

Approaching Stillness

An Interpretive Reading of Selected Verses From the Book of Eights Based on Several English
Translations

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In the strictest sense, the Buddha wasn't a Buddhist, and he didn't teach Buddhism. His first lessons didn't likely contain many of the traditional conceptual 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 or Not-Self.¹ Instead, according to the Book of Eights, the Buddha emphasized liberation from all grasping, especially from entrenched views and rigid narratives, with full release, or *Nibbana*, as its outcome.

This paper will 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, that is, peace independent of attachment to transcendent metaphysical truths, 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 Chapter of Octads or Book of Eights, is Chapter IV of the five sections comprising the Suttanipāta, a collection of Buddhist discourses belonging to the Khuddaka Nikāya, or fifth collection in the Sutta Piṭaka of the Pāli Canon. Also known as the Atthakavagga, this text is a group of sixteen poems. There is evidence that the Atthakavagga existed prior to the compilation of the Sutta Nipāta, and was well known and more influential in ancient times than it is today.²

¹Gil Fronsdal. *The Buddha before Buddhism: Wisdom from the Early Teachings* (Boulder, Colorado: Shambala, 2016).

²Bhikkhu Pannobhasa. *The Atthakavagga (Sutta Nipāta, 4) Pali, with English Translation* (The Netherlands: Path Press Publications with English translation, 2012).

As Buddhist scholar, Bhikkhu Pannobhasa has noted: “This lapse into relative obscurity is unfortunate, as the *Atthakavagga* contains invaluable information for anyone wishing to better understand the earliest teachings of [the Buddha]....”³

Another indication of the *Atthakavagga*’s early origins is that there are references to it found in Pali, Buddhist Sanskrit, and the Chinese Buddhist traditions.⁴ Moreover, the absence of systematized and numerically ordered doctrinal lists and ideological prescriptions, its ancient poetic meter and unusual and archaic word forms,⁵ and the fact that it is alluded to in form and substance in several “extremely old” Buddhist texts, attest to its currency before canonical Buddhism.⁶ It was also referenced by the Buddha himself. After one of the Buddha’s disciples had recited “all sixteen texts of the *Atthakavagga*,” the Buddha “applauded him” with these words: “Excellent, excellent, Bhikkhu! You have learned well, attended well, memorized well the sixteen texts of the *Atthakavagga*.”⁷

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 is teaching the peace of liberation within views (non-grasping), not liberation from views.

³ Pannobhasa, *The Atthakavagga*, 7.

⁴ Premasiri, P. D. "The Philosophy of the *Atthakavagga*, Lecturer in Pāli, Buddhist Civilization and Buddhist Philosophy, University of Ceylon, Peradeniya Campus." Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy • Sri Lanka (The Wheel Publication No. 182 BPS Online Edition (2008): December 2018.

⁵ Fronsdal, *Buddha before Buddhism*, 5.

⁶ Bhikkhu Bodhi. *The Suttanipata: An Ancient Collection of the Buddha’s Discourses Together with its Commentaries* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2017).

⁷ Bodhi. *Suttanipata: An Ancient Collection of the Buddha’s Discourses*, 29.

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."⁸

The following interpretive readings are based on selected verses from several English translations of the Atthakavagga. I carefully studied the different versions, and then composed my own amalgamations. This paper is still a work in progress...

The Suttanipāta
IV The Chapter of Octads
Aṭṭhakavagga

1 SENSUAL PLEASURES (KĀMA SUTTA)

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

2 THE OCTAD ON THE CAVE (GUHAṬṬHAKA SUTTA)

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

(779) The Sage doesn't cling to possessions or possessing.

3 THE OCTAD ON THE HOSTILE (DUṬṬHAṬṬHAKA SUTTA)

(780) Sages don't enter into disputes.

⁸ Fronsdal, *Buddha before Buddhism*, 2.

(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" for their teachings, having loosened the knots of grasping.

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

5 THE OCTAD ON THE SUPREME (PARAMAṬṬHAKA SUTTA)

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

(798-799) Bhikkhus (Noble Disciples) should not cling to what is seen, heard, or sensed, or to religious rituals. Nor should they consider themselves 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...have no prideful swellings.

(857) Sages are at peace because they have overcome 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 disputes. They are peaceful and equanimous among the restless, and free from grasping while others grasp.

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

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

(940) Train for *your own release* from grasping.

(3 Nephi 18:34) And I give you these commandments because of the **disputations** which have been among you. And blessed are ye if ye have no **disputations** among you.

(Matthew 5:22) But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother...shall be in danger of his judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, 'Raca,' or ' Rabcha ' shall be in danger of the council; and whosoever shall say, 'Thou fool,' shall be in danger of hell fire.

(Matthew 5:25) Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the thine adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison.

(Matthew 5:44) But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you....

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