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Preface

The Journal of Religions and Various Sciences (JRS), Vol. 4, No. 2, July–December 2024, is committed to enhancing the quality of English-language academic articles in accordance with the standards of the Thai-Journal Citation Index Centre (TCI) and internationally recognized academic journal standards. Particular emphasis is placed on the quality and clarity of content, appropriate academic English, accurate abstracts and keywords, systematic article organization, the use of credible and verifiable references, and adherence to publication ethics. Every submission is assessed for conformity with the journal's aims and scope, screened for plagiarism, and evaluated by three qualified peer reviewers before undergoing revision and final consideration for publication. These measures are intended to strengthen the journal's credibility, increase its accessibility to international readers, and promote the exchange of knowledge between Thai scholars and the international academic community.

The editorial board cordially invites academics, researchers, lecturers, students, and interested contributors from Thailand and abroad to submit high-quality English-language research and academic articles for consideration. The journal welcomes submissions in religious studies, sociology, liberal arts, the humanities, the social sciences, and interdisciplinary studies, including works presenting innovative ideas, comparative research, and applications of knowledge to contemporary issues. The editorial board is committed to supporting authors in developing manuscripts that meet rigorous academic standards and communicate effectively with international readers. We therefore look forward to contributions from scholars across all sectors as we collectively develop the journal into a high-quality, transparent, and nationally and internationally recognized platform for scholarly exchange.

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Wat Si Chum as a Multidimensional Medium of the Dhamma: Architecture, the Buddha Image, and Jātaka Narratives in the Creation of Sacred Experience

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Abstract

Wat Si Chum is one of the most distinctive Buddhist monuments in the Historic Town of Sukhothai. Its significance arises not only from the colossal seated Buddha image known as Phra Achana but also from the interaction between monumental architecture, controlled spatial movement, inscribed Jātaka reliefs, religious narratives, and later cultural memory. This article interprets Wat Si Chum as a multidimensional medium through which Buddhist teachings are transformed into an embodied sacred experience. The massive maṇḍapa regulates the visitor's movement and vision; Phra Achana communicates the stability and authority of awakening; and the Jātaka reliefs represent the long cultivation of virtues necessary for Buddhahood. Together, these components connect narrative time, ritual space, moral discipline, and visual contemplation. The article also examines unresolved questions concerning the date and original placement of the Jātaka slabs, the possible functions of the internal passage, and the popular legend of the “speaking Buddha.” It argues that the meaning of Wat Si Chum should not be reduced to a single architectural function or historical explanation. Rather, the monument creates sacred experience by bringing the visitor's body, senses, memory, and moral imagination into a coordinated encounter with the Dhamma.

Keywords: Wat Si Chum, Sukhothai art, Buddhist architecture, religious experience

Introduction

Wat Si Chum, situated northwest of the central walled city of Sukhothai, is among the most recognizable monuments of Thai Buddhist art. The temple is best known for Phra Achana, a monumental seated Buddha enclosed within a massive square maṇḍapa. The enormous image, the narrow opening through which it is approached, the thick walls containing an internal passage, and the inscribed Jātaka slabs associated with the monument distinguish Wat Si Chum from other religious buildings in Sukhothai.

Modern descriptions frequently isolate these components. Architectural studies concentrate on the structure of the maṇḍapa and its internal corridor. Art-historical discussions emphasize the style and iconography of Phra Achana. Epigraphic research examines the stone inscriptions and the language of the Jātaka captions. Popular accounts, meanwhile, often focus on the legend that the Buddha image could “speak.” Although each approach contributes to an understanding of the monument, no single element fully explains the religious experience created at Wat Si Chum.

This article proposes that Wat Si Chum should be interpreted as a multidimensional medium of Buddhist teaching. The term “medium” refers here to a material and cultural form through which religious meanings are communicated, remembered, and experienced. The

temple did not merely contain Buddhist doctrines as abstract ideas. It translated them into architectural scale, visual images, spatial movement, narrative sequences, inscriptions, ritual actions, and possibly oral performance.

Wat Si Chum thus communicated through several interconnected modes. Architecture controlled how visitors entered and viewed the sacred image. Phra Achana embodied the Buddha's victory over Māra and the stability of awakening. The Jātaka reliefs connected the enlightened Buddha with the numerous previous lives in which the Bodhisatta accumulated the qualities necessary for Buddhahood. Movement through and around the monument could transform religious knowledge into physical experience. Recitation, explanation, chanting, and later legends added acoustic and mnemonic dimensions.

The monument must nevertheless be interpreted cautiously. Its exact construction history remains debated, and the surviving form may represent several phases of construction, modification, restoration, and reuse. The relationship between Wat Si Chum and the inscription conventionally called Sukhothai Inscription No. 2 is not entirely unambiguous. Scholars have also disagreed about whether the Jātaka slabs were created specifically for the internal corridor or were transferred there from another architectural setting (Gosling, 1981; Skilling, 2008; Terwiel, 2013). Recognizing these uncertainties is necessary for distinguishing historical evidence from attractive but unverified interpretations.

Wat Si Chum in the Religious Landscape of Sukhothai

Wat Si Chum stands outside the northern wall of the principal Sukhothai urban enclosure, near Wat Phra Phai Luang, an important religious complex with architectural evidence connected to earlier Khmer cultural influence. This location places Wat Si Chum within a sacred landscape that developed through interaction among local, Mon, Khmer, Sri Lankan, and other transregional Buddhist traditions.

Sukhothai was not an isolated cultural center that created its religious art independently. Its rulers, monks, artists, and patrons participated in networks extending through mainland Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, South Asia, and maritime trade routes. Elements commonly associated with Sukhothai Buddhism—including Pāli learning, relic worship, monastic reform, Buddha-image production, and narrative art—were formed through both external connections and local reinterpretation.

The precise date of Wat Si Chum remains a matter of scholarly debate. Woodward (2009) proposed that important elements of the monument and its engravings may belong to the first half of the fourteenth century. He also identified artistic connections extending beyond Sukhothai, including stylistic features that may be compared with Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist visual traditions. Such observations indicate that the Jātaka program should not be understood only as an expression of an enclosed “national” artistic style.

The inscription found at Wat Si Chum concerns the monk Śrī Śraddhā, his lineage, journeys, meritorious activities, and participation in the restoration of Buddhist monuments. Its discovery at the temple has encouraged scholars to connect Śrī Śraddhā with Wat Si Chum. Nevertheless, the inscription does not function as an uncomplicated foundation record that explicitly explains every part of the surviving monument. The association is historically important, but it cannot by itself resolve all questions of patronage, chronology, and architectural purpose (Gosling, 1981; Woodward, 2009).

The monument should consequently be approached as the product of a developing religious landscape. Its meaning arose through construction, image installation, narrative representation, ritual activity, restoration, and later historical memory.

Architecture as a Choreography of Sacred Encounter

The central structure of Wat Si Chum is a large square maṇḍapa constructed with extremely thick walls. Within it sits Phra Achana, whose body nearly fills the interior. The front wall is opened by a tall, narrow vertical aperture that provides access to the image and frames it from outside.

This arrangement produces an unusual relationship between concealment and revelation. From a distance, the visitor does not encounter the Buddha image as an independent statue standing in an open hall. Instead, the face and body of the Buddha emerge within a massive architectural frame. The building simultaneously hides, protects, and reveals the image.

The physical approach creates a sequence of perception. At first, the visitor sees only part of the image through the narrow opening. As one moves closer, the Buddha becomes larger, but the surrounding architecture restricts the field of vision. Upon entering the chamber, the visitor encounters the immense knees, torso, hand, and face at close range. The scale of the image therefore changes according to bodily position.

Architecture at Wat Si Chum does more than shelter a sacred object. It choreographs the visitor's movement and vision. The narrowing of space directs attention away from the surrounding environment and toward the Buddha. The contrast between the open landscape outside and the compressed chamber inside establishes a passage from ordinary space into a concentrated sacred presence.

The scale of the walls also produces a sense of permanence. In Buddhist philosophy, conditioned objects are impermanent, but Buddhist architecture frequently uses visual stability to communicate the endurance of the Buddha's teaching. The massive maṇḍapa can therefore represent both protection and containment: it preserves the image and symbolically establishes the Dhamma at the center of a stable sacred order.

The surviving structure contains a narrow passage and staircase within its walls. This feature has generated several interpretations. It may have provided access to higher architectural levels, enabled ritual or maintenance activities, or formed part of an unfinished or subsequently altered building project. Following Pierre Pichard's architectural observations, Terwiel (2013) considered the possibility that the present structure represents one stage in a more ambitious design.

The architectural evidence does not permit every function to be established with certainty. Nevertheless, the existence of the passage shows that the monument was designed to be experienced not only frontally but also internally and vertically. The visitor—or at least certain monks, ritual specialists, or attendants—could move within the thickness of the building itself. The sacred structure was thus not simply viewed from outside; it could be entered, traversed, and climbed.

Phra Achana and the Visual Presence of Awakening

Phra Achana is represented in the earth-touching gesture, or bhūmisparśa-mudrā, widely associated in Southeast Asian Buddhist art with the Buddha's victory over Māra immediately before awakening. In the narrative, Māra challenges the Bodhisatta's right to occupy the seat of enlightenment. The Bodhisatta touches the earth, calling it to witness the merit accumulated through countless previous lives.

The gesture therefore connects the monumental image with both enlightenment and the Jātaka narratives. The earth-touching Buddha represents the completion of a process whose earlier stages are presented through accounts of the Bodhisatta's former births. Awakening does not appear as an isolated miraculous event. It is the culmination of prolonged moral and spiritual cultivation.

The name “Phra Achana” is commonly understood as conveying firmness, fearlessness, or immovability. Regardless of the precise linguistic history of the name, the visual character of the image strongly communicates stability. The Buddha’s broad seated posture, symmetrical composition, downward-facing hand, and monumental scale convey an unshaken presence.

