

Approaching Stillness

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I realize the irony of declaring that the Buddha wasn't a Buddhist, and that he didn't teach Buddhism, since he probably wouldn't have confirmed or disconfirmed that view! Instead, According to *the Book of Eights*, He emphasized liberation from all grasping, especially from entrenched views and rigid narratives, with full release, or Nibbana, as its outcome. Furthermore, his first lessons didn't contain many of the traditional doctrinal lists often associated with Buddhism. For example, the *Four Noble Truths*, the *Eightfold Path*, or the *Three Refuges*. Nor do they contain complex teachings such as *Emptiness and Not-Self*.

We will carefully examine what could be the Buddha's earliest and essential ideas after his enlightenment, but before his followers interpreted and canonized his teachings into Buddhism. Specifically, we will analyze selected verses from ancient poems, known as the *Book of Eights*, with their attention to peace rather than doctrinal or conceptual supremacy.

The peace this text advocates is anchored in existential reality, and thus independent of attachment to transcendent metaphysical truths or ultimate knowledge claims or religious practices. *The Book of Eights* moreover, situates enlightenment within the pervasive conditionality of this world, rather than outside of it.

The Book of Eights is a group of sixteen poems linked to a compilation of texts known as the *Minor Collection* or *Khuddaka Nikaya*. Evidence for its early composition includes: the absence of systematized and numerically ordered doctrinal lists, the lack of ideological prescriptions, its ancient poetic meter, some of its unusual and archaic word forms, and the fact that it is alluded to in form and substance in several very early Buddhist scriptures.

There are four themes in the *Book of Eights*: *Letting Go of Views*, *Avoiding Sensual Craving*, *the Qualities of a Sage*, and *the Training to Become a Sage*. We will narrow our focus to the Letting Go of Views. Here the Buddha seems to be teaching the peace of humility and selflessness. Perhaps we could say Liberation WITHIN Views (non-grasping), not Liberation FROM Views.

On a side note, I like the way C.S. Lewis describes selflessness:

"Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less." (C.S. Lewis, "Mere Christianity," 1952)

Regarding the *Book of Eights*, Buddhist scholar Gil Fronsdal has observed:

"Here we find the Buddha's teachings pared down to their most essential elements, free of the more complex doctrines often associated with Buddhism. The *Book of Eights* does not espouse a religious doctrine that exists in opposition to other doctrines. Nor does it put forth a teaching that is meant to be seen as superior to other teachings. The value of these teachings is not [in]...their authority as 'scripture'; rather, they are valuable for the results they bring to those who live by them. Instead of doctrines to be believed, the *Book of Eights* describes means or practices for realizing peace." (Gil Fronsdal, *The Buddha before Buddhism: Wisdom from the Early Teachings*, (Boulder, Shambhala, 2016),

The Suttanipāta
IV The Chapter of Octads
Aṭṭhakavagga

1 SENSUAL PLEASURES (KĀMA SUTTA)

(768) The sage avoids attachment to sensual desires like the head of a snake with one's foot.

2 THE OCTAD ON THE CAVE (GUHAṬṬHAKA SUTTA)

(772) Attachment to sensual pleasures in this world is not easy to abandon.

(777) Sages don't form attachments to states of existence.

(778) A wise person doesn't cling to what is seen or heard.

3 THE OCTAD ON THE HOSTILE (DUṬṬHAṬṬHAKA SUTTA)

(780) A sage doesn't enter into disputes.

(781) One understands and argues according to entrenched personal preferences.

(785) Attachment to entrenched views is not easy to overcome.

(787) One who is attached to views argues over teachings.

4 THE OCTAD ON THE PURE (SUDDHAṬṬHAKA SUTTA)

(794) Sages don't claim "ultimate purity," having loosened the knot of grasping.

(795) The Brahmin (wise one or sage) who has transcended boundaries has let go of all grasping.

5 THE OCTAD ON THE SUPREME (PARAMATṬHAKA SUTTA)

(796) Persons considering their views as "ultimate," and all others as "inferior," have not transcended disputes.

(798-799) A Bhikkhu (Noble Disciple) should not be dependent on what is seen, heard, or sensed, or upon religious observances. Nor should he consider himself as inferior, superior, or equal to others.

6 OLD AGE (JARĀ SUTTA)

(812) Just as a drop of water does not stick to a lotus leaf, a sage does not cling to what is seen, heard, or sensed.

(813) Those who are cleansed don't cling to passion or dispassion about what is seen, heard, or sensed.

8 PASŪRA (PASŪRA SUTTA)

(825) The unwise desiring debates, plunge into assemblies, and regard others as fools and themselves as skillful.

(830) One shouldn't dispute because it doesn't lead to purity, say those who are skilled.

10 BEFORE THE BREAKUP (PURĀBHEDA SUTTA)

(850) One truly is a sage whose speech is restrained.

(851) Sages don't form attachments to the future or sorrow over the past.

(855) Equanimous, always mindful, sages don't conceive of themselves as equal, superior, or inferior. They have no prideful swellings.

(857) Sages are at peace because they have crossed over attachments.

(859) Not attaching to what people say about them, sages are not agitated by their words.

12 THE SMALLER DISCOURSE ON DEPLOYMENT (CŪḶAVIYŪHA SUTTA)

(892) Sectarians entrenched in their views, argue that purity is only found in their teachings.

(894) Those who have abandoned all entrenched judgments, create no strife in the world.

13 THE GREATER DISCOURSE ON DEPLOYMENT (MAHĀVIYŪHA SUTTA)

(912) Sages don't take sides in arisen disputes. They are peaceful among the restless, equanimous, without grasping while others grasp.

(914) Sages are not bound to all things seen, heard, or sensed. They have laid this burden down and are released from attachments.

15 ONE WHO HAS TAKEN UP THE ROD (ATTADAṆḌA SUTTA)

(940) "Train in your own full release."

"Like an archer an arrow, the wise man steadies his trembling mind, a fickle and restless weapon." —The Buddha

Approaching Stillness

- 1. Be Still...Breathe, Settle, Rest, Observe*
- 2. Remember...Simple Joys and Favorable Circumstances, Kindnesses of Others*
- 3. Practice...Suspend/Release Entrenched Opinions, Narratives, and Story Lines*

"Approaching Stillness"

Idealized Universe
Existential Reality

Misery
(Worldling)

Happiness
(Noble Disciple)

Agitated
(Burdened)

Quarrels, Disputes,
Pride, Selfishness,
Sorrow and Conflict

Peaceful
(Unburdened)

--Attached, Hooked,
Clinging
--Entrenched Narratives and
Rigid Story Lines
--"I, Mine, Me"

--Liberated, Unattached
Full Release
--Suspended Narratives
and Story Lines
--Joy in "Not Mine"

Craving/Grasping
Desireable/Undesireable

--Selective Grasping
--Resistance, If Only
--Narrowing
--Hindering
--Turbulent
--Captivated

--No Grasping
--Acceptance
--Opening
--Liberating
--Fully Stilled
--Free From

Shenpa
(Hooked)

Desire
(Dualities)

Nibbana
(Suspending)

Pleasant/Unpleasant
Agreeable/Disagreeable

by Attachment to
Identities

Judgments
Sense Contact

Attachment to
Identities

--Blinding

Name and Form

--Awakening

Material Universe