the Middle Way. The Buddha wanted his five friends to be free from the idea that austerity is the only correct practice. He had learned firsthand that if you destroy your health, you have no energy left to realize the path. The other

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[1] See footnote number 7 on p. 18.

[2] *Samyutta Nikaya* V, 420. See p. 257 for the full text of this discourse. See also the *Great Turning of the Dharma Wheel* (*Taisho Revised Tripitaka* 109) and the *Three Turnings of the Dharma Wheel* (*Taisho* 110). The term "discourse" (*sutra* in Sanskrit, *sutta* in Pali) means a teaching given by the Buddha or one of his enlightened disciples.

extreme to be avoided, he said, is indulgence in sense pleasures — being possessed by sexual desire, running after fame, eating immoderately, sleeping too much, or chasing after possessions.

The second point is the teaching of the Four Noble Truths. This teaching was of great value during the lifetime of the Buddha, is of great value in our own time, and will be of great value for millennia to come. The third point is engagement in the world. The teachings of the Buddha were not to escape from life, but to help us relate to ourselves and the world as thoroughly as possible. The Noble Eightfold Path includes Right Speech and Right Livelihood. These teachings are for people in the world who have to communicate with each other and earn a living.

The *Discourse on Turning the Wheel of the Dharma* is filled with joy and hope. It teaches us to recognize suffering as suffering and to transform our suffering into mindfulness, compassion, peace, and liberation.

CHAPTER THREE

The Four Noble Truths

After realizing complete, per fect awakening *(samyak sambodhi),* the Buddha had to find words to share his insight. He already had the water, but he had to discover jars like the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path to hold it. The Four Noble Truths are the cream of the Buddha's teaching. The Buddha continued to proclaim these truths right up until his Great Passing Away *(mahaparinirvana).*

The Chinese translate Four Noble Truths as "Four Wonderful Truths" or "Four Holy Truths." Our suffering is holy if we embrace it and look deeply into it. If we don't, it isn't holy at all. We just drown in the ocean of our suffering. For "truth," the Chinese use the characters for "word" and "king." No one can argue with the words of a king. These Four Truths are not something to argue about. They are something to practice and realize.

The First Noble Truth is suffering *(dukkha).* The root meaning of the Chinese character for suffering is "bitter." Happiness is sweet; suffering is bitter. We all suffer to some extent. We have some malaise in our body and our mind. We have to recognize and acknowledge the presence of this suffering and touch it. To do so, we may need the help of a teacher and a *Sangha,* friends in the practice.

The Second Noble Truth is the origin, roots, nature, creation, or arising *(samudaya)* of suffering. After we touch our suffering, we need to look deeply into it to see how it came

The Four Noble Truths & the Noble Eightfold Path

Figure One

to be. We need to recognize and identify the spiritual and material foods we have ingested that are causing us to suffer.

The Third Noble Truth is the cessation *(nirodha)* of creating suffering by refraining from doing the things that make us suffer. This is good news! The Buddha did not deny the existence of suffering, but he also did not deny the existence of joy and happiness. If you think that Buddhism says, "Everything is suffering and we cannot do anything about it," that is the opposite of the Buddha's message. The Buddha taught us how to recognize and acknowledge the presence of suffering, but he also taught the cessation of suffering. If there were no possibility of cessation, what is the use of practicing? The Third Truth is that healing is possible.

The Fourth Noble Truth is the path *(marga)* that leads to refraining from doing the things that cause us to suffer. This is the path we need the most. The Buddha called it the Noble Eightfold Path. The Chinese translate it as the "Path of Eight Right Practices": Right View, Right Thinking, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Diligence, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.[1]

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[1] The Pali word for "Right" is *samma* and the Sanskrit word is *samyak*. It is an adverb meaning "in the right way," "straight," or "upright," not bent or crooked. Right Mindfulness, for example, means that there are ways of being mindful that are right, straight, and beneficial. Wrong mindfulness means that there are ways to practice that are wrong, crooked, and unbeneficial. Entering the Eightfold Path, we learn ways to practice that are of benefit, the "Right" way to practice. Right and wrong are neither moral judgments nor arbitrary standards imposed from outside. Through our own awareness, we discover what is beneficial ("right") and what is unbeneficial ("wrong").