At Wat Si Chum, the image is so large in relation to the chamber that it appears to occupy rather than merely inhabit the architecture. The distinction between image and building becomes partially dissolved. The body of the Buddha functions almost as the interior landscape of the temple: the knees establish the lower spatial boundary, the torso dominates the chamber, and the head rises toward the open sky.

This integration creates a distinctive religious effect. The visitor does not simply look at the Buddha from a detached position. Entering the chamber places the visitor within the image’s spatial field. The scale difference between the human body and the monumental Buddha communicates the distance between ordinary consciousness and perfected awakening. At the same time, physical proximity—especially to the Buddha’s hand—makes that awakening appear accessible as an object of devotion and aspiration.

The narrow opening in the front wall further intensifies the Buddha’s gaze. When viewed from outside, the image is framed like an apparition emerging from the architecture. The visitor’s attention is directed toward the serene face, while the walls exclude much of the surrounding visual environment. The building thus produces a form of visual concentration comparable, at least symbolically, to the mental concentration cultivated through meditation. Contemporary devotional practices, including offerings and the application of gold leaf, add further layers of meaning to the image. These practices should not automatically be projected backward into every phase of the medieval monument. They nevertheless demonstrate that Phra Achana continues to function as a living focus of merit-making and devotional contact, not merely as an archaeological object.

Jātaka Narratives as a Visual Path to Buddhahood

The Jātakas are accounts of the Buddha’s previous lives as a Bodhisatta. In these narratives, the future Buddha appears in different human, animal, divine, and royal forms. Through these existences, he develops generosity, morality, patience, truthfulness, wisdom, determination, loving-kindness, and equanimity.

Jātaka literature has played an important role in Theravāda Buddhist education because it translates doctrinal and ethical principles into memorable stories. A philosophical statement about generosity may remain abstract, whereas a narrative in which the Bodhisatta sacrifices property, security, or even his body gives the virtue dramatic form. Jātaka narratives consequently provide models of conduct while acknowledging the conflicts and suffering involved in moral decision-making.

Wat Si Chum is particularly significant for its corpus of engraved stone slabs illustrating Jātaka episodes and providing inscriptions or captions. The surviving slabs constitute one of the most important bodies of early Thai Buddhist narrative art. Skilling’s (2008) multidisciplinary study demonstrates the richness of this material by bringing together architectural documentation, inscriptions, photography, iconographic analysis, and historical interpretation.

The slabs combine at least three communicative forms. First, the engraved figures convey narrative scenes visually. Second, the written captions identify or interpret the stories. Third, oral explanation would have allowed monks, teachers, guides, or knowledgeable devotees to expand the abbreviated images into complete narratives. The Jātaka program was therefore not exclusively visual or textual. It was potentially a platform for teaching, recitation, memory, and communal interpretation.

The relationship between the slabs and Phra Achana produces an important temporal structure. The monumental image represents the Buddha after the completion of the path, while the Jātakas depict the long history preceding that completion. The enlightened Buddha is thus surrounded—physically or conceptually—by his former lives.

This relationship corrects a possible misunderstanding of Buddhist liberation as an instantaneous achievement without preparation. Although awakening may occur at a decisive moment, that moment is supported by ethical discipline, wisdom, mental cultivation, and accumulated meritorious qualities. The Jātakas transform Phra Achana's earth-touching gesture into a narrative archive: the earth can testify to the Bodhisatta's merit because that merit was created through innumerable intentional actions.

The Problem of the Jātaka Slabs' Original Location

The historical interpretation of the Jātaka slabs is complicated by uncertainty about their original architectural setting. Their association with the passage inside Wat Si Chum is well established in modern scholarship, but scholars have debated whether they were originally designed for that location.

Some interpretations regard the narrow passage as an intentional narrative environment. Under this reading, movement through the corridor would have allowed a visitor to progress from one Jātaka episode to another. Ascending through the building could then be understood as a symbolic journey through the Bodhisatta's cultivation toward Buddhahood.

This interpretation is attractive because it establishes a direct relationship between physical ascent and spiritual development. However, symbolic coherence alone does not prove original architectural intention. Archaeological dimensions, construction phases, differences among slabs, and evidence of later relocation must also be considered.

Gosling (1981) raised important questions about the relationship between the inscriptions, the narrative slabs, and the present monument. Her research contributed to the argument that at least some materials associated with Wat Si Chum may have been transferred, rearranged, or incorporated into a setting different from the one for which they were first designed. Woodward (2009) likewise emphasized the need to reconsider chronology and artistic relationships rather than treating the surviving arrangement as completely self-explanatory.

Terwiel (2013) offered another interpretation of the “hidden” Jātakas. He proposed that their concealed location may be related to attempts to preserve the Buddha's teaching during an anticipated period of religious decline. Within Buddhist historical imagination, the *sāsana*, or dispensation of the Buddha, does not remain unchanged forever. Communities may therefore deposit texts, images, and sacred objects to preserve them for future discovery. This preservation interpretation is intellectually suggestive, particularly when considered alongside material deposits reportedly associated with the monument. Nevertheless, it remains a scholarly hypothesis rather than an established description of the builders' intention. The absence of an explicit contemporary explanation makes it difficult to determine whether the slabs were hidden deliberately, placed there for instruction, relocated for protection, or incorporated during a later construction phase.

Historical uncertainty does not eliminate their religious significance. Even if some slabs were moved from another location, their installation at Wat Si Chum created a new relationship between architecture, narrative, and image. Religious meaning is not produced only at the moment when an object is first made. It may also be produced through relocation, reuse, restoration, and reinterpretation.

The Body of the Visitor and the Experience of the Dhamma

Buddhist teachings are often approached through texts and concepts, but religious practice also involves bodily training. Bowing, walking meditation, circumambulation, sitting, chanting, controlling speech, and regulating the senses all place the body within a disciplined ethical and contemplative order.

Wat Si Chum can be interpreted as an architectural extension of such discipline. The visitor must adjust to the space rather than moving through it without restraint. The narrow entrance limits bodily movement. The enormous Buddha image redirects the gaze upward. The confined chamber discourages visual distraction. If the internal passage was used, those entering it would have experienced darkness, compression, turning, and ascent.

The relationship may be summarized as follows:

Dimension	Material form	Mode of participation	Buddhist significance
Visual	Phra Achana	Seeing and contemplating	Stability and completion of awakening
Spatial	Enclosed maṇḍapa	Entering and approaching	Transition from ordinary to sacred space
Kinetic	Passage and staircase	Walking, turning, and ascending	Gradual cultivation and movement along a path
Narrative	Jātaka slabs	Viewing, reading, and remembering	Accumulation of virtues over many lives
Acoustic	Chanting and oral narration	Listening and reciting	Transmission and communal preservation of the Dhamma
Material	Image, stone slabs, offerings, and deposits	Enshrining, touching, and giving	Merit, presence, memory, and devotion

This interpretation does not require the building to be treated as a literal diagram of a particular doctrinal system. Architecture rarely communicates through exact one-to-one correspondences. Rather, it creates conditions in which religious meanings can be experienced through analogy. Ascending a staircase is not identical to advancing toward awakening, but the bodily experience of gradual movement can reinforce the concept of a spiritual path.

The visitor's body therefore joins the monument's communicative structure. Sacred experience is not entirely contained in the bricks, stone slabs, or Buddha image. It emerges through interaction between these material forms and a person who approaches, sees, moves, remembers, listens, worships, or reflects.

Narrative Time and the Long Path of the Bodhisatta

The integration of Phra Achana and the Jātakas creates several forms of Buddhist time within one monument. Phra Achana represents the decisive moment of victory over Māra and awakening. The Jātakas represent the vast moral preparation leading to that moment. Present-day devotional acts bring those past events into the experience of contemporary worshippers. The monument consequently compresses a long religious history into a single sacred space. The Buddha's numerous past lives, his final enlightenment, the establishment of the Buddhist dispensation, the construction of the temple, and the visitor's present act of devotion become interconnected.

This temporal structure is important for Buddhist ethics. The Jātakas show that character is formed through repeated intentional actions. Generosity practiced once may be valuable, but generosity repeatedly practiced becomes a stable disposition. The same

principle applies to patience, truthfulness, compassion, and wisdom. Buddhahood is represented as the result of moral cultivation across an almost unimaginable duration.

Phra Achana gives visible form to the result of this cultivation. The stillness of the image does not represent inactivity. It represents the stability produced by the completion of the path. The Jātaka narratives reveal the enormous activity—ethical struggles, sacrifices, decisions, and acts of compassion—that lies behind this stillness.

Wat Si Chum therefore connects action and contemplation. The narratives emphasize morally significant conduct, while the Buddha image emphasizes the peace achieved when greed, hatred, and delusion have been overcome. The site communicates that contemplation cannot be separated from ethical development and that moral action should ultimately lead toward liberation rather than merely worldly reward.

Visual Style and Transregional Buddhist Networks

The Jātaka engravings also provide evidence of artistic interaction across regions. Woodward (2009) identified stylistic connections suggesting that the artists or models associated with Wat Si Chum participated in wider Asian artistic networks. Comparisons have been proposed with Buddhist works connected to China, Tibet, Nepal, and other centers through which narrative and iconographic models circulated.

Such evidence challenges a strictly national interpretation of Sukhothai art. The modern category of “Thai art” is useful for historical organization, but medieval artists and patrons did not operate within the same national boundaries that shape modern scholarship. Religious images, texts, monks, relics, and artistic techniques travelled across political territories.

The significance of Wat Si Chum lies not in its isolation from external influence but in its ability to transform diverse elements into a distinctive local monument. The Sukhothai builders did not passively reproduce a foreign architectural model. They combined monumental image-making, narrative engraving, inscriptions, relic-related practices, and local spatial organization into a new sacred environment.

The monument thus embodies a process of religious translation. Buddhist stories originating in South Asian literary traditions were transmitted through Pāli and vernacular cultures. Visual techniques may have travelled through multiple artistic centers. These elements were then reorganized within the political and religious landscape of Sukhothai.

