



Awaken to Truth
in Harmony
A Trilogy



AGGACITTA

Awaken to Truth in Harmony

A Trilogy

Aggacitta Bhikkhu



Sāsanaṛakkha Buddhist Sanctuary

Names of individuals on cover: (top row) Mahasi Sayadaw, Master Sheng Yan, Ajahn Chah, Tenzin Gyatso (the Dalai Lama), Seung Sahn, Pa-Auk Sayadaw, (bottom row) Ramana Maharshi, Mata Amritanandamayi (Amma), Eckhart Tolle, Dipa Ma, Goenkaji, Jiddu Krishnamurti

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T. 017 518 2011
T./F. 05 8411198
E. office@sasanarakkha.org
W. <http://www.sasanarakkha.org>

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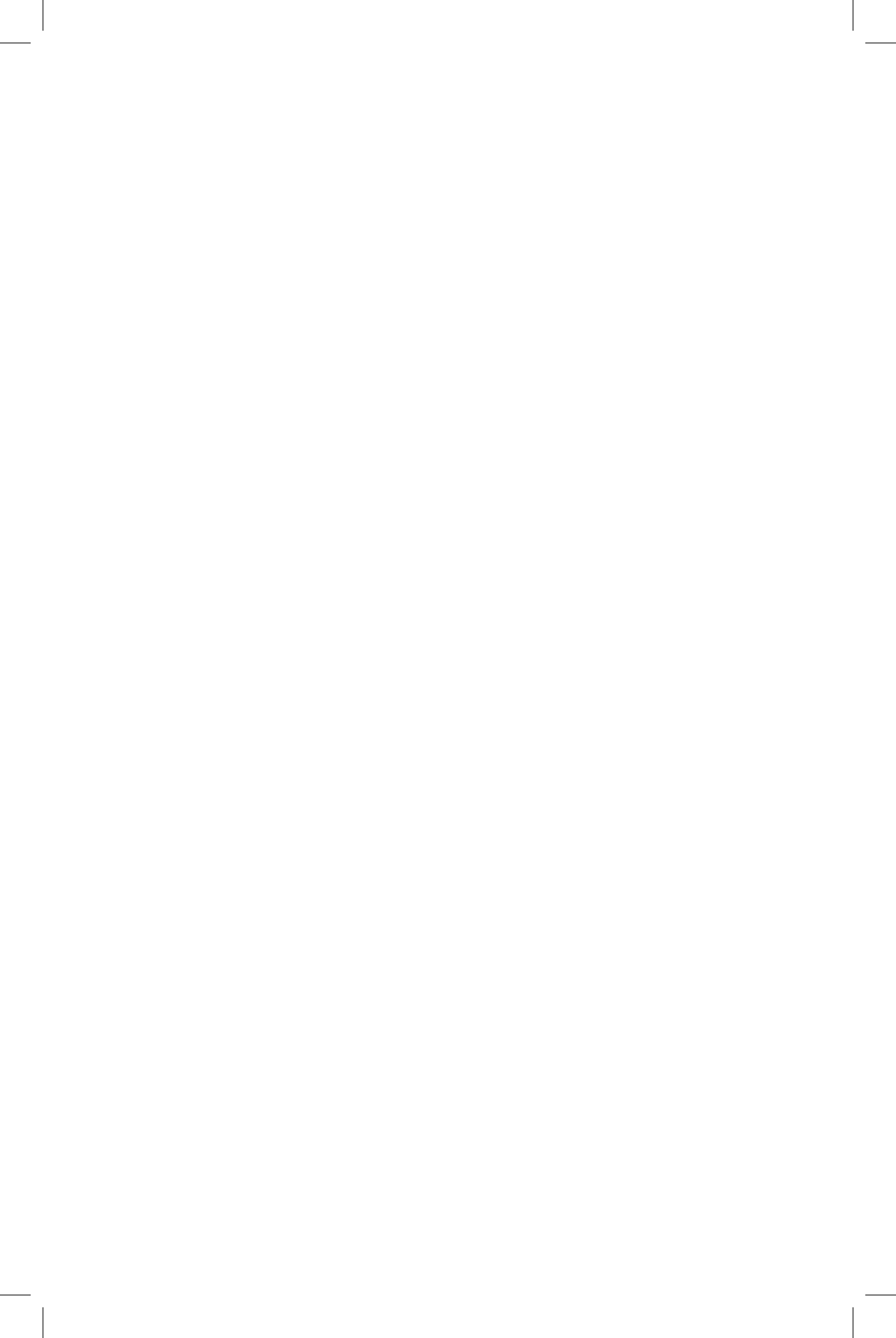
Guide to Non-English Words

Any non-English word, other than proper nouns, that occurs only once in the main text is either accompanied by its English translation or explained in a footnote. Other non-English words in the main text, including some proper nouns, are explained in the Glossary on p58.

Abbreviations

	Pāli Text	Reference according to
AN	Aṅguttara Nikāya	Book no. : Sutta no.
DN	Dīgha Nikāya	Sutta no.
MN	Majjhima Nikāya	Sutta no.
Pug	Puggalapaññatti	Part no. : Section no. : Paragraph no.
SN	Saṃyutta Nikāya	Saṃyutta no. : Sutta no.
Sn	Suttanipāṭa	Chapter no. : Sutta no.
Vin	Vinaya	Book name
CDB	The Connected Discourses of the Buddha	Page no.
MLDB	The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha	Page no.
NDB	Numerical Discourses of the Buddha	Page no.
CSCD	Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana CD-ROM	Paragraph no.

All references are based on Vipassana Research Institute's Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana CD-ROM (V.3.0), except for SN, which is based on CDB.



Foreword

Whenever we feel that we are definitely right, so much so that we refuse to open up to anything or anybody else, right there we are wrong. It becomes wrong view. When suffering arises, where does it arise from? The cause is wrong view, the fruit of that being suffering. If it was right view, it wouldn't cause suffering.

Ajahn Chah

If you asked me what is the most significant thing I've learnt from Āyasmā Aggacitta Mahāthera, the author of this book, I would unhesitatingly say, "Open-mindedness". In fact, I would go as far as to say that it's the most important thing I've learnt as a monk. For it's the key that has opened up to me an amazing wealth of knowledge beyond my comfort zone, bringing about greater well-being physically and mentally. I know that this has led to positive effects in people around me too.

I was a rather orthodox Theravādin Buddhist with a determined partiality for the Burmese Mahasi meditation system. I conveniently assumed that religious or spiritual teachings that seemed incompatible with my views then, to be plain wrong views. Though rarely contemptuous, I was decidedly rejective of other views—a clear sign that I was attached to my own. I do recall some glimmers of open-mindedness, but since I hardly ventured outside my little zone, I suppose they were somewhat dim.

That started to change soon after I accepted Āyasmā Aggacitta as my teacher. Well-known for his strict adherence to the Vinaya, he is unusually open-minded. To my mind then, it was strange; in fact, at times a little disquieting.

With little obvious effort on his part, I was gradually nudged to consider views and practices that I previously wouldn't have delved into. To my surprise, it was liberating and even fun. My faith in the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha was not

only unshaken, but somehow strengthened. I then realised why I had been avoiding other views: I was afraid.

Now I'm no longer afraid to explore knowledge beyond my tentative schema. That doesn't mean that I stop being critical. Instead, I've learnt that being critical is not incompatible with being open-minded. It only appears so to me when I'm attached to views. With less attachment to views, I also notice being more accommodative and reconciling when faced with views that appear different from mine.

I'm now in a little hurry to help others to be open-minded too, while being mindful about thinking, "People should be more open-minded", which is another view that I could get attached to. So, I'm happy that my teacher has written this trilogy to share his thoughts on the subject with references from early Buddhist texts.

Since you've already picked up this book, I guess you're at least open-minded about being open-minded. Even if you're still afraid to explore beyond your comfort zone, if you want to be free from that fear, I believe this trilogy will help you to make this path smoother.

Freeing ourselves from attachment to views is an exciting adventure. That's my experience. Should you notice any resistance in your heart, I invite you to allow that resistance. Relax, and ask, "Why?"

As Byron Katie wisely questions, "Would you rather be right or free?"

Kumāra Bhikkhu,
a grateful student of the author

Preface

Prior to my decision to become a Theravāda Buddhist monk more than 30 years ago, I was impressed by the intellectual writings of Western philosophers and psychologists; and even more deeply inspired by the profound narratives of Eastern mystics and contemplatives. The turning point came when I read Alan Watts' *The Way of Zen* in the mid 70's. It became clear to me then that I needed to go beyond the intellect and rational thinking in order to realise the Truth—whatever it turns out to be.

Thus, during my third year (1977) in the School of Housing, Building and Planning, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, I was spending much more time avidly reading whatever available spiritual literature in the campus library instead of doing my assignments. The selection included translations of Buddhist scriptures, Tao Te Ching, Bhagavadgītā, New Testament and Koran, as well as narratives of ancient Ch'an and Zen masters, sufis¹ and dervishes², Indian swamis³ and Christian saints.

I believed that those works were inspired by real-life experiences of sages who gained access to higher levels of Truth that lie beyond the transient pleasures of the senses and the limited comprehension of the intellect. I was convinced that for me, the realisation of Truth can be facilitated by giving up the pursuit of worldly goals for the reclusive life of a monk. Although I was inspired to follow the footsteps of the ancient Ch'an/ Zen masters who lived secluded lives up in the mountainsides, circumstances led me to eventually become a Theravāda monk in Malaysian Buddhist Meditation Centre, Penang.

1 **Sufi** – A Muslim who represents the mystical dimension of Islam; a Muslim who seeks direct experience of Allah; mainly in Iran. *The Sage's English Dictionary and Thesaurus* v3.1.2 Jan 08, 2009.

2 **Dervish** – An ascetic Muslim monk; a member of an order noted for devotional exercises involving bodily movements. *Ibid.*

3 **Swami** – A Hindu religious teacher; used as a title of respect. *Ibid.*

Having renounced the worldly life in search of Truth, I have always valued a liberal spirit of enquiry that seeks to probe rather than assert, to cooperate rather than compete, to include rather than exclude, to harmonise rather than divide. But this begs the question: “Would not a liberal spirit of enquiry be stifled by the conservative interpretations and practices of Theravāda monasticism?”

Although spirit is formless, it needs to manifest in a world of form; so for me, spirit took the form that fitted best to the place, culture, time and my inclinations when the decision to renounce was made in 1978. And I hope I have allowed this very precious spirit to shine forth through my old-fashioned robes in *Awaken to Truth in Harmony: A Trilogy*.

“Coping with a Handful of Leaves” was written in 2003 and published as a booklet for free distribution in 2004. At that time, the Mahasi method of meditation was already quite well-established in Malaysia while other traditions, such as those of Goenka, Pa Auk and Ajahn Brahm, were just starting to become popular. I wrote “Coping” to allay the fears of both stalwart Mahasi yogis and others among their fold who were contemplating trying out other methods.

Six years later, a momentous event occurred. Taiping Insight Meditation Society (TIMS)—founded in 1989 by Āyasmā Sujīva, one of the pioneer Mahasi meditation teachers of Malaysia—hosted a three-month Pa Auk meditation retreat (March – June 2009) in Sāsanārakkha Buddhist Sanctuary (SBS)⁴. By then, many Mahasi yogis had ‘switched camps’ and some had even excelled to qualify as Pa Auk meditation teachers. The tide then turned. Some of the ex-Mahasi yogis—directly and indirectly, discreetly and indiscreetly—denounced non-Pa Auk methods, including their past practice, as inefficacious and unauthentic. In order to assuage such overzealous sentiments, I delivered a concluding Dhamma talk entitled “Harmony in Diversity” at the end of the three-month retreat. The version in this trilogy is based on the research material that I prepared for the talk.