CHAPTER FOUR

Understanding the Buddha's Teachings

When we hear a Dharma talk or study a sutra, our only job is to remain open. Usually when we hear or read something new, we just compare it to our own ideas. If it is the same, we accept it and say that it is correct. If it is not, we say it is incorrect. In either case, we learn nothing. If we read or listen with an open mind and an open heart, the rain of the Dharma will penetrate the soil of our consciousness.[1]

The gentle spring rain permeates the soil of my soul.
A seed that has lain deeply in the earth for many years just smiles.[2]

While reading or listening, don't work too hard. Be like the earth. When the rain comes, the earth only has to open herself up to the rain. Allow the rain of the Dharma to come in and penetrate the seeds that are buried deep in your consciousness. A teacher cannot give you the truth. The truth

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[1] According to Buddhist psychology, our consciousness is divided into eight parts, including mind consciousness *(manovijñana)* and store consciousness *(alayavijñana)*. Store consciousness is described as a field in which every kind of seed can be found — seeds of suffering, sorrow, fear, and anger, and seeds of happiness and hope. When these seeds sprout, they manifest in our mind consciousness, and when they do, they become stronger. See fig. 5 on p. 208.

[2] From Thich Nhat, "Cuckoo Telephone," in *Call Me By My True Names*, p. 176.

is already in you. You only need to open yourself — body, mind, and heart — so that his or her teachings will penetrate your own seeds of understanding and enlightenment. If you let the words enter you, the soil and the seeds will do the rest of the work.

The transmission of the teachings of the Buddha can be divided into three streams: Source Buddhism, Many-Schools Buddhism, and Mahayana Buddhism. Source Buddhism includes all the teachings the Buddha gave during his lifetime. One hundred forty years after the Buddha's Great Passing Away, the Sangha divided into two schools: *Mahasanghika* (literally "majority," referring to those who wanted changes) and *Sthaviravada* (literally, "School of Elders," referring to those who opposed the changes advocated by the Mahasanghikas). A hundred years after that, the Sthaviravada divided into two branches — *Sarvastivada* ("the School that Proclaims Everything Is") and *Vibhajyavada* ("the School that Discriminates"). The Vibhajyavadins, supported by King Ashoka, flourished in the Ganges valley, while the Sarvastivadins went north to Kashmir.

For four hundred years during and after the Buddha's lifetime, his teachings were transmitted only orally. After that, monks in the *Tamrashatiya* School ("those who wear coppercolored robes") in Sri Lanka, a derivative of the Vibhajyavada School, began to think about writing the Buddha's discourses on palm leaves, and it took another hundred years to begin. By that time, it is said that there was only one monk who had memorized the whole canon and that he was somewhat arrogant. The other monks had to persuade him to recite the discourses so they could write them down. When we hear this, we feel a little uneasy knowing that an arrogant monk may not have been the best vehicle to transmit the teachings of the Buddha.

Even during the Buddha's lifetime, there were people such as the monk Arittha, who misunderstood the Buddha's teachings and conveyed them incorrectly.[3] It is also apparent that some of the monks who memorized the sutras over the centuries did not understand their deepest meaning, or at the very least, they forgot or changed some words. As a result, some of the Buddha's teachings were distorted even before they were written down. Before the Buddha attained full realization of the path, for example, he had tried various methods to suppress his mind, and they did not work. In one discourse, he recounted:

> I thought, Why don't I grit my teeth, press my tongue against my palate, and use my mind to repress my mind? Then, as a wrestler might take hold of the head or the shoulders of someone weaker than he, and, in order to restrain and coerce that person, he has to hold him down constantly without letting go for a moment, so I gritted my teeth, pressed my tongue against my palate, and used my mind to suppress my mind. As I did this, I was bathed in sweat. Although I was not lacking in strength, although I maintained mindfulness and did not fall from mindfulness, my body and my mind were not at peace, and I was exhausted by the striving, even though the painful feelings that arose in my body were not able to overwhelm my mind.[4]

---

[3] *Arittha Sutta (Discourse on the Example of a Snake), Majjhima Nikaya* 22. See Thich Nhat Hanh, *Thundering Silence: Sutra on Knowing the Better Way to Catch a Snake* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993), pp. 47–49.