Sound, Oral Teaching, and the Legend of the Speaking Buddha

Wat Si Chum is widely associated with a popular story that the Buddha image could speak. According to versions of the legend, a person concealed within the walls or passage spoke to an assembled audience, while the architecture made the voice appear to come from Phra Achana. Some modern retellings associate the practice with royal military authority, particularly King Naresuan, who supposedly used the effect to encourage his soldiers.

The legend has become an important part of Wat Si Chum’s modern cultural identity. It attracts attention to the architectural passage and contributes to the perception of the monument as mysterious. Nevertheless, it should not be presented as a verified fact about the Sukhothai-period function of the building. No known contemporary Sukhothai evidence conclusively demonstrates that the passage was constructed to enable a hidden person to speak as the Buddha.

The architecture may indeed produce unusual acoustic effects. Thick walls, enclosed chambers, vertical openings, and narrow passages can redirect or amplify sound. However, an architectural possibility is not the same as historical proof. The “speaking Buddha” story is best understood as later cultural memory unless stronger contemporary evidence becomes available.

Sound remains important even without accepting the legend literally. Buddhist sacred spaces are rarely silent in a social sense. Chanting, sermon delivery, Jātaka narration, ritual recitation, and conversations between teachers and devotees transform architecture into an acoustic environment. The Jātaka slabs may have served as prompts for oral explanation, allowing an abbreviated image to generate an extended narrative performance.

The popular legend therefore preserves a broader truth: religious monuments communicate through sound as well as sight. Yet responsible interpretation must distinguish this general insight from the claim that a particular historical event or architectural function has been conclusively demonstrated.

Sacred Space, Authority, and Moral Community

The construction of a monument on the scale of Wat Si Chum required substantial resources, skilled labor, religious knowledge, and institutional coordination. The temple was therefore connected to political and monastic authority. Large Buddha images could express the merit of patrons, the strength of the Buddhist community, and the legitimacy of rulers who supported the sāsana.

Wat Si Chum should not, however, be reduced to political propaganda. Its architecture and imagery communicate ethical standards that could also evaluate those in power. Jātaka kings are not praised merely because they possess authority. Their legitimacy depends on generosity, justice, self-restraint, truthfulness, and concern for living beings. Royal power becomes morally valuable only when directed by Dhamma.

The earth-touching Buddha likewise represents a form of authority different from coercive political force. The Buddha defeats Māra not through military violence but through accumulated merit, wisdom, and freedom from defilement. His immovability is moral and spiritual.

The monument could consequently support political legitimacy while simultaneously placing that legitimacy under Buddhist ethical judgment. A ruler might gain merit by sponsoring a temple, but the stories represented in the temple reminded patrons and visitors that genuine moral excellence requires sustained discipline and sacrifice.

Wat Si Chum as Heritage and Living Sacred Space

Wat Si Chum is now part of the Historic Town of Sukhothai and Associated Historic Towns, inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. UNESCO recognizes Sukhothai and its associated sites as significant evidence of the development of Thai architecture, art, and political culture (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.).

Modern heritage status has added new modes of experiencing Wat Si Chum. Visitors may approach the site as pilgrims, tourists, students, photographers, historians, or combinations of these identities. The monumental Buddha is reproduced in photographs and digital media, often with the narrow architectural opening serving as a visual frame. Through such reproduction, Phra Achana has become an internationally recognizable image of Sukhothai.

Heritage conservation also changes the monument. Archaeological restoration protects surviving material but may remove, replace, or reorganize elements. Modern visitors encounter a roofless or partially reconstructed environment rather than necessarily experiencing the precise lighting, enclosure, decoration, and ritual activity of the medieval temple.

Peleggi (2013) demonstrates how Buddhist images and monuments in Thailand were gradually reclassified as national antiquities and objects of art history. This transformation does not simply replace religious meaning, but it creates an additional way of seeing. The

same Buddha image can be regarded simultaneously as a sacred presence, an artistic masterpiece, a historical artifact, and a symbol of national heritage.

Wat Si Chum's present significance therefore arises from the coexistence of devotion and heritage. Visitors may pay respect to Phra Achana while also studying its artistic style. They may listen to stories of the speaking Buddha while recognizing that the legend is historically uncertain. They may appreciate the monument as distinctively Sukhothai while acknowledging its transregional artistic relationships.

Discussion: The Monument as an Integrated System of Communication

Wat Si Chum communicates Buddhist teaching through the coordination of several material and experiential dimensions.

First, its architecture establishes a threshold. The visitor moves from an open landscape into a narrow and highly controlled interior. This transition produces concentration and marks the distinction between ordinary and sacred space.

Second, Phra Achana creates a visual center. The immense image embodies the completion of the Buddhist path and the unshaken quality of awakening. Its scale transforms doctrinal authority into physical presence.

Third, the Jātakas create narrative depth. They explain that the Buddha's awakening rests upon repeated ethical cultivation across numerous lives. They also present virtues in forms accessible to audiences through visual recognition, captions, recitation, and storytelling.

Fourth, internal movement introduces a kinetic dimension. Whether the wall passage was used for instruction, access, preservation, or other purposes, it reveals that the building was designed as more than a frontal façade. Its interior could be physically traversed.

Fifth, oral performance expands the monument beyond visible material. Sermons, Jātaka narration, chanting, and later legends allow the building to participate in a continuing culture of memory. Even the historically unverified speaking-Buddha story demonstrates how communities continually produce new meanings around sacred architecture.

Finally, the monument connects multiple temporal levels: the Bodhisatta's former lives, the Buddha's awakening, the establishment of Buddhism at Sukhothai, the preservation of the sāsana, and the activities of present-day visitors. Wat Si Chum is therefore not a static remnant of the past. It is a site where religious time is repeatedly reconstructed.

Conclusion

Wat Si Chum should be understood not merely as an architectural container for Phra Achana but as a multidimensional medium of Buddhist teaching. Its religious power arises from the interaction among architecture, image, narrative, inscription, bodily movement, sound, ritual, and memory.

The massive maṇḍapa controls access and vision, transforming the approach to the Buddha into a passage from ordinary space toward concentrated sacred presence. Phra Achana embodies the stability of awakening and the Buddha's victory over Māra. The Jātaka slabs place that final achievement within the extended history of the Bodhisatta's ethical cultivation. The internal passage introduces movement, concealment, and verticality, while oral explanation and later cultural legends add acoustic and mnemonic dimensions.

Not every aspect of this system can be reconstructed with certainty. The monument's precise chronology, the original setting of the Jātaka slabs, the complete function of the internal passage, and the historical basis of the speaking-Buddha legend remain open to debate. These uncertainties should not be concealed by presenting symbolic interpretations as archaeological facts.

Nevertheless, the unresolved questions themselves reveal the monument's complexity. Wat Si Chum has been constructed, modified, interpreted, restored, narrated, and experienced by different communities over time. Its meaning does not reside exclusively in the intention of a single builder or historical period.

The sacred experience of Wat Si Chum emerges when material forms activate the participant's body and moral imagination. The visitor sees the serenity of the Buddha, experiences the disproportion between ordinary human scale and awakened presence, recalls the Bodhisatta's previous lives, and confronts the idea that liberation is achieved through long and disciplined cultivation. In this sense, Wat Si Chum does not simply represent the Dhamma. It makes the Dhamma spatial, visual, narrative, embodied, and memorable.

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Conventional and Ultimate Truth: The Two Levels of Truth and the Possibility of Language, Knowledge, and Nirvāṇa in Nāgārjuna's Philosophy

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Abstract

The doctrine of the two truths—conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*) and ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*)—is fundamental to Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka philosophy. It explains how Buddhist discourse can employ language, reasoning, causal explanation, and ethical distinctions while simultaneously maintaining that all phenomena are empty of intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*). This article argues that the two truths do not describe two independently existing worlds. Conventional truth concerns the dependently originated world expressed through concepts and linguistic conventions, whereas ultimate truth is the absence of intrinsic nature in those same conventional phenomena. Ultimate truth is consequently not an ineffable metaphysical substance hidden behind appearances. It is the emptiness of whatever is conventionally designated. Language is incapable of capturing a self-existing essence because no such essence exists, yet it remains indispensable for communication, rational inquiry, Buddhist teaching, and the path to liberation. Knowledge likewise functions conventionally through reliable epistemic practices without requiring ultimately self-validating foundations. Nirvāṇa is attained not by abandoning conventional reality for a separate absolute realm but by ending the reifying ignorance through which dependently arisen phenomena are grasped as intrinsically real. The two truths thereby preserve the practical validity of language and knowledge while directing them toward their own non-reifying transformation.

Keywords: two truths, Nāgārjuna, Madhyamaka, nirvāṇa

Introduction

Nāgārjuna's doctrine of emptiness presents an apparent philosophical problem. If all phenomena are empty of intrinsic nature, how can Buddhist teachings themselves be true? If language depends upon conceptual distinctions that cannot be established ultimately, how can it communicate the Dhamma? If neither the knowing subject nor the object of knowledge possesses independent existence, how can knowledge be possible? Most importantly, if *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are both empty, what does liberation mean?

Nāgārjuna addresses these questions through the doctrine of the two truths: The Dharma teaching of the Buddhas is based on two truths: a truth based on worldly convention and an ultimate truth. (Nāgārjuna, trans. 1995, 24.8)

The two truths are conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*) and ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*). Conventional truth includes the world of persons, objects, causes, actions, moral distinctions, and linguistic communication. Ultimate truth is the emptiness of these phenomena—their absence of independent and immutable intrinsic nature.

The two truths are sometimes interpreted as two separate realities. Under this interpretation, the conventional world is false or illusory, while ultimate truth is an absolute reality existing beyond ordinary experience. This reading risks transforming emptiness into the kind of intrinsic foundation that Nāgārjuna's arguments reject.

Nāgārjuna does not divide reality into an unreal world of appearances and a truly existing transcendent world. The two truths are two ways of understanding the same dependently originated phenomena. Conventionally, a person acts and experiences suffering. Ultimately, that person cannot be found as an independent self separate from bodily and mental processes. The absence of such a self does not eliminate the conventional person; it explains the person's dependent mode of existence.

