

The Dhamma Eye

TEXT & CONTEXT

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Maps of the path of Buddhist practice often highlight four major noble attainments that occur in stages. These attainments are called *noble* because they relate directly to the goal of the noble search: a happiness free from aging, illness, and death, from defilement and from sorrow.

The first of the noble attainments—portrayed metaphorically as stream-entry in some contexts, as the arising of the Dhamma eye in others—is a momentous event for anyone who experiences it. The Pali Canon describes it as immediately blissful—giving access to a personal experience of tranquility and unbinding (*nibbāna*) (MN 48)—and as having a radical long-term impact in at least three ways.

To begin with, it marks a new stage in your relationship to the Dhamma. In line with the image of the Dhamma eye, you have actually seen the Dhamma and are said to be *consummate in view*. One passage in the Canon illustrates this point with the simile of a well: Standing at the edge of the well, you see for sure that there is water in the well, even though you don't yet touch the water with your body (SN 12:68)—the implication being that touching it with your body would stand for full awakening. But even just seeing the Dhamma makes a strong impact. Your confidence in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha has been confirmed. You have no more perplexity or doubts about the Dhamma, and are said to be independent of others with regard to the Buddha's message. In other words, you know for sure what the Buddha was talking about, that it was true, that those members of the Saṅgha who have practiced rightly have seen the same Dhamma, and you are mature enough to direct your own practice from that point on.

Second, this attainment has an indelible impact on your behavior, in that you have completed your training in virtue, although you still have further work to do in developing concentration and discernment. In the words of the Canon, your virtues are now pleasing to the noble ones: unbroken, untorn, and conducive to concentration. The noble ones are also pleased because your virtues are *not grasped at* and you yourself are *not made of virtue*, meaning that you don't take hold of your virtues to create a sense of conceit or self around them. You embody the virtues of the five precepts not out of pride but out of a natural reaction to what you have seen in seeing the Dhamma: If you are careless in your

actions, you will cause harm for yourself and for others. So, out of a pure desire to be harmless, you're careful in all you do.

Finally, the first noble attainment has a decisive impact on your future course through the cycles of death and rebirth. Prior to stream-entry, you face the possibility of an unlimited number of rebirths, and you could be reborn in any of the levels of the cosmos, from the highest to the lowest. After stream-entry, though, you are freed from three of the ten fetters that bind you to those cycles: self-identification views, uncertainty, and grasping at habits and practices. As a result, you face a maximum of only seven more lifetimes, none of them below the human level. You are also now bound for awakening for sure, which appears to be the reason why the attainment is called stream-entry: Just as a person who has entered the flow of a stream will inevitably reach the ocean, a person who has achieved stream-entry will inevitably reach unbinding.

Each of these last two points is illustrated with a simile. The first simile is a variant on the stream image. Instead of flowing along with a stream, you are trying to cross over a stream to the safety on the further shore. In this image, the first noble attainment is where you "gain a footing" (MN 56). In other words, you haven't yet reached the further shore, but you have reached the point near that shore where the stream is so shallow that your feet can be firmly planted on the streambed. From this point on, you won't be swept away by the current.

The second simile highlights the fact that the amount of suffering you potentially face in the cycle of death and rebirth is now drastically reduced. Prior to stream-entry, that suffering can be compared to all the dirt in the world. After stream-entry, it's like the dirt under a fingernail (SN 13:1).

For an experience to yield such radical results, it must be extraordinary. The Canon gives some idea of what the stream-entry experience involves in its explanations of what the stream is and what the Dhamma eye sees.

The explanation of the stream is the shorter of the two. The stream is simply the noble eightfold path (SN 55:5). Because the stream-enterer still has further work to do in developing concentration and discernment—which are covered by five of the factors of the path—this equation of the path with the stream seems to mark the point where all eight factors of the path come together, even though not all of them are fully mastered.

As for the Dhamma eye, every instance of its arising described in the Canon is expressed in the same terms: "Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation." The fact that the experience is always expressed in the same terms is striking, because the Canon tells of its happening to a wide variety of people listening to the Buddha's teachings—everyone from the five brethren, long-term ascetics who had attended to the Buddha-to-be during his austerities, to the would-be assassin who, in the Buddha's later years, had been hired by Devadatta

to kill the Buddha, along with the would-be assassins hired to then kill the first would-be assassin, and the would-be assassins hired to kill *them*. So obviously there's something universal about what this formula expresses.