[4] *Mahasaccaka Sutta, Majjhima Nikaya* 36.

Obviously, the Buddha was telling us not to practice in this way. Yet this passage was later inserted into other discourses to convey exactly the opposite meaning:

> Just as a wrestler takes hold of the head or the shoulders of someone weaker than himself, restrains and coerces that person, and holds him down constantly, not letting go for one moment, so a monk who meditates in order to stop all unwholesome thoughts of desire and aversion, when these thoughts continue to arise, should grit his teeth, press his tongue against his palate, and do his best to use his mind to beat down and defeat his mind.[5]

There are other instances where teachings of the Buddha have been inserted in the wrong place. For instance the teaching of the Twelve Links of Conditioned Genesis (to be discussed in chapter 27) have been inserted in many sutras where they do not belong to explain the cycle of birth and death, when in fact the sutras are about the transcendence of birth and death. They have been wrongly inserted in the *Katyayanagotra Sutra,* or the *Discourse on the Middle Way.*

Often, we need to study several discourses and compare them in order to understand which is the true teaching of the Buddha. It is like stringing precious jewels together to make a necklace. If we see each sutra in light of the overall body of teachings, we will not be attached to any one teaching. With comparative study and looking deeply into the meaning of the texts, we can surmise what is a solid teaching

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[5] *Vitakka Santhana Sutta, Majjhima Nikaya* 20. This same passage was inserted into a Sarvastivada version of the Buddha's discourse on mindfulness, *Nian Chu Jing, Madhyama Agama* 26, *Taisho Revised Tripitaka.*

that will help our practice and what is probably an incorrect transmission.

By the time the Buddha's discourses were written down in Pali in Sri Lanka, there were eighteen or twenty schools, and each had its own recension of the Buddha's teachings. These schools did not tear the teachings of the Buddha apart but were threads of a single garment. A number of these recensions exist today. The Pali canon contains the recension that originated with the Tamrashatiya school, and the Chinese and Tibetan canons contain recensions from a number of other schools, Sarvastivada being most prominent. The Sarvastivada and the Tamrashatiya recensions were written down at about the same time. The former was written down in Pali and the latter in Sanskrit. Other schools used other Indian languages and Prakrit. The sutras that were written down in Pali in Sri Lanka are known as the Southern transmission (also known as Mahaviharavasin tradition). The Sarvastivada texts, known as the Northern transmission, exist in Sanskrit only in fragmented form. Fortunately, they were translated into Chinese and Tibetan, and many of these translations are still available. We have to remember that the Buddha did not speak Pali, Sanskrit, or Prakrit. It is surmised that he spoke a language close to Pali and some think this was Ardhamagadhi, and there is no record of the Buddha's words in his own language.

By comparing the equivalent sutras in the Pali and Chinese canons, we can see which teachings must have preceded Buddhism's dividing into schools. When the sutras in both canons are the same, we can conclude that what they say must have been there before the division. When the recensions are different, we can surmise that one or both might be incorrect. The Northern transmission preserved some discourses better, and the Southern transmission preserved others better. That is the advantage of having two transmissions to compare.

The third stream of the Buddha's teaching, Mahayana

Buddhism, arose in the first or second century B.C.E.[6] During the time of Schools' Buddhism, there were some monks who started to live a life completely divorced from the rest of the society. The laypeople were concerned only with making offerings and supporting the monks.

That is why at that time there arose among Buddhist lay, as well as monastic, practitioners the idea of popularizing Buddhism. From this sprouted the Mahayana way of thinking. It was a movement aimed at developing the deep sources of Buddhist thought and reviving the tremendous energy of bodhicitta (the mind of love) and bringing Buddhism back into contact with life. This was the Mahayanizing movement of Buddhism.

These three streams complement one another. It was impossible for Source Buddhism to remember everything the Buddha had taught, so it was necessary for Schools' Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism to renew teachings that had been forgotten or overlooked. Like all traditions, Buddhism needs to renew itself regularly in order to stay alive and grow. The Buddha always found new ways to express his awakening. Since the Buddha's lifetime, Buddhists have continued to open new Dharma doors to express and share the teachings begun in the Deer Park in Sarnath.