The two-truths doctrine therefore serves several interconnected purposes. It preserves conventional practices without granting them intrinsic reality. It permits language and reasoning to function without treating their categories as absolute. It supports ethical and causal knowledge while denying an independent epistemological foundation. Finally, it explains nirvāṇa as liberation from reification rather than entry into a separate metaphysical realm.

The Philosophical Context of the Two Truths

The distinction between different levels or modes of truth did not originate entirely with Nāgārjuna. Earlier Buddhist traditions distinguished ordinary linguistic conventions from more analytically precise accounts of reality. Abhidharma systems, for example, often treated composite persons and objects as conventionally real while regarding irreducible dharmas as ultimately real.

The ordinary person was analyzed into aggregates, sense faculties, mental factors, and momentary events. The term "person" remained useful for communication, but no permanent self could be found under analysis. Some Abhidharma philosophers nevertheless maintained that fundamental dharmas possessed their own intrinsic characteristics.

Nāgārjuna radicalizes this analytical project. If persons are empty because they depend upon the aggregates, the supposedly fundamental dharmas must also be examined. They depend upon causes, conditions, components, conceptual contrasts, and relations to other phenomena. Nothing can therefore function as an ultimately self-existent foundation.

Madhyamaka extends emptiness to all phenomena without exception. Persons are empty, but so are the aggregates. Composite objects are empty, but so are the parts from which they are constructed. Causes, effects, time, motion, consciousness, the Four Noble Truths, and nirvāṇa are likewise empty of intrinsic nature.

This does not mean that every statement is equally valid. Conventional truth continues to distinguish accurate perception from hallucination, beneficial action from harmful conduct, and effective medicine from poison. What Madhyamaka rejects is the further claim that any conventionally valid object or proposition corresponds to an independently established essence.

The two truths thus allow Nāgārjuna to criticize foundational ontology without abandoning the everyday world in which knowledge, moral responsibility, and religious practice operate.

Conventional Truth

The Sanskrit term *saṃvṛti* has several related meanings, including convention, concealment, covering, and ordinary transaction. These meanings reveal the complexity of conventional truth.

Conventional truth is "conventional" because it depends upon shared language, concepts, social practices, and ordinary criteria. A collection of parts is designated as a

“chariot,” a changing series of bodily and mental processes is called a “person,” and a particular causal sequence is described as an “action” followed by a “result.”

Convention does not mean pure invention. If a community designates poison as medicine, the designation alone does not make the substance beneficial. Conventional truth remains constrained by causal effectiveness and coherent practice. Fire burns, water extinguishes fire under appropriate conditions, and hostile conduct tends to produce suffering regardless of whether one has understood their ultimate emptiness.

Conventional truths can therefore be distinguished from conventional falsehoods. The statement “There is a table in the room” may be conventionally true, while “There is an elephant in the room” may be false. Neither the table nor the elephant possesses intrinsic nature, but emptiness does not eliminate the evidential distinction between their presence and absence.

Siderits (2021) expresses this principle through the idea that truth is conventional when it accords with reliable practices and ordinary experience without surviving ultimate analysis as an independently existing entity. Conventional truth is not absolute truth, but neither is it arbitrary error.

The meaning of concealment introduces another dimension. Conventional cognition conceals ultimate truth when it treats dependently designated phenomena as self-existing. The word “person” is not inherently deceptive; it becomes a vehicle of ignorance when the person is grasped as an independent and permanent self.

Conventional truth is consequently ambivalent. It makes communication, science, ethics, and Buddhist teaching possible, but it can also sustain reification. Its value depends upon whether conventions are used pragmatically or mistaken for intrinsic structures of reality.

Ultimate Truth

Ultimate truth concerns the absence of intrinsic nature in all phenomena. It is not a higher object hidden behind conventional appearances. When a phenomenon is subjected to ultimate analysis, no self-established essence can be found.

Consider a chariot. It is not identical to any individual part, nor is it entirely separate from all its parts. It is not merely the collection considered independently of organization, and it cannot be found as an additional substance that owns or controls the components. “Chariot” is a valid designation dependent upon components, arrangement, purpose, and conceptual practice.

The ultimate truth of the chariot is not another chariot located behind the conventional one. It is the emptiness of the conventionally designated chariot. Conventional and ultimate truth therefore concern the same phenomenon under different forms of analysis.

The same applies to the person. Conventionally, persons possess names, make decisions, enter relationships, and bear responsibility for their actions. Ultimately, no independent self can be found apart from the physical and mental processes upon which the designation “person” depends. Ultimate truth does not eliminate the person; it eliminates the imagined intrinsic self.

Nāgārjuna identifies ultimate truth with emptiness, but emptiness itself must not be reified. It is not an absolute substance, universal consciousness, or metaphysical foundation. Emptiness simply signifies the lack of *svabhāva*. Because this lack is also dependently conceived and designated, emptiness is itself empty (Garfield, 2002; Westerhoff, 2009).

Ultimate truth therefore has an unusual status. It is true because phenomena genuinely lack intrinsic nature. Yet it cannot be converted into a description of a self-existing ultimate reality. It is a truth that undermines rather than establishes metaphysical foundations.

Are the Two Truths Two Realities?

A major interpretive error is to treat the two truths as referring to two ontologically separate worlds: 1 . A conventional world composed of deceptive appearances; and 2 . An ultimate world possessing true and independent reality.

Such a dualism is incompatible with Madhyamaka. If ultimate truth existed independently of conventional phenomena, it would possess intrinsic nature and would therefore contradict the doctrine of universal emptiness.

Ultimate truth is the emptiness of conventional phenomena. Without conventionally existing things, there would be nothing whose emptiness could be realized. Conversely, without emptiness, conventional phenomena could not arise dependently, change, or perform causal functions.

Their relationship may be summarized as follows:

Dimension	Conventional truth	Ultimate truth
Concern	How phenomena appear and function	How phenomena exist under ultimate analysis
Mode of existence	Dependently and conventionally	Empty of intrinsic nature
Examples	Persons, tables, actions, causes, language	The emptiness of persons, tables, actions, causes, and language
Function	Communication and practical activity	Elimination of reification
Principal error	Treating conventions as intrinsically real	Reifying emptiness as an absolute
Soteriological role	Provides the path and teaching	Enables liberating wisdom

The distinction is epistemically and pedagogically necessary, but it does not divide reality into two separate domains. Garfield (1995) describes this relationship by emphasizing that the conventional world is not distinct from its emptiness. Emptiness is the manner in which conventional phenomena exist.

The two truths are therefore different without being separable. They cannot be collapsed into a single undifferentiated truth because conventional functionality and ultimate analysis answer different questions. Yet they cannot be separated into independent realities because ultimate truth is nothing other than the emptiness of the conventional.

Language and the Problem of Ineffability

Language operates by making distinctions. It identifies objects, attributes properties, establishes relations, and separates one category from another. Madhyamaka analysis demonstrates that these distinctions do not correspond to independently existing essences. This raises the question of whether language can express ultimate truth.

If ultimate truth is described as “emptiness,” has it not already entered the domain of concepts and conventions? If it lies entirely beyond language, how could Nāgārjuna write a philosophical text explaining it?

Nāgārjuna’s response avoids both linguistic absolutism and complete ineffability. Language cannot capture an intrinsic nature because no intrinsic nature exists. Its limitation is not simply that reality is too profound for words; rather, language becomes misleading when its dependently constituted categories are taken as representations of self-existing entities.

Nevertheless, language can expose this error. Madhyamaka discourse uses concepts to reveal the limitations of concepts. The word “emptiness” does not name an ultimate object. It directs attention toward the failure of phenomena to possess intrinsic nature.

This use of language may be compared with a tool employed for a particular purpose. Once the tool has completed its function, it should not become an object of attachment. Nāgārjuna warns: The victorious ones have said that emptiness is the relinquishing of all views. Those for whom emptiness is itself a view have been declared incurable. (Nāgārjuna, trans. 2013, 13.8)

The statement that emptiness relinquishes all views does not mean that Madhyamaka refuses every conventional claim. It means that no philosophical proposition should be transformed into a metaphysical assertion about intrinsic reality.

Language remains necessary for teaching. Nāgārjuna explicitly states that ultimate truth cannot be taught without relying upon everyday convention: Without relying upon convention, the ultimate cannot be taught. Without understanding the ultimate, nirvāṇa is not attained. (Nāgārjuna, trans. 1995, 24.10)

Language therefore has a paradoxical but coherent role. It cannot describe an intrinsically existing ultimate reality, because no such reality exists. Yet it can guide the practitioner toward insight by revealing the dependent and conventional character of all descriptions.

Dependent Designation and Linguistic Meaning

Nāgārjuna's well-known identification of dependent origination with emptiness also connects both concepts with dependent designation: Whatever is dependently originated, we declare to be emptiness. It is a dependent designation, and is itself the Middle Way. (Nāgārjuna, trans. 2013, 24.18)

The expression “dependent designation” suggests that phenomena are identified in dependence upon bases, parts, relations, and established linguistic practices. A person is designated in dependence upon the aggregates. A forest is designated in dependence upon trees and their spatial relations. A teacher is designated in relation to students and the activity of teaching.

This does not imply that words alone create material reality. Linguistic designation depends upon a basis. The term “forest” cannot conventionally designate an entirely empty field without trees. At the same time, no forest exists independently of the components and practices upon which the designation relies.

Meaning is consequently relational. Words acquire meaning through contrasts and systems of use. “Cause” is intelligible in relation to “effect,” “whole” in relation to “part,” and “teacher” in relation to “student.” If one member of such a conceptual pair possessed an entirely independent nature, the relation through which it is understood would become impossible.

Dependent designation demonstrates why language can function without mirroring intrinsic essences. Words need not refer to metaphysically independent objects in order to be meaningful. They function through shared practices, causal interactions, and relational systems.