To understand what it means, it's good to look at the context: both the events that induce the Dhamma eye to arise, and the impact that the arising of the Dhamma eye has on the mind.

It can arise in a variety of situations—such as when one is meditating on one's own—but the Canon tends to focus on instances where a person gains the Dhamma eye while listening to a Dhamma talk. Usually, the topic of the talk is the four noble truths: the truths of stress, its origination, its cessation, and the path of practice leading to its cessation. In some cases, where the Buddha deems that the listener isn't immediately ready to hear and accept the four noble truths, he prefaces that teaching with what is termed a gradual or step-by-step talk, in which the Buddha describes generosity, virtue, and the rewards of generosity and virtue in heaven. Then he reverses course to describe the drawbacks of even heavenly sensuality. When the listener is ready to regard renunciation of sensuality positively as a state of rest, the Buddha finally presents the four truths.

The two major exceptions to this pattern are contained in the famous story where Sāriputta—who, at that point, is a wanderer in another sect—gains the Dhamma eye when hearing the following verse from Ven. Assaji, and then again when Moggallāna in turn gains the Dhamma eye after hearing the verse from Sāriputta:

“Whatever phenomena arise from cause:
 their cause
 & their cessation.
 Such is the teaching of the Tathāgata,
 the Great Contemplative.” — *Mv 1:23.5*

What this short teaching has in common with the four noble truths is the notion of causation—“origination” means cause—and its relationship to cessation.

The formula for the Dhamma eye is sometimes followed by a description of its impact. In the case of Sāriputta and Moggallāna, this takes the form of a poem that the narrator of their story addresses rhetorically to them:

Just this Dhamma,
 just this much,
 and you experienced
 the sorrowless state—
 unseen, neglected,
 for many ten-thousands of eons. — *Mv 1:23.5*

In this case, the emphasis is on the attaining of a sorrowless state—one of the attributes of the goal of the noble search.

In other cases, the impact of the arising of the Dhamma eye is described by a standard passage focusing on the overcoming of doubt, as in the case of Upāli the householder:

“Then—having seen the Dhamma, having reached the Dhamma, known the Dhamma, gained a footing in the Dhamma, having crossed over & beyond doubt, having had no more questioning—Upāli the householder gained fearlessness and was independent of others with regard to the Teacher’s message.” — *MN 56*

In short, these passages show that the Dhamma eye arises after learning about cause, effect, and cessation. It then leads to the overcoming of doubt and to a sorrowless state. When we understand the context of the Dhamma eye’s arising in these terms, we can evaluate the different interpretations offered for what the Dhamma-eye formula actually means.

ARISING *vs.* ORIGINATION

One interpretation that’s currently widespread states that the Dhamma eye is simply the acceptance of the principle of impermanence or inconstancy: All things that arise must pass away. But there are many reasons, both contextual and textual, for not accepting this interpretation.

To begin with the contextual issues: What sort of experience would legitimately and naturally lead to that acceptance? You’d have to make a survey of all phenomena in the universe for the conclusion to legitimately apply to all phenomena. Anything short of that would simply be, in the words of *MN 95*, “an agreement through pondering views,” i.e., a conclusion based on ideas and observations that fit in with one another, but haven’t been universally tested. As the Buddha repeatedly said, the fact that a theory is coherent and consistent with a few facts is no guarantee that it’s true. So it’s hard to see that such a conclusion would, for him, count as an overcoming of doubt.

There’s also the question of why agreeing to the principle that everything that arises passes away would invariably lead to a tranquil, sorrowless state. I know of many people who, believing that meditation aims at a vision of the impermanence of all things, induce themselves to confirm that principle in their practice and then find the experience disturbing and disorienting.

So, in light of these contextual issues, it’s hard to accept that this is what the Dhamma eye sees.

As for the textual issues, it’s important to note that the formula for the Dhamma eye doesn’t make reference to “all that arises.” Instead, it speaks of “all that is subject to origination.” The difference is crucial. “Arising” is simply an

issue of appearing. “Origination,” however, is an issue of causality: The Dhamma eye speaks of all that arises because of a cause.