4 SBS is a special project founded and managed under the auspices of TIMS.

Soon after the Pa Auk retreat in SBS, Benny Liow reminded me that I had agreed to contribute an article for a special souvenir magazine to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Young Buddhist Association of Malaysia. Deadline: end of August 2009.⁵ “Be Truthful about Truth” was therefore written like a sequel to “Harmony in Diversity”. However, it extends peace and harmony in the quest for Truth beyond the confines of popular Buddhist beliefs. As it was written in the wake of “Harmony” please bear with a page or so of ‘copy-and-paste’ from the former.

If, after reading this trilogy, your path of awakening to Truth becomes more at peace and in harmony within and without, all our efforts expended in producing this Gift of the Dhamma would be well-rewarded.

Unless otherwise stated in the footnotes, the English translations of the Pāli passages are mine.

Finally, I must record my heartfelt thanks to all the monks who gave me valuable feedback while I was preparing the notes for “Harmony in Diversity” in May – June 2009; to the publication team and Tuck Loon for producing yet another handsome publication; and to all others who contributed in one way or more to this precious Gift of the Dhamma.

Aggacitta Bhikkhu
April 2010

5 Although I met the deadline other articles didn’t; so the magazine will be out only in August 2010!



Coping with a Handful of Leaves

“**W**hat do you think, monks? Which are more... the leaves in my hand or those above the *siṃsapā* forest?” The Blessed One was staying near Kosambī in the *siṃsapā* forest when he picked up a handful of *siṃsapā* leaves and posed this question.

“Few are the leaves in your hand, Bhante,” answered the monks, “compared to the abundant leaves above the *siṃsapā* forest.”

“It is so indeed, monks,” said the Blessed One. “In the same way, vast is the knowledge that I have directly realised but not revealed. But why did I not reveal it?” The Buddha explained that it was because such knowledge was not conducive to total liberation from the sufferings pertaining to the endless round of births and deaths.⁶

Picking from the handful of leaves

Centuries later, the “handful of leaves” bequeathed to us was subsequently inscribed in three huge baskets of dried palm leaves, then printed in several thousand pages, and now stored in several hundred megabytes of disc space. How can we relate the method of insight meditation (*vipassanā*) that we are so familiar with to the handful of *siṃsapā* leaves? Could it be a leaf; perhaps just a cell? Or maybe even more minute than that?

Not very long ago I was involved in an open discussion about various methods of *vipassanā* meditation. A long-time Mahasi yogi asked, “What do you think of the Goenka method? They even claim that they are doing *vipassanā* meditation.” I was quite startled by his remark because it implied that only the Mahasi method was *vipassanā* while others were not.

6 *Siṃsapāvana Sutta* (SN 56:31).

There are in fact, some yogis who had difficulty making headway in the Mahasi method but found the Pa Auk method more suitable for their meditative progress. Some of them have made such great advancement that they have become qualified teachers of that method.

Others assert that access or absorption concentration is an absolute prerequisite before a yogi can even start to mentally observe (*vipassati*) the grossest of ultimate reality—material phenomena, not to mention mental phenomena like thoughts, emotions and defilements.

One particular yogi had been regularly practising the Mahasi method on his own for several months when he was talked into accepting this view. He was advised to stop noting predominant physical and mental phenomena ‘interrupting’ his meditation and to just concentrate on the breath at his nostrils. For three months he diligently tried to do so.

Later he told me that although mindfulness of the in-breath and out-breath (*ānāpānassati*) gave him some peace and calmness, he found that his everyday mindfulness was becoming dull and blunt. When he was practising general mindfulness, he could watch his thoughts and emotions even when he was at work, and that helped him in self-restraint. But since he changed to pure tranquillity (*samatha*) meditation, he had got wilder in his behaviour.

Sound advice from a seasoned yogi

Several years ago when I was in Myanmar, I had a discussion with a brother forest monk, Hman Taung Forest Sayadaw U Candobhāsa. He is one of the more exceptional yogis that I have met. Having practised various methods of meditation, e.g. Mahasi, Sun Lun, Mogok, Than Lin Taw Ya, Kanni, etc. he was still very enthusiastic when I told him about the Pa Auk method.

“How can you cope with so many methods?” I asked.

“Whenever I start to learn a new method I make sure that I

completely let go of any other techniques I have learnt,” replied Sayadaw. “One must be unbiased, objective and believing when practising under a competent master. Only then can one reap the most benefits,” he stressed.

Such are the words of a true Truth seeker. Faith in, gratitude and loyalty to one’s teacher are, doubtless, cardinal virtues of a devout student. But should a Dhamma sibling be accused of unfaithfulness (or ‘spiritual adultery’, to coin a new term) and snubbed for having the guts to try another alternative that may very well prove to be more suitable than the Dhamma family’s usual method of practice? There is a great deal of subjectivity involved in walking the path to liberation. What is suitable for one may not be so for another. “One man’s meat is another man’s poison” may be a mundane English saying, but its message reverberates through the **Tipiṭaka**⁷ and its exegetical literature as well as among yogis of all traditions and ages.

Āyasmā Sāriputta’s error

Most of us would be quite familiar with the story of Āyasmā Sāriputta’s newly ordained student⁸ who struggled in vain with an unsuitable meditation subject until the Buddha came to the rescue. He was it seems, a goldsmith’s son. Observing that he was still in his robust youth, Āyasmā Sāriputta, the Buddha’s foremost disciple in great wisdom, gave him the meditation on loathsomeness of the body (*asubha*) to subdue lustful thoughts that he could be prone to. It was a disastrous diagnosis, which goes to prove that even liberated persons who have eradicated all mental defilements (*arahantā*) are human enough to err. Throughout the three-month rainy season retreat (*vassāvāsa*), one-pointedness of mind eluded him. His mind simply did not want to concentrate on the loathsome subject.

7 Three Baskets—the full set of canonical Theravāda scriptures preserved in Pāli.

8 Suvannakārattheravattthu in **Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā** (Commentary on **Dhammapada** #285).

After four months of coaching and persistent striving, both teacher and student were exhausted. Āyasmā Sāriputta, for all his intelligence and wisdom, could not figure out what was wrong. Finally he took him to see the Buddha. Through his psychic insight into others' inclinations and proclivities, the Buddha perceived that this new monk had been born in a goldsmith's family not only in this existence, but for the last 500 lifetimes!

The poor novice was absolutely repelled by such a gross subject because he had been used to working with refined, beautiful objects of gold. It was obvious why his mind could not concentrate on the asubha meditation. Realising that a pleasant meditation subject would be suitable for him, the Buddha created a huge golden lotus with drops of water dripping from its petals and stalk. "Here, take this to the fringe of the monastery, erect it on a heap of sand and meditate on it," he said.

The monk's eyes lit up with pleasure when he saw the beautiful golden lotus in the Buddha's hand. He reached out for it and his mind was immediately absorbed in the golden lotus. Following the Buddha's instructions, he progressively attained and mastered the four states of meditative concentration (*jhāna*) in a single sitting. The Buddha then made the lotus wilt and fade in front of him. At that moment, the new monk realised impermanence and he attained awakening when he heard the Buddha's words, projected through psychic power from afar:

Pluck off one's attachment,
Like the autumnal lotus, with the hand;
Just develop the path to peace,
Nibbāna, preached by the Buddha.⁹

Investigating the mechanics of awakening

Dogmatic Theravāda meditators should be asked, "Under which of the 40 subjects of meditation described in the **Visuddhimagga**

9 Dhammapada #285.

can this golden lotus be classified? Can it be ascertained that he went through the classical 16 stages of insight knowledge? Did he directly perceive the cause-and-effect connection of his past lives before he qualified to attain the Path and Fruition (*maggaphala*) of awakening? It can be argued that individuals during the Buddha's time had superior perfections of spiritual virtues (*pāramī*), so they could break all the rules and still attain awakening; whereas lesser mortals like us shall have to trudge every inch of the way just to get a glimpse of Nibbāna. With all humility, we may have to admit that we have inferior *pāramī* credentials. But who on earth has the audacity to determine which method is best for an individual when even Āyasmā Sāriputta, the Buddha's wisest disciple, could prescribe a wrong subject?

"I tell you, Ashin Phayah¹⁰, all of them lure [their students] according to their respective inclinations. Consider for example, Āyasmā Ānanda's case. The scriptures say that he attained total liberation from all defilements (*arahatta*) while he was practising mindfulness established in respect of the body (*kāyagatāsati*). Teachers from the Mahasi tradition would of course assert that he was noting the movements of his body as he was lying down. Teachers who favour ānāpānassati would instead suggest that he was observing his breath at that time. 'He must have been contemplating one of the thirty-two parts of the body,' asubha enthusiasts would insist. None of them can be proven wrong because the term 'kāyagatāsati' can refer to any of those meditations. This is only one example, mind you. The scriptures are full of ambiguities like that," disclosed Hman Taung Forest Sayadaw.

"They're all so eloquent and convincing; we don't really know whom to believe or not to believe. In the end, it's the actual practice—the direct, personal experience—that matters most," he continued. "After trying out so many different methods, what do I conclude? Each may start differently, but

¹⁰ Burmese word roughly meaning 'Venerable'.

eventually they all end up doing the same thing—observing the arising and passing away of mental and material phenomena. The clarity and subtlety of the perception, of course, depends on the strength and intensity of one’s concentration.”

Diversity in harmony during the Buddha’s time

During the Buddha’s time, monks of different clans, castes, districts and countries stayed and meditated together in one monastery, living in harmony and in accordance with the Doctrine and Discipline (*DhammaVinaya*). But not all of them were practising the same type of meditation. One might be practising development of loving-kindness (*mettābhāvanā*), another ānāpānassati, and yet another contemplation of four great elements. Others might be practising more than just one type of meditation.

For instance, Āyasmā Rāhula, the Buddha’s son, at one time was given six different subjects of meditation: thirty-two parts of the body, five elements, four divine abodes, asubha, impermanence and ānāpānassati.¹¹

As the Omniscient One was still alive, monks were prescribed the meditation subjects most suitable for each individual. The story of Āyasmā Sāriputta’s student is just one of the many cases where monks who were given inappropriate meditation subjects by their teachers struggled in vain until the Buddha came to the rescue. The **Visuddhimagga** and other commentaries also discuss at length the subject of suitability, not only confined to meditation subjects, but covering other areas such as temperament, food, posture, climate, lodging and Dhamma talk as well.

11 **Mahārāhulovāda Sutta** (MN 62).

Getting on the right footing

All this points to the fact that there is a great deal of subjectivity involved in the practice for liberation. Starting off on the spiritual path on the wrong foot could have far-reaching consequences. Imagine what could have happened to the ex-goldsmith monk if the Buddha had not intervened. In my association with yogis and meditation teachers of various traditions, I've met and heard of many yogis who got on the right footing only after they had tried other methods without much success.

If we know that a Dhamma sibling has discovered a new method of practice different from ours that is conducive to clarity of mind, freedom from the hindrances (*nīvaraṇā*) and deepening of insight, what should we do? Would it be to anyone's advantage to ostracise him or her out of loyalty to the good old teacher or to the Dhamma family's usual method of practice? Why can't we maintain the spirit of liberality prevalent during the Buddha's time? Even Āyasmā Sāriputta, Āyasmā Moggallāna and Āyasmā Ānanda would send their students to one another for training. Why don't we hear of student exchange programs, e.g. between the Mahasi, Goenka and Pa Auk traditions? Why can't we live in harmony and with mutual understanding, respect and support within our own organisation or society even though we may be practising different methods of meditation?