Madhyamaka is therefore not forced to choose between metaphysical realism and linguistic chaos. Language can be conventionally reliable precisely because conventional reliability does not require intrinsic foundations.

Knowledge Without Ultimate Foundations

The two truths also address the possibility of knowledge. Indian philosophical traditions debated the nature of valid cognition, or *pramāṇa*. Different schools proposed perception, inference, testimony, and comparison as means of reliable knowledge. A central problem was how these means of knowledge could themselves be justified.

In the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, Nāgārjuna challenges the idea that instruments of knowledge and their objects can be established through intrinsic nature. If a means of knowledge must be validated by another means, an infinite regress threatens. If it validates itself, one must explain why the same status is not granted indiscriminately to other claims. If means and objects mutually validate one another as intrinsically existing, the account risks circularity (Westerhoff, 2009).

This critique is sometimes interpreted as a rejection of all knowledge. Such an interpretation would make Nāgārjuna's arguments self-defeating: if nothing could be known, the claim that phenomena are empty could not be known either.

Madhyamaka instead rejects ultimately grounded knowledge. Conventional epistemic practices remain possible. Perception can correct imagination, repeated experience can confirm causal patterns, and inference can identify implications. These practices are reliable within systems of mutual dependence without requiring an independently existing epistemic foundation.

A doctor's diagnosis, for example, depends upon symptoms, instruments, training, testimony, and established medical concepts. None provides an absolutely self-validating foundation, but together they can produce conventionally reliable knowledge. The absence of ultimate certainty does not make every diagnosis equally acceptable.

Knowledge in Madhyamaka is therefore relational, corrigible, and context-sensitive. A cognition is conventionally valid when it functions successfully, coheres with appropriate evidence, and withstands relevant forms of correction. It does not need to correspond to an object possessing intrinsic nature.

Does Madhyamaka Refute Itself?

A traditional objection maintains that the statement "all phenomena are empty" must itself be either intrinsically true or empty. If intrinsically true, it contradicts universal emptiness. If empty, it appears incapable of refuting anything.

Nāgārjuna responds by accepting that his statements are also empty. Their effectiveness does not depend upon intrinsic truth. A dependently originated statement can expose a contradiction just as dependently originated medicine can cure an illness.

Suppose someone mistakenly sees a rope as a snake. The statement "That is a rope, not a snake" corrects the error. The statement does not need to possess an eternal intrinsic essence in order to function. Its truth depends upon appropriate conditions, evidence, language, and the error being corrected.

Madhyamaka arguments operate similarly. They do not establish a self-grounded metaphysical doctrine. They demonstrate that intrinsic existence cannot be coherently applied to causation, identity, time, motion, knowledge, or liberation.

The emptiness of Madhyamaka language is therefore not a defect. It is a necessary condition of consistency. If Nāgārjuna's propositions possessed intrinsic nature, they would be exempt from the analysis applied to everything else. Their conventional and therapeutic character allows them to function without becoming absolute dogmas.

The Two Truths and the Four Noble Truths

Nāgārjuna develops the two-truths doctrine in Chapter 24 while defending the Four Noble Truths against the charge that emptiness makes Buddhist practice impossible. His opponent argues that if all things are empty, then suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path cannot exist.

Nāgārjuna reverses the criticism. The Four Noble Truths are possible only because phenomena are empty. If suffering possessed an intrinsic and immutable nature, it could never arise or cease. If craving were intrinsically fixed, no practice could remove it. If

practitioners possessed an unchangeable nature as deluded beings, awakening would be impossible.

The Four Noble Truths are conventionally true because they accurately describe the causal structure of suffering and liberation. Ultimately, suffering, craving, cessation, and the path are empty of independent nature. Their emptiness does not invalidate their practical operation; it makes transformation possible.

The relationship can be expressed as follows: 1. Suffering exists conventionally as a dependently originated process. 2. Its causes can be identified because causal relations function conventionally. 3. Suffering can cease because neither suffering nor its causes possess an immutable essence. 4. The path can produce transformation because the practitioner is empty of fixed identity.

Ultimate analysis therefore supports rather than destroys Buddhist practice. The conventional truth of suffering motivates the path, while ultimate insight into emptiness makes liberation possible.

Ethical Knowledge and Moral Responsibility

If persons and actions exist only conventionally, does moral responsibility become merely arbitrary? Madhyamaka answers that ethical responsibility requires causal continuity, not an intrinsically existing self.

A person who performs an action and the person who later experiences its consequences are neither absolutely identical nor entirely different. Bodily and mental processes change continuously, but they form a causally related sequence. This continuity is sufficient for conventional responsibility.

The absence of a permanent self does not erase suffering. Pain does not become insignificant because the sufferer is empty of intrinsic nature. On the contrary, understanding dependent origination shows that suffering arises within relational systems and can be affected by one's conduct.

Moral distinctions are conventionally valid insofar as intentions and actions contribute differently to suffering, well-being, attachment, and liberation. Compassion and cruelty are both empty, but they are not causally or ethically equivalent. Emptiness denies intrinsic essences, not functional differences.

Madhyamaka consequently avoids both moral absolutism and unrestricted relativism. Moral categories are not eternal entities existing independently of sentient life, but neither are they arbitrary preferences. They arise within the shared reality of vulnerability, intention, causation, and suffering.

Ultimate Truth and the Danger of Reification

Ultimate truth may itself become an object of attachment. A practitioner might reject the conventional world and imagine emptiness as a pure absolute existing beyond change. This interpretation reproduces the metaphysical error that Madhyamaka seeks to overcome.

Nāgārjuna warns that emptiness wrongly understood is dangerous: Emptiness wrongly grasped destroys the unintelligent, like a snake incorrectly seized or a spell incorrectly used. (Nāgārjuna, trans. 1995, 24.11)

The danger lies in confusing the absence of intrinsic nature with absolute nonbeing or with an intrinsically existing emptiness. In the first case, emptiness becomes nihilism. In the second, it becomes eternalism disguised as Buddhist philosophy.

The ultimate truth is therefore not “more real” in the sense of possessing a superior metaphysical substance. It is a more adequate understanding because it removes the false projection of *svabhāva*. Once that projection is removed, no separate ultimate entity remains to be grasped.

This is the meaning of the emptiness of emptiness. Emptiness depends upon the phenomena said to be empty, the conceptual contrast between intrinsic and dependent existence, and the teaching context in which the term functions. It is thus itself a dependent designation.

Nirvāṇa and the Two Truths

The doctrine of the two truths reaches its soteriological culmination in Nāgārjuna's analysis of nirvāṇa. If nirvāṇa were an intrinsically existing state, it would be independent of causes and could not be attained. If it were produced as a new substance, it would be conditioned and impermanent. If it were simply nonexistence, liberation would amount to annihilation.

Nāgārjuna rejects all these alternatives. Nirvāṇa is not a separate metaphysical object but the cessation of reifying grasping and the afflictions sustained by it. It is realized through insight into the empty nature of phenomena.

Nāgārjuna famously states: There is not the slightest difference between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. There is not the slightest difference between nirvāṇa and saṃsāra. (Nāgārjuna, trans. 1995, 25.19)

This verse does not deny the experiential and soteriological difference between suffering and liberation. Saṃsāra is characterized by ignorance, craving, and repeated suffering, while nirvāṇa is freedom from those conditions. What Nāgārjuna denies is an intrinsic ontological separation between two self-existing realms.

The same empty phenomena can be experienced through ignorance or understood through wisdom. When dependently originated reality is grasped as intrinsically existing, attachment and suffering arise. When its emptiness is realized, reifying attachment ceases.

Nirvāṇa therefore depends upon both truths. Conventional truth provides the Buddha's teaching, the distinction between wholesome and unwholesome action, meditation, ethical discipline, and the path. Ultimate truth removes attachment to the supposedly intrinsic existence of the practitioner, the path, and the goal.

Is Ultimate Truth Beyond Language?

Ultimate truth is frequently described as beyond conceptual elaboration. This should not be interpreted as the discovery of a mysterious entity about which nothing can be said. The cessation of conceptual elaboration means the cessation of reifying concepts, not necessarily the elimination of all conventional thought and communication.

An awakened person can continue to recognize people, use language, and respond to practical situations. Liberation does not require functional cognitive incapacity. What ceases is the mistaken attribution of intrinsic nature to the objects and categories involved.

Ultimate truth cannot be expressed as an intrinsically accurate representation of an absolute object. Nevertheless, statements about emptiness can be conventionally true and pedagogically effective. They guide analysis until the assumption of intrinsic existence is relinquished.

This creates a distinction between describing and realizing ultimate truth. One can understand the proposition "all phenomena are empty" intellectually without overcoming the habitual experience of self and objects as independently real. Conceptual understanding is necessary but not sufficient. Meditative cultivation and ethical transformation are required to integrate insight into experience.

Language points toward the ultimate, but realization involves a transformation in cognition and attachment that cannot be reduced to the possession of a correct sentence.

Language, Knowledge, and Liberation as a Single Process

Language, knowledge, and nirvāṇa should not be treated as three unrelated topics in Nāgārjuna's philosophy. They form a progressive relationship mediated by the two truths.

Language establishes conventional distinctions and enables the Dhamma to be communicated. Reasoning uses those distinctions to examine phenomena and expose contradictions in the concept of intrinsic nature. Knowledge of emptiness then weakens the reifying ignorance that sustains attachment. Nirvāṇa is possible when this insight becomes transformative rather than merely theoretical.

The process is not strictly linear. Ethical practice and meditation support understanding, while insight changes how language and knowledge are used. After realizing emptiness, the practitioner does not necessarily abandon conventional discourse. Rather, conventions are used without attachment to intrinsic reality.

The bodhisattva ideal illustrates this return to convention. Wisdom recognizes that persons are empty, while compassion responds to their conventionally real suffering. If conventional suffering were dismissed as absolutely unreal, compassionate action would lose its basis. If suffering were reified as intrinsically fixed, liberation would be impossible.