Please remember that a sutra or a Dharma talk is not insight in and of itself. It is a means of presenting insight, using words and concepts. When you use a map to get to Paris, once you have arrived, you can put the map away and enjoy being in Paris. If you spend all your time with your map, if you get caught by the words and notions presented by the Buddha, you'll miss the reality. The Buddha said many times, "My teaching is like a finger pointing to the moon. Do not mistake the finger for the moon."

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[6] See Thich Nhat Hanh, *Cultivating the Mind of Love: The Practice of Looking Deeply in the Mahayana Buddhist Tradition* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1996).

In the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, it is said, "If you explain the meaning of every word and phrase in the sutras, you slander the Buddhas of the three times — past, present, and future. But if you disregard even one word of the sutras, you risk speaking the words of Mara."[7] Sutras are essential guides for our practice, but we must read them carefully and use our own intelligence and the help of a teacher and a Sangha to understand the true meaning and put it into practice. After reading a sutra or any spiritual text, we should feel lighter, not heavier. Buddhist teachings are meant to awaken our true self, not merely to add to our storehouse of knowledge.

From time to time the Buddha refused to answer a question posed to him. The philosopher Vatsigotra asked, "Is there a self?" and the Buddha did not say anything. Vatsigotra persisted, "Do you mean there is no self?" but the Buddha still did not reply. Finally, Vatsigotra left. Ananda, the Buddha's attendant, was puzzled. "Lord, you always teach that there is no self. Why did you not say so to Vatsigotra?" The Buddha told Ananda that he did not reply because Vatsigotra was looking for a theory, not a way to remove obstacles.[8] On another occasion, the Buddha heard a group of disciples discussing whether or not he had said such and such, and he told them, "For forty-five years, I have not uttered a single word." He did not want his disciples to be caught by words or notions, even his own.

When an archaeologist finds a statue that has been broken, he invites sculptors who specialize in restoration to study the art of that period and repair the statue. We must do the same. If we have an overall view of the teachings of the Buddha, when a piece is missing or has been added, we have to recognize it and repair the damage.

---

7 Mara personifies the inner hindrances to the practice, the opposite of the Buddha nature in each person.

8 *Samyutta Nikaya* XIV, 10.

CHAPTER FIVE

Is Everything Suffering?

If we are not careful in the way we practice, we may have the tendency to make the words of our teacher into a doctrine or an ideology. Since the Buddha said that the First Noble Truth is suffering, many good students of the Buddha have used their skills to prove that everything on Earth is suffering. The theory of the Three Kinds of Suffering was such an attempt. It is not a teaching of the Buddha.

The first kind of suffering is "the suffering of suffering" *(dukkha dukkhata)*, the suffering associated with unpleasant feelings, like the pain of a toothache, losing your temper, or feeling too cold on a winter's day. The second is "the suffering of composite things" *(samskara dukkhata)*. Whatever comes together eventually has to come apart; therefore, all composite things are described as suffering. Even things that have not yet decayed, such as mountains, rivers, and the sun, are seen to be suffering, because they will decay and cause suffering eventually. When you believe that everything composed is suffering, how can you find joy? The third is "the suffering associated with change" *(viparinama dukkhata)*. Our liver may be in good health today, but when we grow old, it will cause us to suffer. There is no point in celebrating joy, because sooner or later it will turn into suffering. Suffering is a black cloud that envelops everything. Joy is an illusion. Only suffering is real.

For more than two thousand years, students of Buddhism have been declaring that the Buddha taught that all objects

of perception — all physical (table, sun, moon) and physiological phenomena and all wholesome, unwholesome, and neutral states of mind — are suffering. One hundred years after the Buddha passed away, practitioners were already repeating the formula, "This is suffering. Life is suffering. *Everything* is suffering." They thought that to obtain insight into the First Noble Truth, they had to repeat this formula. Some commentators said that without this constant repetition, the Four Noble Truths could not be realized.[1]

Today, many people invoke the names of the Buddha or do similar practices mechanically, believing that this will bring them insight and emancipation. They are caught in forms, words, and notions, and are not using their intelligence to receive and practice the Dharma. It can be dangerous to practice without using your own intelligence, without a teacher and friends who can show you ways to practice correctly. Repeating a phrase like "Life is suffering" might help you notice when you are about to become attached to something, but it cannot help you understand the true nature of suffering or reveal the path shown to us by the Buddha.