But not just any cause: “Origination” is most often used throughout the Pali Canon to refer to processes where the cause is in one’s own mind. Given that the Dhamma eye most frequently follows on hearing the four noble truths, and given that the word “origination” in the context of those truths refers to the causes of stress within the mind—three types of craving—it follows naturally that anyone listening to these truths would naturally look for the causes of stress in his or her own mind.

So the formula for the Dhamma eye refers to what is seen when a listener does just that. You look for the craving mentioned in the second noble truth, and in bringing right view—and all the other factors of the path, hence the “stream”—to bear on it, you can put an end to it. At the same time, MN 9 and AN 10:92 indicate that in doing so, you not only see the end of stress, but you also see how all the factors of dependent co-arising prior to craving—through feeling, sensory contact, the six sense media, name and form, sensory consciousness, fabrication, all the way back to ignorance—unravel as well. Stress, you come to realize, is not the only thing internally originated. So is what the Buddha calls the *all*: the experience of the sense media (the five senses plus the mind as the sixth). This is probably one of the most radical aspects of gaining the Dhamma eye: seeing the extent to which sensory contact is dependent on events in the mind. This is the *all* that ceases when its internal causal conditions cease. And the cessation of this all is nothing other than an experience of the deathless (Ud 8:1; SN 35:117).

So in answering the textual questions around the Dhamma-eye formula, we also answer the contextual questions raised earlier. The experience leading to the Dhamma eye is one in which you pursue within the mind the question of where stress originates, and in doing so, you unravel not only the immediate cause of stress—craving—but also the internal origination of your experience of the six sense media. In seeing the cessation that results—the cessation of the all—you naturally come to realize that whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation. That’s because you also see what lies outside the category of “whatever is subject to origination”: what is not subject to origination or cessation, the sorrowless state in which there is no arising or passing away (Ud 8:1). It’s only in seeing what is not subject to origination that the category “all that is subject to origination” naturally and legitimately occurs to the mind.

This is why, when Sāriputta—after experiencing the Dhamma eye—was asked by Moggallāna if he had attained the deathless, he replied, “Yes, I have.”

Now, this deathless is not a blanking out. Instead, it is a type of consciousness that’s not known through the all (MN 49) and is not dependently co-arisen. The

Buddha calls it “consciousness without surface,” and in SN 12:63 he gives an image that helps to explain this term: Ordinary consciousness, affected by clinging, is like a beam of sunlight that can be detected because it lands on a surface; this non-clinging consciousness is like a beam of sunlight that doesn’t land on any surface at all.

CUTTING THREE FETTERS

As we have already noted, all the factors of the noble eightfold path are present in the steps leading up to the experience of this consciousness, but the concentration and discernment factors are not yet fully developed. For this reason, the stream-enterer simply sees the Dhamma of the deathless but without fully touching it.

Still, seeing just this much is enough to cut through the first three fetters. This is a point that has to be emphasized: The fetters are not cut by a decision or an act of will, which could easily be reversed. They’re cut once and for all by seeing the deathless—and it’s easy to understand why.

To begin with, now that you’ve seen that the deathless is a reality and that the path is what led you there, you have no more doubt or uncertainty about the truth of the Buddha’s teaching. It really does lead to a sorrowless state totally free from stress. The experience of the deathless thus cuts through the fetter of uncertainty.

Second, you’ve seen that the experience came about through the skillfulness of your own actions, and that what had prevented you from seeing it earlier were your own unskillful actions. For this reason, you would never intentionally break the five precepts ever again. At the same time, though, you see that the experience of the deathless required more than just following the rules of the precepts. It also entailed a radical act of internal discernment and of letting go that didn’t follow any rules. These realizations, combined, cut through the fetter of grasping at habits and practices: From now on, you are virtuous but not “made” of virtue.

Third, when all that is subject to origination falls away, the five aggregates—the form of the body, along with the mental actions of feelings, perceptions, thought-fabrications, and acts of sensory consciousness—fall away as well. And yet there is a consciousness of the deathless that remains. It’s for this reason that you would never again hold to a view in which you would define yourself around any of the aggregates. This is what cuts through the fetter of self-identification.