Interpretive Debates

Modern scholars differ over how the two truths should be interpreted. Some emphasize the conventional reality of ordinary phenomena and understand Madhyamaka as a form of anti-foundationalism. Others interpret Nāgārjuna as adopting a stronger semantic or ontological anti-realism.

Garfield (1995, 2002) emphasizes that conventional reality is the only reality phenomena possess. On this interpretation, Madhyamaka does not deny the world but rejects the demand for an ultimate foundation beneath it.

Siderits and Katsura (2013) give greater attention to the analytical distinction between conventionally useful entities and the inability of any entity to withstand ultimate analysis. Their interpretation also demonstrates how Madhyamaka developed through debates with other Indian Buddhist philosophical traditions.

Westerhoff (2009, 2023) emphasizes Nāgārjuna's systematic rejection of *svabhāva*, including substantial, causal, conceptual, and epistemological forms of intrinsic existence. Ultimate truth should not be treated as a description of a fundamental ontological layer.

Thakchoe (2022) demonstrates that Indian and Tibetan traditions developed multiple interpretations of the relationship between the two truths. Some regard them as distinct perspectives, while others emphasize their nondual relationship. These differences caution against presenting a single modern interpretation as uncontested.

Despite their differences, these interpretations generally agree that Madhyamaka cannot be accurately described as the simple assertion that nothing exists. The central issue is how conventional functionality can be affirmed without metaphysical reification.

Discussion

The two truths resolve several apparent contradictions in Nāgārjuna's philosophy.

First, they explain how Madhyamaka can deny intrinsic existence without denying conventional phenomena. Persons, causes, actions, and objects function through dependence even though they cannot be established ultimately.

Second, they preserve language. Words do not need to correspond to independently existing essences in order to communicate successfully. Their meanings arise through relations, conventions, and practical use.

Third, they preserve knowledge. Reliable cognition can function through mutually dependent evidential practices without requiring an ultimately self-validating foundation.

Fourth, they protect Buddhist ethics. The emptiness of agents and actions does not remove causal continuity or the distinction between conduct that increases suffering and conduct that reduces it.

Fifth, they clarify nirvāṇa. Liberation is neither the discovery of an eternal substance nor the annihilation of a real self. It is the cessation of ignorance and attachment grounded in reification.

The two truths should therefore not be regarded as a temporary compromise between ordinary experience and a metaphysical absolute. They express the structure of Madhyamaka inquiry. Conventional truth shows how phenomena function; ultimate truth reveals that their functioning requires dependence rather than intrinsic nature.

Conclusion

Nāgārjuna's doctrine of the two truths provides the conceptual framework through which language, knowledge, Buddhist practice, and nirvāṇa remain possible within a philosophy of universal emptiness. Conventional truth and ultimate truth are distinct but not separable. They concern the same phenomena understood through different kinds of analysis.

Conventional truth encompasses the dependently originated world of persons, objects, causes, actions, and linguistic practices. It is not merely false because it supports successful communication, causal explanation, ethical responsibility, and religious cultivation. Yet it becomes deceptive when its categories are reified as intrinsically existing.

Ultimate truth is the absence of intrinsic nature in conventional phenomena. It is not another reality situated beyond the conventional world. Neither is it an absolute substance called emptiness. Because emptiness is itself dependently designated, it too is empty.

Language remains indispensable because ultimate truth cannot be taught without conventional expressions. Its role is not to represent a hidden intrinsic reality but to guide the practitioner in recognizing the limitations of reifying thought. Madhyamaka uses concepts therapeutically, allowing reasoning to undermine the metaphysical assumptions embedded in reasoning itself.

Knowledge likewise functions conventionally. Perception, inference, testimony, and correction can produce reliable cognition without ultimately independent foundations. The absence of absolute epistemic certainty does not reduce all claims to equal status.

Nirvāṇa becomes possible through the integration of the two truths. Conventional practices—including morality, meditation, reasoning, and compassion—create the conditions for liberating insight. Ultimate wisdom recognizes that the practitioner, the path, suffering, and nirvāṇa are empty of intrinsic nature. This recognition does not destroy the path; it frees the path from attachment.

The ultimate achievement of the two-truths doctrine is therefore not the replacement of conventional reality with an absolute realm. It is the transformation of how conventional reality is understood and lived. Language continues, knowledge continues, and compassionate activity continues, but they are no longer governed by the illusion that persons and phenomena possess fixed and independent essences.

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Right Self-Direction and the Capital of Goodness: Life Goals, Perseverance, and Responsibility for Self-Development through the Four Wheels

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Abstract

The Buddhist Four Wheels of Prosperity identify four conditions conducive to human progress: dwelling in a suitable locality (*paṭirūpadesavāsa*), relying upon good persons (*sappurisūpassaya*), directing oneself rightly (*attasammāpaṇidhi*), and having performed meritorious deeds previously (*pubbe ca katapuññatā*). This article concentrates on the relationship between the latter two principles. *Attasammāpaṇidhi* concerns the ethical orientation of one's life rather than the mere technical ability to achieve personal goals, while *pubbe ca katapuññatā* refers to wholesome actions and capacities accumulated before the present situation. The article conceptualizes previous merit as a “capital of goodness” consisting of ethical dispositions, knowledge, trust, supportive relationships, and opportunities generated by earlier conduct. This metaphor does not imply a transferable spiritual currency or a deterministic explanation of privilege and disadvantage. Previous merit conditions but does not completely determine present life. Present intention, Right Effort, social conditions, and the actions of others remain causally important. By comparing Buddhist thought with contemporary theories of goal pursuit, self-determination, and human agency, the article develops an ethically directed model of self-development. It argues that responsible development requires morally worthy goals, wholesome motivation, non-harmful means, sustained but flexible effort, reflective evaluation, and contribution to the welfare of others. Right self-direction thus transforms inherited conditions into new opportunities while generating beneficial foundations for the future.

Keywords: Four Wheels, life goals, Right Effort, self-development

Introduction

Human development involves both inheritance and initiative. Every person begins life within conditions not entirely of their own choosing: body, family, language, culture, social position, education, health, environment, and historical circumstances. Yet individuals are not merely passive products of these conditions. They form intentions, establish goals, undertake effort, revise decisions, and influence the conditions inherited by others.

Buddhist philosophy expresses this relationship through the Four Wheels of Prosperity in the Cakka Sutta. The four wheels are: 1. Living in a suitable locality; 2. Relying upon good persons; 3 . Directing oneself rightly; and 4 . Having previously performed meritorious deeds (Bodhi, 2012, AN 4.31).

The first two principles emphasize environmental and relational support. The latter two concern personal direction and temporal continuity. *Attasammāpaṇidhi* identifies the

responsibility to orient one's life rightly, while *pubbe ca katapuññatā* acknowledges that present opportunities and capacities are conditioned by previous action.

The relationship between these factors generates a fundamental philosophical question: If present development depends upon the past, what role remains for current effort? Conversely, if individuals are responsible for directing themselves, how should unequal starting conditions be understood?

Two extreme answers should be avoided. Radical individualism attributes success or failure entirely to personal effort. It neglects inherited inequalities, supportive relationships, and structural barriers. Fatalism treats present life as predetermined by past kamma and weakens motivation for personal and social transformation.

The Four Wheels provide a middle position. The past conditions the present without fixing it completely. Present agency is real but dependent rather than absolute. Current intentions transform inherited conditions and simultaneously create foundations for the future.

This article analyzes *attasammāpaṇidhi* and *pubbe ca katapuññatā* as complementary principles of ethically directed self-development. It examines goal selection, perseverance, responsibility, accumulated merit, and the dangers of karmic fatalism. It also compares Buddhist insights with contemporary theories of motivation and human agency.

Textual Foundation of the Four Wheels

The Cakka Sutta describes four wheels that, when operating, lead human and divine beings toward prosperity and advancement. The Pāli terms are *paṭirūpadesavāsa*, *sappurisūpassaya*, *attasammāpaṇidhi*, and *pubbe ca katapuññatā* (Bodhi, 2012; SuttaCentral, n.d.-a).

Thanissaro Bhikkhu (2005) renders them as dwelling in a civilized land, associating with people of integrity, directing oneself rightly, and having made merit in the past.

The same principles appear in the Maṅgala Sutta, where living in a suitable place, having previously performed merit, and rightly directing oneself are identified among the highest blessings (Ñāṇamoli, 1994).

The repetition suggests that right self-direction and previous merit were regarded as broadly applicable conditions of well-being. They are not confined to monastic meditation or to material success. They apply to moral, intellectual, social, and spiritual development.

The metaphor of a wheel is significant. A wheel creates forward movement only in coordination with other wheels. Personal determination without a suitable environment may be obstructed. Favorable conditions without right direction may be wasted. Previous merit without present wisdom may be misused, while present effort without earlier foundations may require greater support.

The Meaning of Attasammāpaṇidhi

Rightly Directing Oneself

Attasammāpaṇidhi may be translated as right self-direction, establishing oneself rightly, or orienting oneself appropriately. It combines *atta*, conventionally referring to oneself; *sammā*, rightly or correctly; and *paṇidhi*, direction, resolution, aspiration, or commitment.

The principle does not imply belief in a permanent metaphysical self. Buddhist discourse can use conventional personal language while denying that body and mind constitute an unchanging essence. The “self” to be directed is the conventional person understood as a changing continuum of intentions, habits, bodily processes, and consciousness.

The most important element is sammā. A person may set clear goals and pursue them effectively while remaining wrongly directed. A corrupt official, manipulative advertiser, or violent extremist may demonstrate discipline and perseverance. Technical success does not establish ethical rightness.

Right self-direction therefore requires evaluation of: The goal; The motivation; The methods; The consequences; The effects upon others; and The goal's relationship to attachment and liberation.

Direction before Achievement

Modern goal culture often emphasizes achievement, measurement, competition, and productivity. Buddhism first asks whether the direction is wholesome.