The handful of leaves given to us by the Buddha may be insignificant compared to the bountiful leaves of knowledge and information available to us today. But the wonder of that little handful is that it can be so varied, so versatile, so readily customised, and so effective—if only we allow ourselves the freedom to choose and experiment. If only we are humble enough to admit the limitations of our knowledge and experience. If only we are discreet enough when commenting on others' meditative experiences that are beyond our ken. If

only we are tolerant and understanding enough to encourage our Dhamma siblings to try another path that is different from ours. If only we have enough unconditional love to rejoice in the success achieved through the Pa Auk method by a long-time Mahasi yogi and vice versa. If only we know how to cope with just a handful of variegated leaves.

Mutual support, understanding and respect, and unity in diversity are essential virtues that will help to nurture our practice while we walk on the spiritual path together. As a minority in a Muslim country, and even among the Malaysian Buddhist community, we Theravādins can no longer afford to be further decimated by our petty dogmatic differences, opinionated assertions and partisan loyalties. To react emotionally or behave judgementally towards our Dhamma siblings who have found their mecca in the 'opposite camp' may well cause an obstruction to their spiritual progress and well-being. It may also undermine our own precious fraternity, strength, unity, and direction as the privileged heirs of our Master's handful of leaves, given without a closed fist.

Harmony in Diversity

Addressing the exclusive claims of different meditation traditions

Philosophy of SBS Retreat Centre

Sāsanārakkha Buddhist Sanctuary (SBS) was created with the help and support of the public, mostly Buddhist devotees from different traditions on a national and international scale. So it is only fair that it should share its resources—beautiful environment close to nature and modern facilities—with Buddhists and others in the pursuit of physical, intellectual and spiritual health and development.

Most meditation centres and monasteries allow only one method or tradition to be taught and practised in their premises. SBS is unique because of its openness in offering its facilities for residential retreats to be conducted by teachers of various Buddhist meditative traditions.

What if there are conflicting claims by teachers or followers of different traditions? Will that not cause confusion and discord among the congregation of SBS residents, devotees and supporters?

The purpose of this tract is to show that despite our differences in interpretation and practice, there can still be harmony and mutual respect—if we know how.

Claims, confusion and disharmony

Claims, confusion and disharmony are not something new or peculiar to our age and society. This is an ancient problem that was addressed by the Buddha on several occasions, e.g. in the famous **Kālāma Sutta** (AN 3:65) the Kālāmas asked the Buddha when he passed through Kesaputta Town:¹²

¹² Translation adapted from NDB p65.

“Bhante, there are some monks and brahmins who visit Kesaputta. They expound and explain only their own doctrines; but they disparage, debunk, revile, and deprecate the doctrines of others. But then some other monks and brahmins come to Kesaputta, and they also expound and explain only their own doctrines; but they disparage, debunk, revile, and deprecate the doctrines of others. Bhante, for us there is doubt, there is uncertainty as to which of these reverend monks and brahmins speak the truth and which falsehood?”

“Come, Kālāmas. Do not go

1. by oral tradition (*anussavena*),
2. by lineage of teaching (*paramparāya*),
3. by hearsay (*itikirāya*),
4. by a collection of scriptures (*piṭakasampadānena*),
5. by logical reasoning (*takkahetu*),
6. by inferential reasoning (*mayahetu*),
7. by theorising (*ākāraparivitakkena*),
8. by considered acceptance of a view (*diṭṭhiniijjhānakkhantiyā*),
9. by the seeming competence of a speaker (*bhabbārūpatāya*), or
10. because you think, ‘The monk is our teacher.’ (*‘samaṇo no garū’ ti.*)

“But when you know for yourselves, ‘These things are unwholesome, these things are blameable, these things are censured by the wise; these things, if undertaken and practised, lead to harm and suffering’, then you should abandon them... But when you know for yourselves, ‘These things are wholesome, these things are blameless, these things are praised by the wise; these things, if undertaken and practised, lead to welfare and happiness’, then you should engage in them...”

The Buddha went on to ask the Kālāmas if greed (*lobha*), hate (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*) are evidently unwholesome, blameable things that are censured by the wise and when undertaken and practised, lead to harm and suffering. They acknowledged that it was so. They also admitted that non-greed (*alobha*), non-hate (*adosa*) and non-delusion (*amoha*) are evidently wholesome, blameless things that are praised by the wise and

when undertaken and practised, lead to welfare and happiness. This advice was given to non-Buddhists and is still applicable to ‘free-lance’ Truth seekers who do not wish to be included under any religious or sectarian labels. We will come back to this towards the end of this tract.

But what if such conflicting claims and disputes occur among Buddhists? Even during the Buddha’s time there were already disputes regarding what is Dhamma and Vinaya.

How do disputes arise?

Vin Cūlavagga (CSCD para 215) defines 18 grounds of dispute:

Therein what is a case of dispute (*vivādādhikaraṇa*)? Here, monks, monks dispute:

1. “This is Dhamma, this is not Dhamma;
2. this is Vinaya, this is not Vinaya;
3. this is spoken, uttered by the Tathāgata, this is not spoken, not uttered by the Tathāgata;
4. this is practised by the Tathāgata, this is not practised by the Tathāgata;
5. this is proclaimed by the Tathāgata, this is not proclaimed by the Tathāgata;
6. this is an offence, this is not an offence;
7. this is a light offence, this is a grave offence;
8. this is an offence with remainder [i.e. can be cleared], this is an offence without remainder [i.e. cannot be cleared];
9. this is a gross offence, this is not a gross offence.”

Therein the quarrel, brawling, split, dispute, difference in doctrine, doctrine in another way, exasperating speech, strife—this is called a case of dispute.¹³

These 18 grounds of dispute can actually lead to a schism in the Saṅgha as mentioned in **Vin Cūlavagga** (CSCD para 352).

“It is said, Bhante, ‘Schism in the Saṅgha, schism in the Saṅgha.’ To what extent is the Saṅgha split?”

¹³ *Yaṃ tattha bhaṇḍanaṃ kalaho viggaho vivādo nānāvādo aññathāvādo vipaccatāya vohāro medhagaṇi—idaṃ vuccati vivādādhikaraṇaṃ.*

“Here, Upāli, monks explain not-Dhamma as Dhamma, Dhamma as not-Dhamma; not-Vinaya as Vinaya, Vinaya as not-Vinaya; what is not spoken, not uttered by the Tathāgata, as spoken, uttered by the Tathāgata; what is spoken, uttered by the Tathāgata, as not spoken, not uttered by the Tathāgata; what is not practised by the Tathāgata, as practised by the Tathāgata; what is practised by the Tathāgata, as not practised by the Tathāgata.... Because of these 18 grounds they canvas, rally support, perform uposatha separately, perform pavāraṇā separately, perform saṅghakamma separately. To this extent, Upāli, is the Saṅgha split.”

Vin Cūlavagga continues, in the next paragraph, to define harmony in the Saṅgha:

“It is said, Bhante, ‘Harmony in the Saṅgha, harmony in the Saṅgha.’ To what extent is the Saṅgha harmonious?”

“Here, Upāli, monks explain not-Dhamma as not-Dhamma, Dhamma as Dhamma; not-Vinaya as not-Vinaya, Vinaya as Vinaya; what is not spoken, not uttered by the Tathāgata, as not spoken, not uttered by the Tathāgata; what is spoken, uttered by the Tathāgata, as spoken, uttered by the Tathāgata; what is not practised by the Tathāgata, as not practised by the Tathāgata; what is practised by the Tathāgata, as practised by the Tathāgata.... Because of these 18 grounds they do not canvas, rally support, perform uposatha separately, perform pavāraṇā separately, perform saṅghakamma separately. To this extent, Upāli, is the Saṅgha harmonious.”

Motives for dispute

Although causing a schism in the Saṅgha is invariably motivated by unwholesome mental states, starting a dispute in the Saṅgha can be motivated by wholesome, unwholesome, or indeterminate mental states as mentioned in **Vin Parivāra** (CSCD para 293):

What is the forerunner (*pubbaṅgama*) of the case of dispute? Lobha is the forerunner, dosa is the forerunner, moha is the forerunner, alobha is the forerunner, adosa is the forerunner, amoha is the forerunner... How many causes (*hetū*)? Three wholesome causes, three unwholesome causes, three indeterminate causes... In how

many modes (*ākārā*) does one dispute? One disputes in two modes—view that it is Dhamma or view that it is not-Dhamma....

Consequences of disputes about how to practise

We can see what could happen as described in **Sāmagāma Sutta** (MN 104). Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta, the founder of the Jains, had just died and his disciples were quarrelling and brawling with one another over what the correct teaching and discipline (*dhammavinaya*) of their teacher was.

You do not understand this Dhamma and Discipline. I understand this Dhamma and Discipline. How could you understand this Dhamma and Discipline? Your way is wrong. My way is right. I am consistent. You are inconsistent. What should have been said first you said last. What should have been said last you said first. What you had so carefully thought up has been turned inside out. Your assertion has been shown up. You are refuted. Go and learn better, or disentangle yourself if you can!¹⁴

The matter was reported to Āyasmā Ānanda by the novice Cunda, and together they informed the Buddha. Āyasmā Ānanda expressed his apprehension that a similar dispute might happen after the Buddha's demise. But the Buddha assured him that not even two monks then were making differing assertions about the 37 “wings of awakening” (*bodhipakkhiyadhammā*)¹⁵ which he had taught after directly knowing them. Āyasmā Ānanda continued,

But, Bhante, there are people who live apparently deferential towards the Blessed One who might, when he has gone, create a dispute in the Saṅgha about livelihood and about the Pātimokkha. Such a dispute would be for the harm and unhappiness of many, for the loss, harm and suffering of gods and humans.¹⁶

¹⁴ Translation extracted from MLDB p853.

¹⁵ These are: the four establishments of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhānā*), four right kinds of striving (*sammappadhānā*), four bases for spiritual power (*iddhipādā*), five faculties (*indriyāni*), five powers (*balāni*), seven awakening factors (*bojjhaṅgā*), Noble Eightfold Path.

¹⁶ Translation extracted from MLDB p854.

The Buddha answered,

A dispute about livelihood or about the Pātimokkha would be trifling, Ānanda. But should a dispute (*vivāda*) arise in the Saṅgha about the path (*magga*) or way (*paṭipadā*), such a dispute would be for the harm and unhappiness of many, for the loss, harm and suffering of gods and humans.¹⁷

From this sutta, as well as **Mahāparinibbāna Sutta** (DN 16), we can infer that these 37 bodhipakkhiyadhammā are the core teachings of the Buddha leading to liberation. Although all Buddhist schools and traditions agree on this, they may differ on *how* to put them into practice. So when there are conflicting claims by teachers or followers of different Buddhist traditions about *the* correct method of practice, this could lead to very serious consequences. This has happened so often in the history of Buddhism. It is happening now.

So how do I propose to address this issue of what is *the* ‘correct’ method of practice without causing confusion, animosity and disharmony among the Buddhist community? I propose to follow the advice given by the Buddha and the ancient theras. If you were aware of this advice would you not follow it? I’m sure that as good Buddhists we would all try to do so, right?

Conflict-management

I have compiled a six-point strategy based on the guidelines, set by the Buddha and the ancient theras, found scattered among the **Pāli Canon** and its commentaries. The outline of the strategy is shown below, followed by elaborations on each sub-heading together with the relevant citations.

A. Preventive measures

1. Nurture humble attitudes
2. Abandon six roots of dispute
3. Cultivate six things worth remembering that create love and respect, and conduce to concord and unity

¹⁷ Ibid.

B. Curative measures

4. Meet cordially
5. Evaluate claims based on doctrinal criteria
6. Evaluate claims based on experiential criteria.

A. Preventive measures

1.0 Nurture humble attitudes

1.1 Be equanimous and objective when criticised or praised

This basic attitude to cultivate is found in the introduction to **Brahmajāla Sutta** (DN 1).