This last fetter relates to another common misinterpretation of the stream-entry experience. There are those who say that because stream-entry cuts through this fetter, stream-entry is the point in the practice where you realize

that there is no self. But here again, there are textual and contextual reasons for calling this interpretation into question.

To start with the contextual reasons: It's hard to see what kind of experience would legitimately lead to the conclusion that there is no self—just as it's hard to see what kind of experience would legitimately lead to the conclusion that there *is* a self. Now, it is possible, in the course of meditation, to experience a total blanking out, but the Buddha identified this as a state of non-perception, which—if you maintain it—leads to rebirth in the dimension of non-percipient beings who are not sensitive to anything at all (DN 1; DN 15; AN 9:24). This dimension is not a noble attainment, and nothing is known or remembered while in it. So there's no legitimate reason to conclude from such an experience that there is no self. It's simply proof that it's possible to deliberately bring yourself to a state in which you don't perceive anything at all.

As for the textual reasons, the first is that the Buddha consistently avoided giving an answer to the question of whether there is or isn't a self—saying that either answer would side with an extreme wrong view (SN 44:10). He also stated that the questions of what you are and whether you exist or not are not worthy of attention, in that they pull you off the path into a jungle of views, including the views that “I have a self” and “I have no self,” with all the entanglements that those views entail (MN 2).

Second, after the Buddha brought all five brethren to an experience of the Dhamma eye, he then gave them a Dhamma talk in which he taught that the five aggregates should be regarded as not-self. If, in experiencing the Dhamma eye, they had already come to the conclusion that there is no self, there would have been no reason for him to address this topic. They would have already seen it for themselves.

The reason he *did* have to address the topic is because cutting the fetter of self-identification views does not entirely remove from the mind all traces of stress related to the act of clinging to a sense of self. The views covered by self-identification all come down to the sense that “I am this,” where “this” can be either an aggregate, the owner of an aggregate, something within an aggregate, or something containing an aggregate within it (such as a cosmic sense of self) (SN 22:2). However, even after abandoning the sense that “I am this,” you don't necessarily abandon the conceit “I am”—a fetter that is cut only with the fourth and final noble attainment. As SN 22:89 explains, even after self-identification views are removed, there is still a lingering sense of “I am” with regard to the aggregates, just as when a cloth has been thoroughly washed, there is still a lingering scent of the cleaning agent used in cleaning the cloth.

So it was to get rid of the lingering sense of “I am” around the aggregates that the Buddha taught the five brethren that all five aggregates should be regarded

as not-self. When they abandoned that last, lingering clinging, they were able to gain the ultimate noble attainment, total release from clinging, fully touching unbinding for themselves.

LISTENING TO THE DHAMMA

When we understand that the arising of the Dhamma eye has to occur in conjunction with the first experience of the deathless, it helps us to answer many of the textual and contextual questions surrounding the descriptions of the Dhamma eye in the Canon. It explains what the terms of the Dhamma eye actually mean, and also why the arising of the Dhamma eye has such a radical impact both on one's present state of mind and on one's future course, cutting through the three fetters and placing a limit on one's suffering in saṃsāra.

However, this way of understanding the Dhamma eye does raise an important contextual question of its own: How can just listening to a Dhamma talk give rise to such an experience, especially in cases like those of the would-be assassins, who had no background in Dhamma practice at all?

The short answer to this question is that people who gain stream-entry while listening to a Dhamma talk aren't "just listening." They have to be more actively engaged in seeing how the talk applies to events in their own minds. This point is made, in general terms, in the list of four factors required for stream-entry: associating with people of integrity, listening to the True Dhamma, applying appropriate attention, and practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma (SN 55:5).

Appropriate attention, here, means seeing how the lessons of the talk apply to the four noble truths as they appear in your own mind—for example, seeing what the talk has to say about any stress you detect, about any factors that give rise to stress, or any factors that, if they're developed, could lead to its cessation. Practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma means applying the duties of the four noble truths appropriately to such events as they appear in the mind—comprehending stress, abandoning its origination, realizing its cessation, and developing the path to its cessation—all for the sake of dispassion and release.