This dialogue is repeated in many sutras:

> "Monks, are conditioned things permanent or impermanent?"
>
> "They are impermanent, World-Honored One."
>
> "If things are impermanent, are they suffering or well-being?"
>
> "They are suffering, World-Honored One."
>
> "If things are suffering, can we say that they are self or belong to self?"
>
> "No, World-Honored One."

---

1 *Samyukta Agama 262.*

When we read this, we may think that the Buddha is offering a theory — "All things are suffering" — that we have to prove in our daily life. But in other parts of the same sutras, the Buddha says that he only wants us to recognize suffering when it is present and to recognize joy when suffering is absent. By the time the Buddha's discourses were written down, seeing all things as suffering must have been widely practiced, as the above quotation occurs more frequently than the teaching on the origin of suffering and the path to end suffering.

The argument, "Impermanent, therefore suffering, therefore nonself" is illogical. Of course, if we believe that something is permanent or has a self, we may suffer when we discover that it is impermanent and without a separate self. But, in many texts, suffering is regarded as one of the Three Dharma Seals, along with impermanence and nonself. It is said that all teachings of the Buddha bear the Three Dharma Seals. To put suffering on the same level as impermanence and nonself is an error. Impermanence and nonself are "universal." They are a "mark" of all things. Suffering is not. It is not difficult to see that a table is impermanent and does not have a self separate from all non-table elements, like wood, rain, sun, furniture maker, and so on. But is it suffering? A table will only make us suffer if we attribute permanence or separateness to it. When we are attached to a certain table, it is not the table that causes us to suffer. It is our attachment. We can agree that anger is impermanent, without a separate self, and filled with suffering, but it is strange to talk about a table or a flower as being filled with suffering. The Buddha taught impermanence and nonself to help us not be caught in signs.

The theory of the Three Kinds of Suffering is an attempt to justify the universalization of suffering. What joy is left in life? We find it in nirvana. In several sutras the Buddha

CHAPTER SIX

Stopping, Calming, Resting, Healing

Buddhist meditation has two aspects — *shamatha* and *vipashyana*. We tend to stress the importance of vipashyana ("looking deeply") because it can bring us insight and liberate us from suffering and afflictions. But the practice of shamatha ("stopping") is fundamental. If we cannot stop, we cannot have insight.

There is a story in Zen circles about a man and a horse. The horse is galloping quickly, and it appears that the man on the horse is going somewhere important. Another man, standing alongside the road, shouts, "Where are you going?" and the first man replies, "I don't know! Ask the horse!" This is also our story. We are riding a horse, we don't know where we are going, and we can't stop. The horse is our habit energy pulling us along, and we are powerless. We are always running, and it has become a habit. We struggle all the time, even during our sleep. We are at war within ourselves, and we can easily start a war with others.

We have to learn the art of stopping — stopping our thinking, our habit energies, our forgetfulness, the strong emotions that rule us. When an emotion rushes through us like a storm, we have no peace. We turn on the TV and then we turn it off. We pick up a book and then we put it down. How can we stop this state of agitation? How can we stop our fear, despair, anger, and craving? We can stop by practicing mindful breathing, mindful walking, mindful smiling, and

deep looking in order to understand. When we are mindful, touching deeply the present moment, the fruits are always understanding, acceptance, love, and the desire to relieve suffering and bring joy.

But our habit energies are often stronger than our volition. We say and do things we don't want to and afterwards we regret it. We make ourselves and others suffer, and we bring about a lot of damage. We may vow not to do it again, but we do it again. Why? Because our habit energies *(vasana)* push us.

We need the energy of mindfulness to recognize and be present with our habit energy in order to stop this course of destruction. With mindfulness, we have the capacity to recognize the habit energy every time it manifests. "Hello, my habit energy, I know you are there!" If we just smile to it, it will lose much of its strength. Mindfulness is the energy that allows us to recognize our habit energy and prevent it from dominating us.