“Monks, should others speak in dispraise of me, of the Dhamma or of the Saṅgha, ill-will, mistrust and resentment are not to be evoked in you on that account. Monks, should others speak in dispraise of me, of the Dhamma or of the Saṅgha, and on that account you were to be angry or displeased, that would only be an obstacle to you. Monks, should others speak in dispraise of me, the Dhamma or the Saṅgha, and on that account you were angry or displeased, would you know others’ speech as well-spoken or ill-spoken?”

“Certainly not, Bhante.”

“Monks, should others speak in dispraise of me, of the Dhamma or of the Saṅgha, then what is not true is to be explained as not true by you: ‘In this way also that is not true; in this way also that is false; and that is not among us; and that does not occur among us.’

“Monks, should others speak in praise of me, of the Dhamma or of the Saṅgha, delight, pleasure and elation are not to be evoked in you on that account. Monks, should others speak in praise of me, of the Dhamma or of the Saṅgha and on that account you were to be delighted, pleased or elated, that would only be an obstacle to you. Monks, should others speak in praise of me, of the Dhamma or of the Saṅgha, what is true is to be acknowledged as true by you: ‘In this way also that is true; in this way also that is correct; and that is among us; and that does occur among us.’”

This sutta clearly disapproves of wrong attitudes in reacting to criticism and praise, but it also shows the necessity to refute

incorrect criticism and acknowledge the truth of what is said, with the correct attitude.

1.2 Be cautious when professing a view

This intermediate attitude to cultivate is found in **Caṅkī Sutta** (MN 95).

The Buddha talked about five grounds upon which our beliefs and opinions are based and how to be truthful and objective about such beliefs and opinions.

1. Faith (*saddhā*)
2. Fancy (*ruci*)
3. Oral tradition (*anussava*)
4. Theorising (*ākāraparivitakka*)
5. Considered acceptance of a view (*diṭṭhinijjhānakkhanti*)

Something that is accepted on any of these grounds may actually be empty, hollow and false; while something else that is not accepted on any of these grounds may actually be factual, true and unmistaken.

So, these five grounds are not sufficient for a wise person who preserves truth to come to the definite conclusion: “Only this is true, anything else is wrong.”¹⁸

One may argue that to say this requires a much higher standard of verification—both doctrinal and experiential. However, it is interesting to note that although the Buddha went on to explain how to discover and finally arrive at truth, he did not condone that such an assertion can eventually be made.

This means that we should always be cautious and humble when professing a view or opinion based on any of these grounds or a combination of them, by allowing an element of uncertainty, just as engineers always allow a factor of safety in their designs. At best, such views and opinions are merely working hypotheses that remain to be verified by personal experience.

With regard to the Path (*magga*) and Way (*paṭipadā*), unless and until one becomes a sotāpanna, sakadāgāmi, anāgāmi

¹⁸ Paraphrase translation based on MLDB p780.

or arahant, one's opinion about any method of practice for liberation still falls within these five grounds. Even if one successfully attains to any of these stages of awakening through a particular method of practice, that method is only relevant for one's own temperament.

1.3 Be receptive to other views

This advanced attitude to cultivate is found in **Pañcakaṅga Sutta** (SN 36:19).

The carpenter Pañcakaṅga argued with Āyasmā Udāyī that the Buddha taught only two kinds of feeling—pleasant and painful—not three, since neutral feeling was classified as pleasant. Āyasmā Ānanda heard their conversation, went to see the Buddha and related the matter to him. The Buddha said that both of them were right although they disagreed; in fact he had spoken about many kinds of feeling—up till 108 kinds—according to different methods of exposition. Then the Buddha continued:

When the Dhamma has been taught by me in such a way through [different] methods of exposition, it may be expected of those who will not concede, allow, and approve of what is well-stated and well-spoken by others that they will become contentious and quarrelsome, and engage in disputes, and that they will dwell stabbing each other with verbal daggers.

But when the Dhamma has been taught by me in such a way through [different] methods of exposition, it may be expected of those who will concede, allow, and approve of what is well-stated and well-spoken by others that they will live in concord, with mutual appreciation, without disputing, blending like milk and water, viewing each other with kindly eyes.¹⁹

We all know that the Buddha tailored his discourses to suit his audience. The main aim of all the Buddha's varied discourses related to liberation is to present the Four Noble Truths in the best way that can most effectively lead the listener to their realisation. What works for some may not work for others and vice versa.

¹⁹ Translation extracted from CDB p1275.

There are cases of meditators who criticise a method they have unsuccessfully practised. They are like the proverbial fox who could not reach the grapes high up on the grape vine and complained, “They must be just sour grapes.”

Some people thrive on details while others are daunted by them. Here is an example from **Vajjiputta Sutta** (AN 3:85).

Once the Buddha was staying in the Spired Roof Pavilion in the Great Forest near Vesālī. Then a bhikkhu of Vajjian descent approached the Buddha, paid respect to him, sat down at one side and said: “Bhante, over 150 training rules (*sikkhāpadāni*) are recited every half-month. Bhante, I am unable to train by undertaking these training rules.”

“But can you, bhikkhu, train by undertaking the three trainings (*sikkhā*)—the training of higher morality (*adhisīlasikkhā*), the training of higher mind (*adhicittasikkhā*), the training of higher wisdom (*adhipaññāsikkhā*)?”

The bhikkhu answered that he could, so the Buddha urged him to do so because that would result in the abandoning of lust (*rāga*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). When lust, hatred and delusion have been abandoned, then he will not do what is unwholesome nor indulge in evil. The bhikkhu trained accordingly and achieved the stated result.

The moral of this story is this. The bhikkhu was daunted by the thought of having to undertake *more than one hundred and fifty* training rules (*sikkhāpadāni*) but he readily agreed to undertake *only* three trainings (*sikkhā*). However, little did he realise that the three trainings entailed *much* more than just training rules—he had to develop the mind and wisdom as well. But because he was no longer bothered by the details, he could practise freely, without stress, and he eventually attained arahantship.

Another example can be found in **Kimsukopama Sutta** (SN 35:245).

Four bhikkhus briefly described how, by meditating in varying degrees of detail, their vision became well purified.

Each understood, according to reality, the origin and passing away of one of the following:

1. six bases of contact
2. five aggregates subject to clinging
3. four great elements
4. whatever is subject to origination.

So we should always bear in mind that even if we are right, it doesn't mean that others are wrong—for they could be right too in their own ways. Perhaps the safest way is to be receptive to various views and opinions, so that we can later evaluate them objectively. If we are not attached to our own views or opinions—or better still, if we do not identify with any view or opinion as “mine”, “me” or “my self”—then no matter what others may say we can keep cool without feeling offended or flattered.

2.0 *Abandon six roots of dispute*

Let us go back to **Sāmagāma Sutta** (MN 104).

After warning that a dispute in the Saṅgha about the Path (*magga*) or Way (*paṭipadā*) “would be for the harm and unhappiness of many, for the loss, harm and suffering of gods and humans,” the Buddha went on to talk on the roots of disputes, how to settle them, and what sort of attitude to cultivate in order to prevent disputes from arising. To summarise, the root causes of dispute are disrespect towards the Teacher, Dhamma and Saṅgha, and not practising the training (*sikkhā*) because

1. one is angry and revengeful
2. one is deprecatory and prone to one-upmanship
3. one is envious and stingy
4. one is deceitful and fraudulent
5. one has evil wishes and wrong view
6. one adheres to one's own views, holds on to them tenaciously, and relinquishes them with difficulty.²⁰

²⁰ Translation adapted from MLDB p854-5.

The last item on the list reminds me of another sutta (AN 2.38).

A brahmin asked Āyasmā Mahākaccāna: “Why do laypeople dispute with one another and why do monks dispute with one another?” Āyasmā Mahākaccāna answered that laypeople disputed with one another because of attachment to, and obsession with, sensual objects/pleasures while monks disputed with one another because of attachment to, and obsession with, views.

Obviously, if one can guard the mind-door well enough, one will be able to recognise these unwholesome mental states as soon as they arise and abandon them with Right Effort before they can start to proliferate. Thus the causes of dispute can be eliminated at the root. That is why constantly being aware of one’s mental states is so important. Isn’t it stated in the first verse of the **Dhammapada** that “All things have mind as the forerunner, as the leader and are mind-made”?

3.0 Cultivate six things worth remembering (sāraṇīyadhammā)

At the end of **Sāmagāma Sutta** (MN 104) the Buddha also encouraged the monks to cultivate these six things worth remembering (*sāraṇīyadhammā*): (1-3) practising physical, verbal and mental mettā for one another publicly and privately, (4) sharing righteously obtained gains, and (5, 6) having a common morality (*sīla*) and view (*diṭṭhi*) that lead to the end of suffering. These six things (*sāraṇīyadhammā*) create love and respect, and conduce to cohesion, to non-dispute, to concord, and to unity.²¹

B. Curative measures

4.0 Meet cordially

However, despite the preventive measures, a dispute can still arise in the Saṅgha for some other reason, e.g. moved by

²¹ Paraphrase summary based on MLDB p859.

altruistic mettā-karuṇā, a learned, wise arahant might decide to point out the incorrect interpretations and practices of some influential monks.

This dispute is to be settled by certain legal proceedings prescribed in the Vinaya. There are seven such proceedings called *adhikaraṇasamathā*. The first one is called *sammukhāvinaya*, meaning settlement by coming face-to-face with one another, which is particularly relevant in a doctrinal dispute. The disputing parties should meet in concord and establish the guideline of the Dhamma (*dhammanetti samanumajjitabbā*) and the dispute should be settled according to it. Although this is stated in **Sāmagāma Sutta** (MN 104), no further details are given. For this we turn now to other sources.

5.0 Evaluate claims based on doctrinal criteria

We can find some explicit doctrinal criteria on how to determine what is or is not DhammaVinaya in the suttas and in post-canonical literature.

5.1 Canonical

Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (DN 16) says that before the Buddha passed away, he reminded Āyasmā Ānanda that after his demise there is still a final authority for the monks.

Perhaps, Ānanda, it may occur to some of you: ‘The teaching is without the Teacher (*atītasatthukariṃ pāvacanariṃ*); we no longer have a Teacher.’ But Ānanda, it is not to be regarded in that way. The Dhamma and the Vinaya that have been discoursed upon and laid down by me for you shall be your Teacher after my demise.

It is recorded earlier on in the same **Mahāparinibbāna Sutta** (DN 16) and also in **Mahāpadesa Sutta** (AN 4:180), that the Buddha had proclaimed the Four Great Standards (*cattāro mahāpadesā*) which can be summarised in this way:

When we hear a monk proclaiming that what he teaches “is the Dhamma... the Vinaya... the teachings of the Master”, how

can we assess the authenticity of his claims? He may say that he heard and learned it in the presence of

1. the Buddha himself,
2. the Saṅgha in a certain monastery with its elders (*therā*) and leaders,
3. many learned theras in a certain monastery who are holders of the traditional teachings; bearers of the Dhamma, Vinaya and the summaries, or
4. a learned therā in a certain monastery who is a holder of the traditional teachings; a bearer of the Dhamma, Vinaya and the summaries.

In such situations, without rejoicing in or scorning the monk's words, we should investigate to see if such teachings are included in the suttas or seen in the Vinaya. If they are, we may conclude that they are the words of the Buddha and that they have been well-learned by the speaker. Otherwise, we may conclude that they are not the words of the Buddha and that they have been wrongly learned by the speaker, and so we should reject them.

Notice that according to the above criteria there is no consideration given to the varying interpretations of the commentaries or elders. If this guideline is strictly adhered to, any doctrine that cannot be found in the suttas or the Vinaya has to be rejected as *not* the DhammaVinaya of the Buddha.

But this is the province of scholars only, for how many of us here have studied all the suttas and Vinaya in order to determine whether a claim can be found there or not? How many of us here have the interest, capability, resources or time to do that? Most of us will simply have to accept such claims based on the five grounds that the Buddha listed in **Caṅkī Sutta** (MN 95): (1) faith, (2) fancy, (3) oral tradition, (4) theorising and (5) considered acceptance of a view. And if such is the case, then these grounds are not sufficient for a wise person who preserves truth to come to the definite conclusion: "Only this is true, anything else is wrong."