This list of factors doesn't say that they all have to occur while listening to a talk—for example, you could apply the duties of the four noble truths while meditating on your own after listening to the talk. It also doesn't describe how the factors can come into play while listening to a talk. However, the Canon does address this latter issue both in its descriptions of what ideally happens when you're fully engaged in listening to a Dhamma talk, and in its descriptions of the Buddha's special skills as a teacher.

Two discourses in particular—AN 5:26 and AN 5:151—give an idea of how you actively follow along when a talk is being given. AN 5:151 discusses what you bring to the talk. You approach it with an attitude of respect: not despising the teacher, not despising the talk, and not despising your own ability to understand and follow it. You gather your mind into singleness, focused totally on listening to the talk, at the same time bringing appropriate attention to bear.

“Singleness (*ekagga*),” here, is the defining feature of concentration; appropriate attention is related directly to right view. This means the two most difficult factors of the path, right view and right concentration, can be present while you’re listening to the talk. By implication, all the other factors of the noble eightfold path can be present as well.

It’s sometimes thought that right concentration puts you into a state of one-pointedness where you can’t hear or think, but the fact that you can listen and apply appropriate attention when the mind is in a state of singleness shows that this is not the case. Both activities can occur in conjunction with a rightly concentrated mind, which is why it’s possible, while listening to a Dhamma talk, for the path to come together in a way that allows the Dhamma eye to arise.

AN 5:26 discusses how the preliminary singleness of mind that you bring to the talk actually develops into right concentration: As you gain a sense of the Dhamma and of what it’s aiming at, you develop a feeling of joy. This feeling of joy leads successively to rapture, calm, pleasure, and then concentration. This state of concentration then provides an opening for total release to occur, meaning that at the very least, it provides a basis for the Dhamma eye to arise.

As for the case of the would-be assassins (Cv 7:3.6–8), this is where the Buddha’s status as a person of integrity and his skills as a teacher come into play. In addressing each group of assassins, he started by extending goodwill to them all, which influenced them to abandon their plans. Then he gave them a step-by-step talk. This talk is described at many spots in the Canon, but nowhere is there any record of exactly how the Buddha addressed each topic in any of the individual talks. This suggests that he tailored each talk to his listeners’ needs. In the case of the assassins, it’s easy to imagine that he would have used some strong imagery to emphasize the dangers that are avoided by following the precepts. This would have alerted the assassins to the huge mistake they had just been saved from committing.

The Buddha could have also emphasized the drawbacks of even the most refined sensual pleasures in heaven in terms of the dangers of staying on in *samsāra*, the round of death and rebirth. SN 15:13 contains a striking instance where the Buddha informs a group of monks that the amount of blood they have shed from having their heads cut off as they have wandered through *samsāra* is greater than the water of the oceans. It’s easy to imagine that the Buddha would

have used similar imagery to gain the would-be assassins' undivided attention, so that they really would be ready not only to listen to the four noble truths, but also to look into their own minds while listening.

This is where the Buddha would have exercised what he called the miracle of instruction (DN 11), where the speaker—reading the minds of his audience—tells them, as soon as a particular state arises in their minds, whether to abandon it or to develop it. This would have aroused the respect of the assassins, at the same time helping them to apply appropriate attention to the events actually happening in their minds. As he explained these events in language they could understand, this would have led to the joy that would form the basis for right concentration. In this way, all of the factors for stream-entry would have been present within them.

So it's not at all impossible that, even in their case, the Buddha was able to bring them to the realizations that allowed them to gain the Dhamma eye.

Unfortunately, at present, there are very few people who can practice the miracle of instruction, so our opportunities for gaining the same sort of help that the Buddha gave to the would-be assassins are few and far between. Still, even though you may not encounter anyone who can read your mind, it's nevertheless still possible to learn how to read your own mind. And, in reading your mind, it's still possible to bring the mind to singleness and to apply appropriate attention and to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma with regard to whatever originates within you. That way, you can put yourself in a position where joy leads to concentration, and where concentration can provide a context where the Dhamma eye can arise. Then you can know for yourself what the Dhamma eye sees and the Dhamma-eye formula actually means.

So, the path is still wide open. The conditions for gaining the Dhamma eye are still at hand. It's simply a matter of making the most of them while you can.