Travelling efficiently in the wrong direction does not constitute progress. Likewise, achieving wealth through exploitation or status through deception cannot be regarded as right self-development.

The Buddhist framework distinguishes between worldly effectiveness and ethical-spiritual progress. A goal may be achievable but unwholesome, socially admired but harmful, or personally satisfying while strengthening greed and conceit.

Self-Direction and Conditionality

Right self-direction does not mean that individuals create themselves independently. Goals arise within social, cultural, psychological, and historical contexts. Teachers, families, institutions, and media influence what people regard as desirable.

Buddhist agency is therefore conditioned agency. Individuals can reflect upon inherited goals, examine their consequences, and choose alternative directions, but this capacity depends upon knowledge, attention, support, and prior cultivation.

This conditional view avoids both an unconditioned free will and rigid determinism.

Goals in Buddhist Philosophy

Hierarchies of Goals

Buddhist teachings recognize multiple legitimate levels of aspiration. A householder may seek livelihood, security, education, family welfare, health, social respect, and favorable future conditions. At a higher level, practitioners cultivate ethical purity, concentration, wisdom, and liberation.

These aims need not always conflict. Ethical livelihood may support family and generosity. Education may increase the ability to serve society. Health practices may provide the physical basis for study and meditation.

Conflict arises when lower goals are treated as ultimate. Wealth becomes harmful when pursued through exploitation or interpreted as the final source of security. Status becomes problematic when it strengthens conceit and dependence upon praise.

Right View as the Compass

Right View supplies the cognitive orientation for right goals. It includes understanding that intentional actions have consequences, conditioned phenomena are impermanent, and attachment produces suffering.

A goal informed by Right View considers both immediate and long-term consequences. It asks not only "What will I gain?" but also: What habits will this pursuit cultivate? Whom will it affect? What form of person will I become? Will it strengthen craving or wisdom? Does it contribute to the ending or continuation of suffering?

Right Intention

Right Intention includes orientations toward renunciation or nonattachment, non-ill will, and harmlessness. These criteria evaluate motivation.

Renunciation does not require every person to abandon possessions or ordinary responsibilities. It means freedom from possessive attachment and the willingness to subordinate acquisition to ethical and spiritual values.

Non-ill will prevents goals from being organized around revenge or humiliation. Harmlessness excludes objectives whose achievement depends upon cruelty or exploitation.

The Meaning of Pubbe ca Katapuññatā

Merit Previously Performed

Pubbe ca katapuññatā means having performed merit previously. The expression may refer to deeds in previous lives within traditional Buddhist cosmology, but it also includes earlier action in the present life.

A student's present ability reflects earlier study. Professional trust reflects previous reliability. Meditative stability reflects prior practice. Social support may reflect earlier generosity, care, and friendship.

The principle therefore expresses temporal continuity. Development is cumulative, although never perfectly linear.

Merit as Wholesome Action

Merit, or puñña, arises through wholesome intentional conduct such as generosity, ethical discipline, respect, service, teaching, rejoicing in others' goodness, and mental cultivation.

Merit should not be reduced to ceremonial donation. Ritual giving may be meritorious when motivated wholesomely, but merit encompasses the broader formation of beneficial dispositions and consequences.

Earlier wholesome conduct may generate: Ethical habits; Knowledge and skill; Psychological resilience; Trust and reputation; Supportive relationships; Material opportunity; Mental stability; and Readiness to understand the Dhamma.

Merit and Intention

Buddhist ethics places intention at the center of kamma. In the Nibbedhika Sutta, the Buddha states that intention is kamma because, after intending, one acts through body, speech, or mind (Bodhi, 2012, AN 6.63).

The value of previous action cannot therefore be evaluated solely by its visible form. A donation motivated by compassion differs from one made to secure status. Both may help a recipient, but they shape the donor differently.

Merit is consequently both outwardly consequential and inwardly formative.

The “Capital of Goodness” Metaphor

The phrase “capital of goodness” can help explain the cumulative function of merit. Capital generally refers to resources that can produce future possibilities. Previous wholesome action may become a resource for later development.

This ethical capital may take several forms:

Form of capital	Example
Moral capital	Habits of honesty, restraint, and responsibility
Intellectual capital	Knowledge and discernment developed through study
Relational capital	Trust, friendship, and networks of mutual support
Psychological capital	Patience, confidence, resilience, and emotional regulation
Contemplative capital	Mindfulness and concentration developed through practice
Social capital	Reputation and cooperation generated by service
Material foundation	Resources ethically accumulated and responsibly maintained

The metaphor must be used carefully. Merit is not a commodity stored in a spiritual account, nor does worldly success prove moral superiority. Ethical capital may support action without guaranteeing a particular outcome.

A generous and virtuous person may still experience illness, loss, or injustice. Multiple conditions contribute to life events. Merit is one causal dimension, not a total explanation.

Why Previous Merit Is Not Destiny

The Error of Karmic Fatalism

Karmic fatalism claims that every present condition is predetermined by past kamma. This view can lead to passivity, victim-blaming, and justification of inequality.

If illness, poverty, oppression, or disability is automatically attributed to a person's past wrongdoing, compassion and social responsibility are weakened. Such reasoning exceeds what can ordinarily be known about causal histories.

Buddhist conditionality includes bodily processes, climate, nutrition, social institutions, other people's actions, chance encounters, and present decisions. Past kamma is important but not exclusive.

Conditioning versus Determination

A condition influences an outcome without necessarily determining it by itself. A person may inherit limited educational opportunities but later receive support from a teacher. Another may inherit wealth but misuse it through addiction or greed.

Previous merit provides tendencies and opportunities; right self-direction determines how present capacities are used. This interaction explains why the third and fourth wheels must operate together.

The Moral Danger of Reading Merit from Status

Wealth, power, beauty, or high social position should not be treated as transparent evidence of virtue. Such an interpretation confuses worldly advantage with moral development.

People may acquire wealth through exploitation, inherit privilege without earning it, or possess status while lacking wisdom. Conversely, virtuous persons may live under oppressive conditions.

Buddhist assessment must therefore focus on intention and conduct rather than infer moral worth from social position.

Present Effort as the Bridge between Past and Future

Previous merit supplies a foundation, but present effort activates, redirects, or transforms that foundation. A musical talent remains undeveloped without practice. A good education may be misused. A favorable reputation can be destroyed by dishonesty.

Right Effort provides the operational dimension of self-development. In the Noble Eightfold Path, it consists of effort to: 1. Prevent unarisen unwholesome states; 2. Abandon unwholesome states already arisen; 3. Develop wholesome states not yet arisen; and 4. Maintain and perfect wholesome states already present.

This structure avoids the assumption that effort means simply working harder. Effort is ethically discriminating. It knows what should be prevented, abandoned, cultivated, and sustained.

Perseverance and Wise Flexibility

Perseverance as Sustained Commitment

Meaningful goals require effort over time. Ethical development is rarely achieved through one decision. Habits are formed through repetition, and setbacks are normal.

Perseverance includes: Maintaining commitment; Returning after failure; Accepting gradual progress; Learning from consequences; Seeking appropriate support; and Continuing without immediate reward.

Perseverance Is Not Rigid Attachment

Buddhist effort should not be confused with inflexible persistence. A person may continue pursuing a harmful or impossible goal merely because abandoning it threatens identity.

Wise perseverance distinguishes between commitment to a wholesome purpose and attachment to one particular strategy. Methods should be revised when conditions change or evidence shows that they produce harm.

A person committed to serving society may need to change occupations. A practitioner may need to modify meditation under conditions of illness. Flexibility protects perseverance from becoming compulsive.

The Middle Way of Effort

Insufficient effort produces negligence, while excessive strain produces agitation, burnout, and discouragement. Buddhist cultivation seeks balanced energy adapted to circumstances.

The moral quality of effort depends upon its object and manner. Intense effort directed toward greed or hatred is not Right Effort. Sustainable effort includes rest, health, relationship, and awareness of limits.

Goal Pursuit and Self-Determination Theory

Contemporary self-determination theory distinguishes different qualities of motivation. Ryan and Deci (2000) argue that autonomy, competence, and relatedness support motivation and well-being. Autonomy does not mean isolation but action experienced as willingly endorsed rather than externally coerced.

The theory also distinguishes intrinsic aspirations, such as personal growth, relationships, community contribution, and health, from extrinsic aspirations centered upon wealth, fame, and image. Greater emphasis on intrinsic goals is generally associated with stronger well-being than dominant emphasis upon extrinsic goals (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vansteenkiste et al., 2006).

This distinction resembles Buddhist concern with motivation and attachment. Goals directed toward growth, relationship, and contribution may be less dependent upon status comparison than goals centered upon fame and image.

The frameworks are not identical. Buddhist thought evaluates goals through kamma, wholesome roots, non-self, and liberation, while self-determination theory addresses motivation and psychological needs. Nevertheless, both reject the assumption that all successfully achieved goals contribute equally to well-being.

Human Agency and Reciprocal Conditionality

Bandura (2001) describes human agency through intentionality, forethought, self-regulation, and reflection. People form intentions, anticipate consequences, regulate conduct, and evaluate their functioning.

His model also emphasizes reciprocal interaction among personal factors, behavior, and environment. Individuals shape environments that in turn influence them.

This resonates with the Four Wheels: Suitable locality corresponds to environmental conditions. Good companionship represents social modeling and support. Right self-direction corresponds to intentional agency. Previous merit represents accumulated consequences and capacities.

Buddhist philosophy adds that the agent is not an independent self but a conditioned process. Agency remains functional without requiring a permanent controller.

Responsibility without an Independent Self

The doctrine of non-self may appear to conflict with personal responsibility. If no permanent self exists, who sets goals and experiences consequences?

Buddhism distinguishes between conventional agency and an intrinsically existing self. A person is a causally continuous stream of physical and mental processes. Intentions at one time influence habits and experiences at later times.

Responsibility requires causal continuity, not permanent identity. The person who experiences a later consequence is neither completely identical to nor entirely different from the earlier agent.