Nonetheless, while this injunction may have been relevant during the Buddha's time, we cannot now use it as the *only* yardstick. Why? Because the authenticity and reliability of the texts that are presently available to us (in the **Nikāyas**, **Āgamas**, or their translations in various Asian languages and dialects) cannot be determined with absolute certainty, despite vastly improved means of multi-disciplinary research.

5.2 Post-canonical

The ancient theras who collated the Dhamma (*dharmasaṅgāhakā*) came up with another list of criteria that includes non-canonical interpretations. This is found in **Samantapāsādikā**, the Commentary to the **Vinaya Piṭaka**.²² They are listed according to a hierarchy of importance. The list and explanations below are direct translations from the relevant Pāli passages in the Commentary (CSCD para 45).

1. Thread, principle (*sutta*)

The text in the entire Basket of Discipline.

2. Corollary to the thread/principle (*suttānuloma*)

The Four Great Standards, as said thus by the Blessed One in **Vin Mahāvagga** (CSCD para 305).

Bhikkhus, whatever I have not objected to, saying, "This is not allowable," if it fits in with what is not allowable, if it goes against what is allowable, that is not allowable for you. [E.g. paper money, cheques, credit cards]

Whatever I have not objected to, saying, "This is not allowable," if it fits in with what is allowable, if it goes against what is not allowable, that is allowable for you. [E.g. robes and footwear made of artificial materials, artificial dye, tent, sleeping bags, postage stamps]

And whatever I have not permitted, saying, "This is allowable," if it fits in with what is not allowable, if it goes against what is allowable, that is not allowable for you. [E.g.

²² This list found in **Samantapāsādikā** is based on Āyasmā Nāgasena's reply to King Milinda in **Milindapañhā**, a post-canonical text believed to have been written between 100 BCE and 200 CE (i.e. 444 – 744 years after the Buddha's parinibbāna, according to Theravāda reckoning).

watching entertainment on TV, reading romance novels, listening to music through earphones plugged to CD player]

And whatever I have not permitted, saying, “This is allowable,” if it fits in with what is allowable, if it goes against what is not allowable, that is allowable for you. [E.g. stationery, PC, word processor, alarm clock, spectacles]²³

3. Teachers’ doctrine (*ācariyavāda*)

The commentarial tradition, independent of the **Pāli Canon**, consisting of verdicts (*vinicchaya*) arrived at and established by the 500 arahants who were Dhamma collators (*dhammasaṅgāhaka*) [at the 1st Synod].

4. Personal idea (*attanomati*)

Talk, independent of sutta, suttānuloma and ācariyavāda, on the mode established by using the method through one’s own intelligence, by inference. Indeed it is also the entire doctrine of the elders (*theravāda*)²⁴ found in the commentaries to the suttas, **Abhidhamma** and **Vinaya**.

This list of criteria establishes the hierarchy of authority to be followed when deciding on various interpretations of the Vinaya. The highest and final authority is still what is directly stated in the suttas, although in cases where there are grey areas not dealt with in the **Canon**, the other subsidiary authorities can be resorted to.

Although this list is found in the **Vinaya Commentary**, it can also be used in deciding whether a claim is according to the DhammaVinaya or not. In other words, the reliability and authenticity of any interpretation or practice must be graded according to this priority: sutta, corollary to the sutta, teacher’s doctrine and lastly personal idea. Notice that in this list, as in the Four Great Standards of DN 16 and AN 4:180, the final authority is the DhammaVinaya discoursed upon/laid down by the Buddha.

23 Adapted from Thanissaro Bhikkhu’s translation in *Access to Insight*, May 24, 2009, <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/vin/mv/mv.06.40.01.than.html> (Offline Edition 2009.10.25.17).

24 The views and interpretations of various elders are sometimes discussed in the commentaries. As their views and interpretations are independent of sutta, suttānuloma and ācariyavāda, they are categorised as attanomati.

This hierarchy of authority has been followed by scholars since ancient times. Āyasmā Buddhaghosa and all the commentators after him made clear distinctions in their works. Some modern examples in English can be found in the works of Āyasmā Bhikkhu Bodhi, Āyasmā Thānissaro Bhikkhu and Āyasmā Anālayo Bhikkhu. One notable modern commentary is Āyasmā Anālayo's doctoral thesis on *satipaṭṭhāna*,²⁵ where he clearly distinguishes between canonical and post-canonical doctrines. Post-canonical ideas are again classified into (1) interpretations of the commentaries, (2) views of contemporary meditation teachers from various traditions and (3) his personal conclusions. Āyasmā Anālayo was an ardent meditator even before he started his research on *satipaṭṭhāna*. So this is not just an academic treatise, but a survey of *satipaṭṭhāna* in the light of canonical and post-canonical notions and how it is variously put into practice today.

But then again as I pointed out earlier, if we cannot definitely determine the authenticity of the texts that are presently available to us (in the **Nikāyas**, **Āgamas**, or their translations in various Asian languages and dialects) this list of criteria—by itself—is not totally reliable either.

6.0 Evaluate claims based on experiential criteria

Fortunately, the Buddha also gave two separate lists of experiential criteria, of which only one criterion is common to both lists, for determining what is or is not truly his DhammaVinaya, on two separate occasions to two different people—Gotamī Mahāpajāpatī (his aunt and foster mother) and Āyasmā Upāli (the Vinaya patriarch). When combined they total fourteen principles (AN 8:53 + AN 7:80) .

“It would be good, Lord, if the Blessed One would teach me the Dhamma in brief such that, having heard the Dhamma from the Blessed One, I might dwell alone, secluded, heedful, ardent, and resolute.”

25 Published by Buddhist Publication Society in 2003 as *Satipaṭṭhāna—the Direct Path to Realization*.

“...As for the qualities (*dhammā*) of which you may know, that lead (*samivattanti*)

Saṅkhitta Sutta (AN 8:53)— to Gotamī Mahāpajāpati	Satthūsāsana Sutta (AN 7:80)— to Āyasmā Upāli
	to utter disenchantment, (<i>ekantanibbidāya</i>)
to dispassion (<i>virāgāya</i>)	to dispassion (<i>virāgāya</i>)
to being unfettered (<i>visaṃyogāya</i>)	to cessation (<i>nirodhāya</i>)
to shedding (<i>apacayāya</i>)	to calm (<i>upasamāya</i>)
to modesty (<i>appicchatāya</i>)	to direct knowledge (<i>abhiññāya</i>)
to contentment (<i>santuṭṭhiyā</i>)	to self-awakening (<i>sambodhāya</i>)
to seclusion (<i>pavivekāya</i>)	to Nibbāna (<i>nibbānāya</i>)
to aroused effort (<i>vīriyārambhāya</i>)	
to being easily supported (<i>subharatāyā</i>)	

You may definitely hold, ‘This is the Dhamma, this is the Vinaya, this is the Teacher’s instruction.’”²⁶

Notice that there are two levels addressed by the Buddha: **basic** and **ultimate**. The answer given to Gotamī Mahāpajāpati listed the basic experiential criteria for ascertaining what the true DhammaVinaya of the Buddha is. The answer given to Āyasmā Upāli points to the ultimate goal of liberation because all the terms used are actually synonyms of Nibbāna.

For those who are not scholastically inclined, and even for scholars, these fourteen principles seem more reliable in helping to determine whether a method of Dhamma practice actually conforms to the Buddha’s teachings.

6.1 Attributes of Dhamma are mostly experiential

These lists of experiential criteria seem to agree very well with the attributes of the Dhamma so frequently mentioned by the Buddha. Let us take a look at them. Except for the first

²⁶ Adapted from Thanissaro Bhikkhu’s translation in *Access to Insight*, May 24 2009, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an08/an08.053.than.html> (Offline Edition 2009.10.25.17).

attribute (*svākkhāto*—well-spoken), the other five attributes are all experiential. In other words, more than 83% of the attributes are experiential. These are stated in various ways by the Buddha in several suttas when he was asked the question:

In what way, Bhante, is the Dhamma directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, inward-bound, to be personally experienced by the wise?

In **PaṭhamaSandiṭṭhika Sutta** (AN 6:47) the Buddha replied to the wandering ascetic, Moliyasīvaka:

If you thus know of the greed, hatred or delusion present in you that it is there; and when greed, hatred or delusion is absent that it is absent—that is a way the Dhamma is directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, inward-bound, to be personally experienced by the wise. (abridged)²⁷

In **DutiyaSandiṭṭhika Sutta** (AN 6:48) the Buddha gave the same answer to a certain brahmin, but added defilements of body, speech and mind to the list:

If you thus know of the bodily defilement (*kāyasaṅdosa*), verbal defilement (*vacisaṅdosa*) or mental defilement (*manosaṅdosa*) present in you that it is there; and when it is absent that it is absent—that is a way the Dhamma is directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, inward-bound, to be personally experienced by the wise. (abridged)

In **UpavāṇaSandiṭṭhika Sutta** (SN 35:70) the Buddha told Āyasmā Upavāṇa that if a bhikkhu knows the presence or absence of lust within himself for any of the six sense objects, then “the Dhamma is directly visible, etc.”

In **Aññatarabrāhmaṇa Sutta** (AN 3:54) the Buddha answered a certain brahmin

...if lust, hatred and delusion have been abandoned, one neither plans for the harm of oneself, others or both; one does not experience suffering and grief in the mind; one does not misbehave through body, speech and mind; and one understands, as it really is, what is good for oneself, others and both. In this way is the Dhamma directly visible, etc.²⁸

27 Translation adapted from NDB p165.

28 Translation adapted from NDB p56.

In **Sandiṭṭhikadhamma Sutta** (AN 9:46) Āyasmā Udāyī asked Āyasmā Ānanda

Āvuso, it is said, ‘The Dhamma is directly visible. The Dhamma is directly visible.’ To what extent is it said by the Blessed One that the Dhamma is directly visible?

Āyasmā Ānanda answered that when a bhikkhu dwells having attained the first jhāna, to that extent, it is said by the Buddha that the Dhamma is directly visible, in a figurative way (*pariyāyena*). He went on to say the same thing for the remaining three jhānas and for the four formless spheres (*ārūppā āyatana*). Then he concluded by saying that the Buddha said that the Dhamma is directly visible in a non-figurative way to the extent of the attainment of arahantship after having completely transcended the fourth formless sphere, attained the cessation of perception and feeling and seen with wisdom.²⁹

Notice that here again, there is a range of standards: those in the first three suttas are at the low end while those in the last two are at the high end. So even if you have not attained the jhānas or the āyatanas during these three months, please don’t despair—if you have noticed the presence or absence of lobha, dosa or moha in your minds in an objective, impersonal way, then for you at that time the Dhamma was “directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, inward-bound, to be personally experienced by the wise”.

However, being at the lower end does not necessarily mean that they are useless or ineffective and therefore to be belittled. Look at what the Buddha said about such a practice in **Atthinukhopariyāya Sutta** (SN 35:153).

There is a method (*pariyāya*) by means of which (*yaṃ pariyāyaṃ āgama*) a bhikkhu—apart from faith... fancy... oral tradition... theorising... considered acceptance of a view—can declare final knowledge (*aññaṃ byākaroti*) in this way: ‘Birth is destroyed, the holy life lived, the task done. There is nothing further for the sake of this so-called state.’ And what is that method?

29 “puna caparaṃ, āvuso, bhikkhu sabbaso nevasaññānāsaññāyatanaṃ samatikkamma saññāvedāyitanirodhaṃ upasampajja viharati, paññāya cassa disvā āsavā parikkhīṇā honti. ettāvotāpi kho, āvuso, sandiṭṭhiko dhammo vutto bhagavatā nippariyāyenā”ti.