Forgetfulness is the opposite. We drink a cup of tea, but we do not know we are drinking a cup of tea. We sit with the person we love, but we don't know that she is there. We walk, but we are not really walking. We are someplace else, thinking about the past or the future. The horse of our habit energy is carrying us along, and we are its captive. We need to stop our horse and reclaim our liberty. We need to shine the light of mindfulness on everything we do, so the darkness of forgetfulness will disappear. The first function of meditation — shamatha — is to stop.

The second function of shamatha is calming. When we have a strong emotion, we know it can be dangerous to act, but we don't have the strength or clarity to refrain. We have to learn the art of breathing in and out, stopping our activities, and calming our emotions. We have to learn to become solid and stable like an oak tree, and not be blown from side

to side by the storm. The Buddha taught many techniques to help us calm our body and mind and look deeply at them. They can be summarized in five stages:

(1) Recognition — If we are angry, we say, "I know that anger is in me."

(2) Acceptance — When we are angry, we do not deny it. We accept what is present.

(3) Embracing — We hold our anger in our two arms like a mother holding her crying baby. Our mindfulness embraces our emotion, and this alone can calm our anger and ourselves.

(4) Looking deeply — When we are calm enough, we can look deeply to understand what has brought this anger to be, what is causing our baby's discomfort.

(5) Insight — The fruit of looking deeply is understanding the many causes and conditions, primary and secondary, that have brought about our anger, that are causing our baby to cry. Perhaps our baby is hungry. Perhaps his diaper pin is piercing his skin. Our anger was triggered when our friend spoke to us meanly, and suddenly we remember that he was not at his best today because his father is dying. We reflect like this until we have some insights into what has caused our suffering. With insight, we know what to do and what not to do to change the situation.

After calming, the third function of shamatha is resting. Suppose someone standing alongside a river throws a pebble in the air and it falls down into the river. The pebble allows itself to sink slowly and reach the riverbed without any effort. Once the pebble is at the bottom, it continues to rest, allowing the water to pass by. When we practice sitting meditation, we can allow ourselves to rest just like that pebble. We can allow ourselves to sink naturally into the position of sitting —

resting, without effort. We have to learn the art of resting, allowing our body and mind to rest. If we have wounds in our body or our mind, we have to rest so they can heal themselves.

Calming allows us to rest, and resting is a precondition for healing. When animals in the forest get wounded, they find a place to lie down, and they rest completely for many days. They don't think about food or anything else. They just rest, and they get the healing they need. When we humans get sick, we just worry! We look for doctors and medicine, but we don't stop. Even when we go to the beach or the mountains for a vacation, we don't rest, and we come back more tired than before. We have to learn to rest. Lying down is not the only position for resting. During sitting or walking meditation, we can rest very well. Meditation does not have to be hard labor. Just allow your body and mind to rest like an animal in the forest. Don't struggle. There is no need to attain anything. I am writing a book, but I am not struggling. I am resting also. Please read in a joyful, yet restful way. The Buddha said, "My Dharma is the practice of nonpractice."[1] Practice in a way that does not tire you out, but gives your body, emotions, and consciousness a chance to rest. Our body and mind have the capacity to heal themselves if we allow them to rest.

Stopping, calming, and resting are preconditions for healing. If we cannot stop, the course of our destruction will just continue. The world needs healing. Individuals, communities, and nations need healing.

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1 *Dvachatvarimshat Khanda Sutra (Sutra of Forty-Two Chapters). Taisho* 789.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Touching Our Suffering

In the Pali version of the *Discourse on Turning the Wheel of the Dharma,* the Buddha told the five monks,

> As long as the insight and the understanding of these Four Noble Truths in their three stages and twelve aspects, just as they are, had not been fully realized, I could not say that in this world with its gods, maras, brahmas, recluses, brahmans, and men, someone had realized the highest awakening. Monks, as soon as the insight and understanding of the Four Noble Truths in their three stages and twelve aspects, just as they are, had been realized, I could say that in this world with its gods, maras, brahmas, recluses, brahmans, and men, someone had realized the highest awakening.