The Buddha asked: if a bhikkhu perceived an object with any of the six senses and is aware of the presence or absence of lust, hatred or delusion internally, then are these things (*dhammā*) to be known by faith... fancy... oral tradition... theorising... considered acceptance of a view? The bhikkhus replied in the negative.

“Aren’t these things to be known by seeing them with wisdom?”

“Yes, Bhante.”

“This, bhikkhus, is the method by which a bhikkhu—apart from faith... fancy... oral tradition... theorising... considered acceptance of a view—can declare final knowledge....”

We all know that the Buddha often spoke of the importance of faith (*saddhā*). In fact, faith in the Buddha’s awakening is the first among the five factors of exertion (**Padhāniyaṅga Sutta**, AN 5:53)³⁰ that can lead to awakening. However, there are some Truth seekers whose faculty of faith is much weaker than their faculty of wisdom. So, even for such individuals our compassionate Buddha has declared that there is still a method of practice that can lead to total liberation. I think that this method will certainly appeal to those who take inspiration in **Kālāma Sutta** (AN 3:65), cited at the beginning of this tract.

Summary

I have covered a wide range of subjects in my attempt to share with you the guidelines for conflict-management laid down by the Buddha and the ancient theras who compiled and collated the DhammaVinaya now preserved in the Pāli texts. Let me summarise the salient points.

- ◆ Exclusive claims of the efficacy of a method were common even during the Buddha’s time.
- ◆ The guidelines for conflict-management recommended by the Pāli scriptures are twofold: (1) preventive and (2) curative.

30 The five factors can be summarised as: (1) faith in the Buddha’s awakening, (2) good health and digestion, (3) honesty with oneself, one’s teacher and fellow practitioners, (4) diligence and perseverance with regard to wholesome states, and (5) noble, penetrative wisdom that leads to the complete ending of suffering.

- ◆ Preventive measures comprise
 1. pre-programming one's attitude with regards to views, opinions and beliefs, i.e. stay cool, don't be assertive, respect others' right to express views that are different from yours
 2. constantly checking one's mental states to abandon the root causes of dispute, which "would be for the harm and unhappiness of many, for the loss, harm and suffering of gods and humans"
 3. practising the six things worth remembering (*sāraṇīyadhammā*) that create love and respect, and conduce to cohesion, to non-dispute, to concord, and to unity.
- ◆ Curative measures comprise using two sets of criteria to assess any claims: (1) doctrinal and (2) experiential.
- ◆ Using doctrinal criteria entails
 1. applying the Four Great Standards established by the Buddha
 2. respecting the hierarchy of authority recommended by the ancient Dhamma-collators.
- ◆ Using experiential criteria entails
 1. checking the practitioner's bodily, verbal and mental conduct to see if the method has resulted in changes that measure up to the experiential criteria established by the Buddha
 2. checking if there is improvement in one's own conduct as a result of following the method. This is even more important than checking the conduct of others.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this is my proposal for harmony in diversity, based on the above guidelines:

- ◆ Keep cool whenever you are discussing views, opinions and beliefs. Check if your motivations for speaking are related to the root causes of dispute; don't speak if they are. You can only

do that effectively if you cultivate the habit of guarding your mind door.

- ◆ Avoid causing disputes by remembering the Buddha's reply to Āyasmā Ānanda recorded in **Sāmagāma Sutta** (MN 104):

A dispute about livelihood or about the Pātimokkha would be trifling, Ānanda. But should a dispute arise in the Saṅgha about the path (*magga*) or way (*paṭipadā*), such a dispute would be for the harm and unhappiness of many, for the loss, harm and suffering of gods and humans.

- ◆ Always be cautious and humble when professing a view or opinion based on any of the five grounds (faith, fancy, oral tradition, theorising, considered acceptance of a view) or a combination of them, by allowing an element of uncertainty, just as engineers always allow a factor of safety in their designs. At best such views and opinions are merely working hypotheses that remain to be verified by personal experience. With regard to the Path (*magga*) and Way (*paṭipadā*), unless and until one becomes a sotāpanna, sakadāgāmi, anāgāmi or arahant, one's opinion about any method of practice for liberation still falls within these five grounds.
- ◆ The Buddha tailored his discourses to suit his audience. The main aim of all the Buddha's varied discourses related to liberation is to present the Four Noble Truths in the best way that can most effectively lead the listeners to their realisation. What works for you may not work for others and vice versa. So, always remember that even if you are right, it doesn't mean that others are wrong—for they could be right too in their own ways, just as the Buddha pointed out by using as an example, his numerous classifications of feeling from 2 to 108.
- ◆ Using doctrinal criteria to assess the authenticity of an exclusive claim is the province of scholars only, for how many of us here have studied all the suttas and Vinaya? How many of us here have the interest, capability, resources or time to do that? Most of us will simply have to accept such claims based on the five grounds: (1) faith, (2) fancy, (3) tradition,

- (4) theorising and (5) consideration of another's view. These are not sufficient reasons for a wise person who preserves truth to come to the definite conclusion: "Only this is true, anything else is wrong."
- ◆ Instead, based on these five grounds alone, one should avoid making such exclusive assertions, particularly about controversial aspects of Truth and how to realise it. Why? Because we may harm ourselves by creating the bad kamma of misrepresenting the Buddha and misleading other earnest Truth seekers. We should truthfully say according to our basis of view: "This is my belief, fancy, tradition, theory or teacher's view."
 - ◆ But if you do have the interest, capability, resources or time to study the DhammaVinaya, especially if you are a local Malaysian monk, you are most welcome to join us here in SBS, where we try to balance study and practice. Then you will be able to distinguish what is canonical, commentarial, teacher's interpretation and personal view.
 - ◆ Nonetheless, even if you are an expert scholar we cannot now use the Four Great Standards as the *only* yardstick. Why? Because any modern, truly objective Buddhologist will humbly admit that the authenticity and reliability of the available scriptures (in the **Nikāyas**, **Āgamas**, or their translations in various Asian languages and dialects) cannot be determined with absolute certainty, despite vastly improved means of multi-disciplinary research.
 - ◆ Fortunately, the Buddha gave us some experiential criteria to determine what is or is not truly his DhammaVinaya. The list of eight given to Gotamī Mahāpajāpati is the most useful and applicable even today. So remember this list: If a method of practice really leads to the following results then you can be sure that "This is the Dhamma, this is the Vinaya, this is the Teacher's instruction." Otherwise it is not.
 1. Dispassion (*virāga*)
 2. Being unfettered (*visaṇṇyoga*)

3. Shedding (*apacaya*)
4. Modesty (*appicchatā*)
5. Contentment (*santuṭṭhi*)
6. Seclusion (*paviveka*)
7. Aroused effort (*vīriyārambha*)
8. Being easily supported (*subharatā*).

I wish to add that these results should be successively apparent in the beginning, middle and end of the practice, not only *after* the attainment of the Theravādin supramundane Path and Fruition (*lokuttara maggaphala*).

- ◆ **Note of caution:** I am stressing the importance of experience over doctrine only because I want to avoid any dispute over exclusive claims. For even the most learned scholar can be biased and attached to his own views and interpretations—even being self-righteous about propagating his understanding of the Truth by denouncing other interpretations. The experiential criteria that I have quoted from the Buddha involve not just meditative experience, but the *totality* of human moral experience reflected in one's bodily, verbal and mental conduct. Further, this set of criteria comes from the suttas, so it is doctrinal as well.

In fact, mere meditative experience without a sound doctrinal basis can be dangerous. For example, of the 62 wrong views listed in **Brahmajāla Sutta** (DN 1), 20 (32.3%) were based on misinterpretations of meditative experience while 42 (67.7%) were mere speculations. The Commentary, however, gives different figures. According to one reckoning, 47 (75.8%) were based on misinterpretations of meditative experience while only 15 (24.2%) were mere speculations.

In order to have the correct interpretation of meditative experiences one needs to know enough doctrinal teaching. For this reason, all Truth seekers are encouraged to balance study and practice.

- ◆ So as a final word—if you are a learned meditator, use both the doctrinal criteria of the Buddha and ancient theras as well as the experiential criteria found in the suttas to evaluate the reliability and efficacy of a method of practice. Otherwise if you are not a scholar, resort to the Buddha’s advice given to Gotamī Mahāpajāpati (AN 8:53) and Āyasmā Upāli (AN 7:80).

If it passes the test and it suits you—because practising it makes you gradually reduce the intensity and frequency of the defilements—go ahead and practise accordingly until you attain liberation. Feel free to encourage others to follow suit so that they can also reap similar benefits. However, if they find another more suitable method that conforms with the Buddha’s experiential criteria, even if it differs from yours, rejoice and encourage them. Marvel at the richness and versatility of the Buddha’s DhammaVinaya.

- ◆ When we have the fortitude to be faithful to our conviction and yet have enough mettā to be accepting of those who think and practise differently, we will be mature enough to enjoy the blessing of communal harmony in diversity. We will be able to help all those who think and practise differently with the purest intention and deepest compassion. Fortified with a pure mind, sincerity and compassion when we offer our criticism, we can be internally at peace when our criticism is rejected. And we will never be easily provoked into incurring defilements when our views are pointed out, rightly or wrongly, to be wrong.
- ◆ Having fortified our heart and mind with Dhamma, we will always have harmony in our mind in all situations. This is the ultimate source of communal harmony in diversity, a blessing indeed.

Sukho buddhānamuppādo, Blessed is the arising of the Buddhas
sukhā saddhammadesanā; Blessed is the preaching of the True Dhamma
sukhā saṅghassa sāmaggī, Blessed is harmony in the Saṅgha
samaggānaṃ tapo sukho. Blessed is the spiritual pursuit of the united.

Be Truthful about Truth

If I were not a monk ordained in the Theravāda tradition and nurtured by it, I would be a freelance Truth seeker. No labels, no denominational or doctrinal restrictions. After all, who can claim monopoly on Truth? Not even a true sage.

Granted, the Buddha is attributed to have proclaimed that he discovered the Four Noble Truths.³¹ But Buddhists also admit that it was a re-discovery that could be made by other individuals as well, such as solitary awakened ones (*paccekabuddhā*) and other perfectly self-awakened ones (*sammāsambuddhā*). Moreover, the Four Noble Truths are very specialised and are approached from the perspective of fundamental suffering (*dukkha*), its cause and cessation and the way leading to its cessation—or put in another way—to ultimate happiness. There are many other aspects of Truth that he did not reveal, as evidenced by his simile of a handful of leaves compared to the myriad leaves in the *siṃsapā* forest.³²

Distortion of Truth

Bear in mind that the Buddha, like many other great ancient sages, never wrote any treatise or manual to expound the theory and practice of his path to realise the truths that he propounded. The scriptures available to us now were compiled, collated, edited and passed down over many centuries through the sheer dedication and perseverance of his ordained disciples. After about 2½ millennia of transmission across vast geographical distances and dissimilar cultural and ideological backgrounds, in these scriptures there are bound to be discrepancies as to what the Buddha really taught. All Truth seekers should be acutely

31 *Ariyapariyesana Sutta* (MN 26, MLDB p263), *Nagara Sutta* (SN 12:65, CDB p603), *Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta* (SN 56:11, CDB p1844-5).

32 *Siṃsapāvana Sutta* (SN 56:31, CDB p1857-8).

aware of the utility and limitations of the spoken or written word, particularly words meant for specific individuals and pointing to the realisation of Truth at various levels.

Consider also human piety—the emotive force that generates devotion, faithfulness, righteousness, exclusiveness and indignation—and its tendency to exaggerate and glorify its object of faith. I personally believe that the true sages who ‘founded’ great religious or spiritual traditions genuinely experienced profound truths beyond rational thinking, the realisation of which is irreversibly and positively life-transforming. But when they told their followers about such truths and how to realise them, they had to use conventional language built upon rational thinking. Some of the more spiritually advanced understood, practised accordingly and accessed those profound truths. The great majority could have misunderstood or misinterpreted those very words that point to Truth and consequently led others astray—whether unwittingly and in good faith, or deliberately with devious intentions and ulterior motives. Is it surprising then that through the passage of time and the glasses of human piety, the original message could have gradually become diluted, adulterated, misconstrued and eventually distorted beyond recognition? In the process, it will certainly degenerate to a stage of empty rites and rituals when ceremonious form reigns over genuine spirit.

Some 2,500 years have passed since our Lord Buddha started to teach after his great awakening; it is not too early now—perhaps rather late—to ask: “At which stage of degeneration of our Master’s original message are we passing through?” I do not attempt to give a clear-cut answer for I believe that the question itself is more important because it can guide us to have a more sober perspective of how we formulate our religious or spiritual convictions. Nonetheless, if you look around objectively at what is happening in most Buddhist institutions all over the world, isn’t the answer quite apparent?

Truth is in your hands

In the light of what I have pointed out thus far, sincere spiritual leaders are well-advised to be cautious, precise and frank in their interpretations of their Master's teachings. Why? Because the magnitude of the good or bad kamma created by their interpretations would commensurate with their intentions and influence. Yet, how often do we hear Dhamma speakers pronounce, "The Buddha said..." or "This is what the Buddha really meant..." when even the most knowledgeable Buddhologist today would have to categorically admit that in many cases we do not and can not know with certainty.

Consider what sort of impact the following statements would have on the average Buddhist audience:

1. The Buddha said...
(Spoken by (a) Pa Auk Sayadaw, (b) Bhante Dr Guṇaratana, (c) Ajahn Brahmaniso, (d) Āyasmā Bhikkhu Bodhi, (e) Āyasmā So-and-so (not well-known senior monk), (f) Āyasmā So-and-so (unknown junior monk), (g) Benny Liow, (h) a fresh graduate of Dhamma Speakers' Course)
2. According to **Mahāparinibbāna Sutta**, the Buddha said...
3. According to **Aṭṭhasālinī** (the Commentary to **Dhammasaṅgani**, the first book of the **Abhidhamma Piṭaka**) the Buddha said...
4. According to Mahasi Sayadaw, the Buddha said...
5. According to Sister Henrietta, the Buddha said...
6. According to the Burmese, the Buddha said...
7. I think the Buddha said...
8. I am convinced that the Buddha said...
9. I believe that the Buddha said....

Anyone who has a basic knowledge of marketing will immediately be able to identify the most strategic statement for 'selling' your argument: it depends on who makes the statement and the source of reference. For example, if you

are not quite sure of the reliability, authenticity or source of a particular statement, it is definitely more convincing to simply say, “The Buddha said...” rather than honestly say, “According to Uncle Vijaya, the Buddha said...” or “If I’m not mistaken, I think the Buddha said...”. In fact, it is not uncommon for a meditation teacher to say, “This is not *my* method, but the Buddha’s method.” Upon close scrutiny, however, it may actually be his or his teacher’s interpretation of a method found in the commentaries written about 900 years after the Buddha’s final passing away (*parinibbāna*).³³

Dhamma speakers and spiritual leaders are immediately rewarded by the sheer joy of sharing the priceless Dhamma with others. Energised by the sharing, they can reap even greater satisfaction when they come to know how others have consequently benefited. However, there is an occupational hazard that they should ever be mindful of: misleading others because of misinformation, misinterpretation, and human piety.

Be a good custodian of Truth

In order to avoid this hazardous pitfall, a Dhamma speaker should be cautious, precise and frank in presenting and interpreting the Dhamma. Firstly, do your homework before a Dhamma talk.

1. Find out the source of your information, e.g. the name of the sutta and its location in the **Nikāyas**.
2. Cite the translator.
3. Identify statements and quoted passages as Canonical, commentarial, teachers’ interpretation or personal

³³ Most of the extant commentaries of the **Pāli Canon** are traditionally ascribed to the great 5th century commentator, Āyasmā Buddhaghosa, but the current consensus among scholars is that only the **Visuddhimagga** and the commentaries on the first four **Nikāyas** are Buddhaghosa’s work. (See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhaghosa#cite_ref-0). According to the epilogue of **Visuddhimagga**, and to the prologue of **Samantapāsādikā**, they were written in Pāli based on the Sinhalese commentaries (now lost) and on the interpretations and views of the elder monks then residing in Mahāvihāra, Anurādhapura, Sri Lanka.

opinion so that the audience can distinguish between what is Canonical and what is not.

4. Be mindful that the scriptures were originally preserved orally for several hundred years before they were committed to writing. There are also several recensions in various Indic dialects and Asian translations, some of which are very similar while others are vastly different. While it is certain that none of the scriptures is the exact words of the historical Buddha, it is extremely difficult to ascertain which is the closest, most accurate version.
5. Bear in mind that your information is based on a translation which may or may not be accurate.

Then when you give the talk, the safest way to truly represent and preserve truth is to say:

- ◆ According to ... **Sutta** found in ... **Nikāya** and translated by ..., the Buddha said...
- ◆ According to the Commentary to ... **Sutta** translated by ..., this is what the Buddha meant... these are the details of the circumstances surrounding this sutta...

Or if you don't have the time or resources to get such detailed references, you could simply say:

- ◆ According to a Dhamma talk given by Sister Chan Kah Yein ...
- ◆ According to what I read in Ajahn Chah's *A Still Forest Pool*

In this way you pass the responsibility of ensuring that the information is reliable back to the source from where you got it. This is very much in accordance with the spirit of the original redactors of the Buddha's teachings, who started the suttas with "Thus have I heard...". It also agrees with the Buddha's advice to the young brahmin Caṅkī on how to guard or preserve truth, which brings up another very pertinent point.

Uncertainty as a safety factor

In **Caṅkī Sutta** (MN 95) the Buddha talked about five grounds upon which our beliefs and opinions are based and how to be truthful and objective. These are:

1. Faith (*saddhā*)
2. Fancy (*ruci*)
3. Oral tradition (*anussava*)
4. Theorising (*ākāraparivitakka*)
5. Considered acceptance of a view (*diṭṭhinijjhānakkhanti*).

Something that is accepted on any of these grounds or a combination of them may actually be empty, hollow and false; while something else that is not accepted on any of these grounds may actually be factual, true and unmistaken. So, these five grounds are not sufficient for a wise person who preserves truth to come to the definite conclusion: “Only this is true, anything else is wrong.”

Instead, based on these five grounds alone, one should avoid making such exclusive assertions, particularly about controversial aspects of Truth and how to realise it. Why? Because we may harm ourselves creating bad kamma by misrepresenting the Buddha and misleading other earnest Truth seekers. We should truthfully say, accordingly, “This is my belief, my preference, my theory or my teacher’s view.”

This means that it is better to be cautious and humble when professing a view or opinion based on any of these grounds or a combination of them, by allowing an element of uncertainty, just as engineers always allow a factor of safety in their designs. At best such views and opinions are merely working hypotheses that remain to be verified by personal experience.

With regard to the Path (*magga*) and Way (*paṭipadā*), unless and until one becomes awakened, one’s opinion about any method of practice for liberation still falls within these five grounds. Even if one successfully attains to any stage of awakening through a particular method of practice, that method is only relevant for one’s own temperament.

The Buddha tailored his discourses to suit his audience. The main aim of all the Buddha's varied discourses related to liberation is to present the Four Noble Truths in the best way that can most effectively lead the listener to their realisation. What works for you may not work for others and vice versa. So, always remember that even if you are right, it doesn't mean that others are wrong—for they could be right too in their own ways, just as the Buddha pointed out by using as an example his numerous classifications of feeling from 2 to 108 in **Pañcakaṅga Sutta** (SN 36:19).³⁴ Another good example can be seen in **Kimsukopama Sutta** (SN 35:245), which was briefly highlighted in "Harmony in Diversity".³⁵

Who has monopoly on Truth?

How about non-Buddhist spiritual practices—can they also lead to realisations of Truth that are irreversibly and positively life-transforming? If we as Buddhists are right, can other non-Buddhist practitioners also be right in this context? I suppose we shall have to first define our parameters. What is meant by "irreversibly and positively life-transforming"? From the Buddhist perspective, this means the irreversible attenuation or eradication of the ten fetters (*samyojanā*), namely (1) self-identity views, (2) uncertainty, (3) grasping at precepts and practices, (4) sensual desire, (5) ill will, (6) passion for form, (7) passion for the formless, (8) conceit, (9) restlessness, and (10) ignorance. So, regardless of how a person—Buddhist or non-Buddhist—claims to have attained awakening, his/her claim can be assessed by checking for the presence, attenuation or absence of these fetters. The grosser physical manifestations of these fetters can be noticed by keen observers—although this is not free from the danger of misperception. So, honest self-introspection is still the most reliable test.

³⁴ See p29 .

³⁵ See p30.

With regard to deprecating the genuine spiritual practice of other non-Buddhists, we should be aware that the Buddha warned of its dire consequences, such as rebirth in states of woe.³⁶ Still, most Buddhists are of the opinion that the path to true awakening can only be found in the Buddha's teaching. But don't other religionists also believe that true salvation can only be found in their respective religions? Who then has monopoly on Truth?

The truth is: no one. Truth, or to be more precise, various levels of Truth are accessible to those who are worthy of them. Even the fundamental truths rediscovered and revealed by our Lord Buddha can be realised by others who are not his disciples, as the Buddha proclaimed in **Gilāna Sutta** (AN 3:22):

But here, monks, a person—regardless of whether he does or doesn't get to see the Tathāgata, regardless of whether he does or doesn't get to hear the Dhamma and Discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata—enters the fixed course of rightness in regard to wholesome things.³⁷

According to the Commentary, “the fixed course of rightness in regard to wholesome things” refers to the Noble Eightfold Path³⁸ and this type of person refers to a solitary awakened one (*paccekabuddha*).

In the Pāli suttas, there is sparse information on solitary awakened ones apart from their names³⁹ and the fact that they are fully awakened,⁴⁰ are worthy of offerings, etc.⁴¹ and of stupas to enshrine their relics⁴² and are ranked between perfectly self-awakened ones (*sammāsambuddhā*) and worthy disciples

36 **Dhammika Sutta** (AN 6:54).

37 *Idha, pana, bhikkhave, ekacco puggalo labhanto vā tathāgataṃ dassanāya alabhanto vā tathāgataṃ dassanāya, labhanto vā tathāgatappaveditaṃ dhammavinayaṃ savanāya alabhanto vā tathāgatappaveditaṃ dhammavinayaṃ savanāya okkamati niyāmaṃ kusalesu dhammesu sammattaṃ.*

38 This can be corroborated in several suttas, such as the first ten suttas in **Okkantisaṃyutta** (SN 25:1-10, CDB p1004-7) and the **Micchatta Suttas** (SN 45:21, CDB p1535; AN 10:103).

39 **Isigili Sutta** (MN 116, MLDB p932-3).

40 *Ibid.*

41 **Āhuneyya Sutta** (AN 10:16).

42 **Thūpārāha Sutta** (AN 4:247).

(*arahantā sāvaka*)⁴³. **Puggalapaññatti**, a late Pāli text but probably the earliest in the **Abhidhamma Piṭaka**,⁴⁴ attempts to define a solitary awakened one—although under a slightly different name (*paccekasambuddha*):

Here a person awakens to the truths by himself when the teachings have not been heard before; but he does not therein attain omniscience and mastery of the powers—this person is called “a solitary self-awakened one”.⁴⁵

This is in contrast to a previous definition of a *sammā-sambuddha*, in the same text, who similarly awakens but also attains omniscience and mastery of the powers.