In the Chinese version of the sutra, the Buddha said,

> Monks, the experience of the three turnings of the wheel with regard to each of the Four Truths gives rise to eyes of awakened understanding, and therefore I declare before gods, spirits, shramanas, and brahmans of all times that I have destroyed all afflictions and reached full awakening.

The wheel of the Dharma was put in motion twelve times

and we make every effort to get to the bottom of it. At this stage, our practice can still be "set back" *(ashrava)*.

The third turning of the wheel is called "Realization" and can be expressed as, "This suffering has been understood." We realize the efforts begun during the second turning. The doctor tells us the name and all the characteristics of our illness. After studying, reflecting upon, and practicing the First Noble Truth, we realize that we have stopped running away from our pain. We can now call our suffering by its specific name and identify all of its characteristics. This alone brings us happiness, joy "without setbacks" *(anashrava)*.

Still, after we have successfully diagnosed our ailment, for a time we continue to create suffering for ourselves. We pour gasoline on the fire through our words, thoughts, and deeds and often don't even realize it. The first turning of the wheel of the Second Noble Truth is the "Recognition": I am continuing to create suffering. The Buddha said, "When something has come to be, we have to acknowledge its presence and look deeply into its nature. When we look deeply, we will discover the kinds of nutriments that have helped it come to be and that continue to feed it."[1] He then elaborated four kinds of nutriments that can lead to our happiness or our suffering — edible food, sense impressions, intention, and consciousness.

The first nutriment is edible food. What we eat or drink can bring about mental or physical suffering. We must be able to distinguish between what is healthful and what is harmful. We need to practice Right View when we shop, cook, and eat. The Buddha offered this example. A young couple and their two-year-old child were trying to cross the desert, and they ran out of food. After deep reflection, the parents realized that in order to survive they had to kill their son and eat his flesh. They calculated that if they ate such

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1 *Samyutta Nikaya* II, 47. See also p. 271, *Discourse on Right View.*

and such a proportion of their baby's flesh each day and carried the rest on their shoulders to dry, it would last the rest of the journey. But with every morsel of their baby's flesh they ate, the young couple cried and cried. After he told this story, the Buddha asked, "Dear friends, do you think the young man and woman enjoyed eating their son's flesh?" "No, Lord, it would not be possible for them to enjoy eating their son's flesh." The Buddha said, "Yet many people eat the flesh of their parents, their children, and their grandchildren and do not know it."[2]

Much of our suffering comes from not eating mindfully. We have to learn ways to eat that preserve the health and well-being of our body and our spirit. When we smoke, drink, or consume toxins, we are eating our own lungs, liver, and heart. If we have children and do these things, we are eating our children's flesh. Our children need us to be healthy and strong.

We have to look deeply to see how we grow our food, so we can eat in ways that preserve our collective well-being, minimize our suffering and the suffering of other species, and allow the earth to continue to be a source of life for all of us. If, while we eat, we destroy living beings or the environment, we are eating the flesh of our own sons and daughters. We need to look deeply together and discuss how to eat, what to eat, and what to resist. This will be a real Dharma discussion.

The second kind of nutriment is sense impressions. Our six sense organs — eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind — are in constant contact *(sparsha)* with sense objects, and these contacts become food for our consciousness. When we drive through a city, our eyes see so many billboards, and these images enter our consciousness. When we pick up a magazine, the articles and advertisements are food for our

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[2] *Discourse on the Son's Flesh, Samyukta Agama* 373 (*Taisho* 99). Also *Samyutta Nikaya* II, 97.

consciousness. Advertisements that stimulate our craving for possessions, sex, and food can be toxic. If after reading the newspaper, hearing the news, or being in a conversation, we feel anxious or worn out, we know we have been in contact with toxins.

Movies are food for our eyes, ears, and minds. When we watch TV, the program is our food. Children who spend five hours a day watching television are ingesting images that water the negative seeds of craving, fear, anger, and violence in them. We are exposed to so many forms, colors, sounds, smells, tastes, objects of touch, and ideas that are toxic and rob our body and consciousness of their well-being. When you feel despair, fear, or depression, it may be because you have ingested too many toxins through your sense impressions. Not only children need to be protected from violent and unwholesome films, TV programs, books, magazines, and games. We, too, can be destroyed by these media.