The commentaries however, have a lot of legendary stories to tell, including the following claims:

1. solitary awakened ones arise *only* during the final lifetime of the Buddha-to-be but prior to his awakening as a *sammāsambuddha*
2. while a *sammāsambuddha* awakens himself as well as others, a *paccekabuddha* awakens only himself but not others because he lacks the capability to conceptualise and communicate his experience of Truth, like a dumb person, his dream
3. a *paccekabuddha* achieves all types of psychic powers, meditative attainments and discriminative knowledge.⁴⁶

As the captivating tales and the above claims are not

43 **Dakkhiṇavibhaṅga Sutta** (MN 142, MLDB p1104), **Velāma Sutta** (AN 9:20).

44 “Whatever be the actual date of its compilation in respect of subject matter and treatment, it deserves to be considered as the earliest of the Abhidhamma books.” —according to Bimala Churn Law Ph.D., M.A., B.L., in his “Chronology of the Pali Canon” in *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, Poona, pp.171-201 (copied from <http://www.buddhanet.net/budsas/ebud/eb sut053.hhtm>).

45 *Idhekacco puggalo pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu sāmāṇi saccāni abhisambujjhati; na ca tattha sabbaññūtaṃ pāpuṇāti, na ca balesu vasibhāvaṃ—ayaṃ vuccati puggalo “paccekasambuddho”.* (Pug 2:1:23)

46 *Paccekabuddhā buddhe appatvā buddhānaṃ uppajjanakāleyeva uppajjanti. buddhā sayāṇa bujjhanti, pare ca bodhenti. Paccekabuddhā sayameva bujjhanti, na pare bodhenti. Attharasameva paṭivijjanti, na dhammarasaṃ. Na hi te lokuttaradhammaṃ paññattim āropevā desetuṃ sakkonti, mūgena diṭṭhasupino viya vanacarakena nagare sāyitabyañjanaraso viya ca nesaṃ dhammābhisamayoti. Sabbam iddhisamāpattipaṭisambhidāpabhedam pāpuṇanti....* (Commentary to **Khaggavisāṇa Sutta** (Sn 1:3) Section 34)

substantiated by the suttas they are questionable. The last point especially makes me wonder why a paccekabuddha is unable to conceptualise and communicate his experience of Truth. After all, he has achieved more than what liberated disciples (*arahantā sāvaka*) can, some of whom were praised by the Buddha for their excellence in wisdom, discriminative knowledge, spontaneous wit and articulate exposition.⁴⁷ Surely what is proclaimed by the Buddha in **Gilāna Sutta** carries more weight than the commentarial gloss, in which some element of human piety may be involved?

Truth is beyond boundaries

I personally believe that there were, are and always will be sages within and without the Buddha's Dispensation—sages who realise Truth at various levels such that their lives are irreversibly transformed for the better and who can also guide others, according to their personal capability, to similar realisations. I also believe that they should rightly be honoured rather than belittled or doubted just because they are not Buddhists—not out of fear of creating bad kamma but out of respect for their exceptional attainments.

Truth is vast and profound while the average human mind is narrow and profane. For those of us who have come thus far in the search for Truth, let's be truthful about this truth: It is wiser to confess ignorance rather than profess cognizance of things beyond our ken.

47 *Etadagga* (AN 1: Ch 14: Suttas 1, 3, 4, 5).

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Glossary

Terms below are in Pāli unless otherwise stated. Italicised words in the explanations below (e.g. *bhikkhu*) are separately explained.

Abhidhamma a later collection of analytical treatises based on lists of categories drawn from the teachings in the *suttas*, probably added to the *Pāli* Canon several centuries after the Buddha's life.

adosa non-hate—a blanket term that covers wholesome mental states such as loving-kindness, compassion, sympathy, etc.

Āgamas the Northern Buddhist Tradition's equivalent of the *Nikāyas*.

alobha non-greed—a blanket term that covers wholesome mental states ranging from detachment to liberality.

amoha non-delusion—a blanket term that covers wholesome mental states ranging from insight, knowledge and vision of things as they really are, to wisdom.

anāgāmi non-returner—one who has attained the third stage of awakening, and who after death will not return to this world of humans and devas, but either reappear among the brahmas or attain *Nibbāna*.

ānāpānassati mindfulness of breathing.

arahant worthy one—one who has attained the fourth stage of awakening, eradicated all mental defilements and is liberated from the round of birth and death.

asubha unattractiveness, loathsomeness (of the body).

Āyasmā Venerable Sir—often used to refer to a *bhikkhu* in the third person.

Bhante Venerable Sir—often used to address a *bhikkhu* in the second person.

bhikkhu mendicant; Buddhist monk.

Dhamma Universal Truth; teaching; Teaching of the Buddha.

DhammaVinaya Teaching and Discipline of the Buddha.

dosa hate—a blanket term that covers all unpleasant mental states ranging from subtle dislike to fury.

jhāna meditative concentration.

kamma intentional, moral action.

kāyagatāsati mindfulness gone to the body.

lobha greed—a blanket term that covers unwholesome mental states ranging from subtle liking to craving.

maggaphala Path-Fruition. There is a commentarial notion that awakening occurs through a definite, linear series of cittas (units of consciousness), of which three or four realise *Nibbāna*, i.e. perceive *Nibbāna*. The second citta is called magga—Path, while the third and fourth belong to the category of phala—Fruition.

mettā loving-kindness.

mettabhāvanā cultivation or development of *mettā*.

moha delusion regarding the true nature of things as they really are.

Nibbāna the extinction of all mental defilements and emancipation from the round of birth and death.

Nikāya Collection; usually referring to the four collections of *Theravāda Pāli suttas*.

PaccekaBuddha solitary awakened one.

Pāli the Canon of *Theravāda* Buddhist texts, as opposed to the commentaries and sub-commentaries; ancient language in which *Theravāda* scriptures are preserved.

Pātimokkha Buddhist monastic code comprising summary of major rules and etiquette.

pāramī completeness or perfection of certain virtues essential

for awakening or attainment of *Nibbāna*—a concept alien to the four *Nikāyas* but developed in some books of the fifth *Nikāya*. A full set of 10 *pārāmīs* is often mentioned in later *Pāli* commentarial literature.

pavāraṇā invitation—a monastic ceremony held on the last day of the three-month rainy season residence (*vassāvāsa*) in which resident *bhikkhus* sincerely invite each other to candidly appraise their behaviour in an atmosphere of receptivity.

sakadāgāmi once-returner—one who has attained the second stage of awakening and will return to be reborn in the sensual realm only one more time before attaining *Nibbāna*.

samatha tranquillity, serenity, calm.

sammāsambuddha perfectly self-awakened one.

Saṅgha Community of Buddhist monks or nuns.

saṅghakamma official act or legal proceeding of the *Saṅgha*.

satipaṭṭhāna establishing of mindfulness.

Sayadaw (Burmese) Venerable teacher.

śiṃsapā name of a strong tall forest tree found in ancient India.

sotāpanna stream-enterer—one who has attained the first stage of awakening.

sutta discourse attributed to the Buddha or his contemporaneous disciples.

Tathāgata Thus-gone; Thus-come—an epithet that the Buddha uses to refer to himself.

thera elder; *bhikkhu* with 10 or more years of seniority.

Theravāda Doctrine of the Elders—one of the two main traditions of Buddhism (the other being *Mahāyāna*) claiming to have the earliest, most authentic extant record of Gotama Buddha's teachings.

Theravādin advocate or follower of *Theravāda*.

uposatha Buddhist Sabbath; day of religious observance and ritual for the laity and the *Saṅgha* respectively.

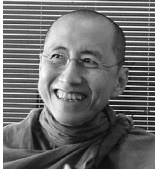
Vinaya Discipline; *Pāli* text on monastic rules and regulations.

vipassanā distinct observation of conditioned physical and mental phenomena as they really are.

Visuddhimagga The Path of Purification—an important manual of Buddhist meditation written by the great Indian commentator Āyasmā Buddhaghosa around 430 CE based on the *Pāli* Canon, the ancient Sinhala commentaries and the views of the *theras* then residing in Mahāvihāra, Anurādhapura, Sri Lanka.

yogi earnest meditator.

Biodata



Āyasmā Aggacitta Bhikkhu is a Malaysian Theravāda Buddhist monk who received higher ordination (*upasampadā*) from his preceptor (*upajjhāya*) Bhaddanta Mahasi Sayadaw at Mahasi Meditation Centre, Rangoon, Burma (Myanmar), in 1979. After several periods of intensive meditation there, Āyasmā Aggacitta began to study the Burmese language and later learned basic Pāli grammar and Pāli-Burmese translation from Sayadaw U Paṇḍita.

Since then he has trained under various other teachers, notably Sayadaw U Tissara (Yankin Forest Monastery), Sayadaw U Āciṇṇa (Pa Auk Forest Monastery) and Sayadaw U Tejaniya (Shwe Oo Min Dhammasukha Forest Centre).

Besides practising meditation, he studied advanced Pāli grammar and translation in Thai and Burmese under Sayadaw U Dhammananda at Wat Tamaoh, Lampang, Thailand, from 1983 to 1984. He continued to study the Pāli Tipiṭaka in Myanmar and researched on its interpretation and practice until his return to Malaysia at the end of 1994.

In 2000 he founded Sāsanārakkha Buddhist Sanctuary, a Theravāda monk training centre nestled among secluded valleys and brooks near Taiping, Perak, Malaysia.

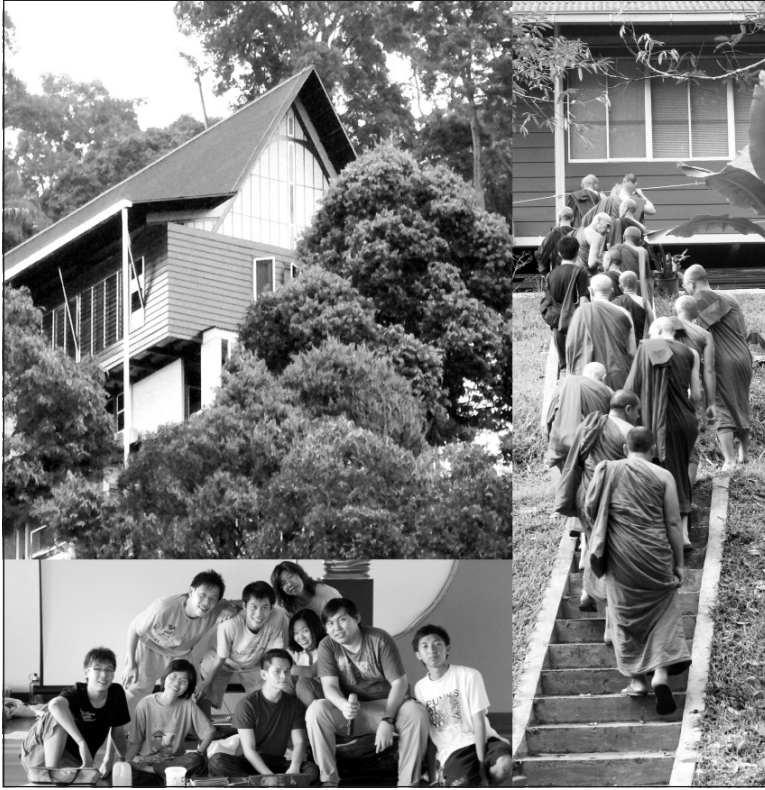
Languages that he is knowledgeable in are English, Bahasa Malaysia, Hokkien, Myanmar, Thai and Pāli.

Publications

Among his major literary contributions are:

- ◆ *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta Commentarial Course Book* (authored, 2012)
- ◆ *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta Study Workbook* (authored, 2011)
- ◆ *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta Study Workbook* (authored, 2011)
- ◆ *The Importance of Being Morally Virtuous* (authored, 2010)
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