If we are mindful, we will know whether we are "ingesting" the toxins of fear, hatred, and violence, or eating foods that encourage understanding, compassion, and the determination to help others. With the practice of mindfulness, we will know that hearing this, looking at that, or touching this, we feel light and peaceful, while hearing that, looking at this, or touching that, we feel anxious, sad, or depressed. As a result, we will know what to be in contact with and what to avoid. Our skin protects us from bacteria. Antibodies protect us from internal invaders. We have to use the equivalent aspects of our consciousness to protect us from unwholesome sense objects that can poison us.

The Buddha offered this drastic image: "There is a cow with such a terrible skin disease that her skin is almost no longer there. When you bring her close to an ancient wall or old tree, all the living creatures in the bark of the tree come out, cling to the cow's body, and suck. When we bring her into the water, the same thing happens. Even when she is

just exposed to the air, tiny insects come and suck." Then the Buddha said, "This is our situation, also."

We are exposed to invasions of all kinds — images, sounds, smells, touch, ideas — and many of these feed the craving, violence, fear, and despair in us. The Buddha advised us to post a sentinel, namely mindfulness, at each of our sense doors to protect ourselves. Use your Buddha eyes to look at each nutriment you are about to ingest. If you see that it is toxic, refuse to look at it, listen to it, taste it, or touch it. Ingest only what you are certain is safe. The Five Mindfulness Trainings[3] can help very much. We must come together as individuals, families, cities, and a nation to discuss strategies of self-protection and survival. To get out of the dangerous situation we are in, the practice of mindfulness has to be collective.

The third kind of nutriment is volition, intention, or will — the desire in us to obtain whatever it is that we want. Volition is the ground of all our actions. If we think that the way for us to be happy is to become president of a large corporation, everything we do or say will be directed toward realizing that goal. Even when we sleep, our consciousness will continue to work on it. Or suppose we believe that all our suffering and the suffering of our family has been brought about by someone who wronged us in the past. We believe we will only be happy if we inflict harm on that person. Our life is motivated solely by the desire for revenge, and everything we say, everything we plan, is to punish that person. At night, we dream of revenge, and we think this will liberate us from our anger and hatred.

Everyone wants to be happy, and there is a strong energy in us pushing us toward what we think will make us happy.

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[3] See Thich Nhat Hanh, *For a Future To Be Possible: Commentaries on the Five Mindfulness Trainings*, Revised Edition (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1998). See also chaps. 12 and 13 of this book.

But we may suffer a lot because of this. We need the insight that position, revenge, wealth, fame, or possessions are, more often than not, obstacles to our happiness. We need to cultivate the wish to be free of these things so we can enjoy the wonders of life that are always available — the blue sky, the trees, our beautiful children. After three months or six months of mindful sitting, mindful walking, and mindful looking, a deep vision of reality arises in us, and the capacity of being there, enjoying life in the present moment, liberates us from all impulses and brings us real happiness.

One day, after the Buddha and a group of monks finished eating lunch mindfully together, a farmer, very agitated, came by and asked, "Monks, have you seen my cows? I don't think I can survive so much misfortune." The Buddha asked him, "What happened?" and the man said, "Monks, this morning all twelve of my cows ran away. And this year my whole crop of sesame plants was eaten by insects!" The Buddha said, "Sir, we have not seen your cows. Perhaps they have gone in the other direction." After the farmer went off in that direction, the Buddha turned to his Sangha and said, "Dear friends, do you know you are the happiest people on Earth? You have no cows or sesame plants to lose." We always try to accumulate more and more, and we think these "cows" are essential for our existence. In fact, they may be the obstacles that prevent us from being happy. Release your cows and become a free person. Release your cows so you can be truly happy.

The Buddha presented another drastic image: "Two strong men are dragging a third man along in order to throw him into a fire pit. He cannot resist, and finally they throw him into the glowing embers." These strong men, the Buddha said, are our own volition. We don't want to suffer, but our deep-seated habit energies drag us into the fire of suffering. The Buddha advised us to look deeply into the nature of our volition to see whether it is pushing us in the direction of