This process account makes development possible. If the self were immutable, education and moral cultivation could not change it. Because the person is conditioned and impermanent, transformation can occur.

Retrospective and Prospective Responsibility

Responsibility has at least two dimensions.

Retrospective Responsibility

Retrospective responsibility asks what a person has done and what consequences followed. It includes acknowledgment, restitution, correction, and learning.

Buddhist reflection on kamma can support accountability, but it should not become permanent condemnation. Because persons can change, past misconduct does not constitute an immutable identity.

Prospective Responsibility

Prospective responsibility asks what conditions one should create now. It is future-oriented and particularly relevant to the Four Wheels.

A person may not be responsible for every inherited condition, but they become responsible for how they respond within their capacity. Communities likewise bear responsibility for creating opportunities, education, safety, and ethical institutions.

Self-development is therefore both personal and social. Individuals direct themselves, while societies influence whether right direction is realistically possible.

Goals, Means, and Consequences

A Buddhist goal is not ethically justified by its desired outcome alone. Means matter because every action shapes character and produces consequences during the pursuit.

A goal framework informed by attasammāpaṇidhi should evaluate six dimensions:

Dimension	Guiding question
View	Is the goal based on a realistic understanding of causes and consequences?
Intention	Is it motivated by non-greed, non-hatred, and wisdom?
Means	Are the methods truthful, non-harmful, and fair?
Consequences	Who benefits and who may be harmed?
Character	What habits and qualities will the pursuit develop?
Liberation	Does the goal weaken or strengthen attachment?

This framework moves beyond technical goal setting. A goal may be specific and achievable while remaining ethically corrupt.

Failure, Guilt, and Self-Compassion

The emphasis on responsibility can become psychologically harmful if failure is interpreted as proof of moral worthlessness. Buddhist teaching distinguishes an unwholesome action from an unchangeable evil self.

Constructive acknowledgment recognizes harm, feels appropriate moral concern, repairs what can be repaired, and develops conditions preventing repetition. Destructive shame fixes identity around failure and may lead to concealment or despair.

Non-self supports a developmental response. Because personality and behavior are conditioned, failure can become a source of learning rather than a permanent essence.

Compassion does not erase responsibility. It creates the emotional conditions in which responsibility can be faced without denial or self-destruction.

Social Conditions and Unequal Starting Points

The Four Wheels prevent self-development from becoming isolated self-help. Right direction depends partly upon access to a suitable environment and good persons. Previous merit may appear as inherited opportunity, but social inequality also results from institutions and the actions of others.

Two individuals may exercise equal effort under very different conditions. One may possess health, safety, education, and supportive mentors, while another faces poverty, discrimination, violence, or disability.

A just society should not praise the first as inherently superior or blame the second for obstacles beyond their control. It should create the first two wheels—suitable environments and good support—more equitably.

Responsibility is proportional to capacity, knowledge, power, and opportunity. Those with greater resources have greater ability to create beneficial conditions for others.

Self-Development as Generativity

Right self-development does not end with personal success. The developed person contributes to environments and relationships supporting others.

Previous merit often originates in socially beneficial conduct. A teacher's earlier service becomes a student's present opportunity. A community's investment in education becomes a future generation's knowledge. Environmental protection becomes inherited health and security.

Generativity converts personal achievement into collective capital. It includes: Mentoring; Teaching; Ethical leadership; Generosity; Institution-building; Knowledge preservation; Environmental care; and Protection of vulnerable persons.

In this way, the fourth wheel is continually recreated. Present good action becomes the previous merit upon which future development depends.

A Model of Ethically Directed Self-Development

The relationship among past conditions, present agency, and future consequences may be represented as follows: The model is cyclical rather than linear. Earlier action influences the present; present direction transforms available conditions; and current conduct creates future foundations.

No stage operates alone. Merit without present effort may remain unused, while effort without support may be severely constrained. Right self-direction coordinates the system ethically.

Practical Framework for Life Goals

A Buddhist-informed process for establishing life goals may include seven steps.

Step 1: Examine Present Conditions

Identify strengths, limitations, obligations, resources, relationships, and structural barriers without either pride or self-condemnation.

Step 2: Clarify Values

Determine which qualities and forms of contribution matter. Distinguish intrinsic moral purpose from desire for praise, status, or comparison.

Step 3: Test the Goal Ethically

Evaluate motivation, means, consequences, and the potential for harm.

Step 4: Establish Realistic Action

Translate broad aspirations into practices appropriate to present capacity.

Step 5: Cultivate Right Effort

Prevent harmful patterns, abandon those already present, develop wholesome qualities, and sustain progress.

Step 6: Review without Reification

Assess evidence and revise strategies. Do not attach identity completely to success or failure.

Step 7: Convert Achievement into Service

Use developed capacities to improve the conditions available to others.

This process retains practical clarity while integrating Buddhist ethical and spiritual criteria.

Applications

Education

Students should be encouraged to define learning goals connected with wisdom, integrity, and contribution rather than grades alone. Educational institutions must also recognize unequal prior preparation and provide appropriate support.

Professional Life

Career goals should be evaluated through Right Livelihood. Income and advancement are legitimate concerns, but professions and methods causing serious harm require reconsideration.

Health

Health goals should combine discipline with compassion and realistic understanding. Illness should not automatically be interpreted as personal failure or karmic punishment.

Leadership

Leaders inherit institutional capital such as trust, knowledge, and reputation. Their responsibility is not merely to consume these resources but to strengthen them for successors.

Spiritual Practice

Meditation goals require guidance and flexibility. Attachment to extraordinary experience or spiritual status may transform practice into another form of craving.

Limitations and Critical Considerations

First, the concept of merit is interpreted differently across Buddhist traditions. This article emphasizes ethical and developmental functions without denying traditional karmic meanings.

Second, the metaphor of capital may unintentionally commercialize merit. It should be understood as accumulated capacity and beneficial conditionality, not as quantifiable spiritual property.

Third, contemporary motivational theories arise from different cultural and philosophical assumptions. Their comparison with Buddhism identifies functional parallels rather than equivalence.

Fourth, right self-direction may be defined paternalistically if institutions impose goals without respecting individual context and freedom. Ethical guidance should cultivate discernment, not blind obedience.

Finally, the outcomes of action remain uncertain. Wise effort improves conditions but cannot guarantee success. Buddhist responsibility concerns intention and appropriate action, not complete control over results.

Discussion

Attasammāpaṇidhi and pubbe ca katapuññatā form a complementary pair. The first prevents past conditions from becoming destiny; the second prevents agency from becoming ahistorical individualism.

Previous merit explains why present development has foundations. Right self-direction explains how these foundations are interpreted and used. A person with strong prior advantages can direct them harmfully, while a person with limited conditions may create new possibilities through effort and support.

The pair also integrates moral responsibility with compassion. Individuals are responsible for intentional action, but their choices occur within unequal conditions. Communities must therefore create suitable environments and good companionship alongside encouraging personal effort.

The deepest Buddhist criterion is not achievement alone but reduction of suffering. A goal that produces wealth while strengthening greed is incomplete. Perseverance that causes harm is not Right Effort. Self-development that benefits only oneself fails to create the future conditions implied by merit.

Conclusion

The Buddhist principles of right self-direction and previously accumulated merit provide an integrated account of life goals, perseverance, and responsibility.

Attasammāpaṇidhi means more than setting clear goals. It requires orienting life through Right View, wholesome intention, ethical means, awareness of consequences, and concern for liberation. Efficiency and determination become virtues only when directed toward worthy purposes.

Pubbe ca katapuññatā recognizes that present development depends upon previous action. Earlier generosity, discipline, learning, service, and cultivation create habits, knowledge, trust, relationships, and opportunities that function as a capital of goodness.

This capital should not be understood as a fixed spiritual currency or as proof that privileged persons possess greater virtue. Nor should disadvantage be explained simplistically through past kamma. Human life arises from multiple personal, social, biological, and environmental conditions.

The past conditions but does not absolutely determine the present. Present intention and effort can redirect inherited tendencies, especially when supported by suitable environments and wise companions. Current action then becomes a condition inherited by the future.

Perseverance within this framework is neither passive acceptance nor rigid striving. It is sustained, ethically discerning, and flexible effort. It maintains wholesome purpose while revising methods in response to evidence and changing conditions.

Responsibility is likewise both personal and collective. Individuals must direct themselves according to their capacities, while communities and institutions must create conditions in which right direction becomes possible. Those who inherit greater resources bear greater responsibility to use them for the welfare of others.

The ultimate sign of successful self-development is therefore not private achievement. It is the transformation of personal capacity into ethical conduct, wisdom, service, and beneficial conditions for future persons. Right self-direction activates the goodness inherited from the past and turns present life into a foundation upon which others may grow.

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From Paratoghosa to Yoniso Manasikāra: Spiritual Friendship, Systematic Reflection, and the Formation of Right View in Buddhist Education

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Abstract

Early Buddhist education is not limited to the transmission of doctrines or the memorization of sacred texts. It is a transformative process through which learners develop ethical conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom leading ultimately to liberation from suffering. The Pāli discourses identify two conditions for the arising of right view (*sammādiṭṭhi*): the “voice of another” (*paratoghosa*) and appropriate or wise attention (*yoniso manasikāra*). These conditions represent the external and internal dimensions of Buddhist learning. *Paratoghosa* includes instruction, testimony, dialogue, and other forms of communication, but it does not guarantee truth; external speech may produce either right or wrong view. Its educational value therefore depends on reliable sources, especially spiritual friends (*kalyāṇamitta*) who embody ethical integrity and communicate the Dhamma responsibly. *Yoniso manasikāra* is the learner’s disciplined attention to causes, conditions, consequences, and the Four Noble Truths. Although it overlaps with critical and systematic thinking, it also possesses a distinct ethical and soteriological orientation. This article argues that right view arises through a reciprocal relationship among trustworthy guidance, reflective examination, contemplative verification, and ethical transformation. Buddhist education consequently avoids both passive reliance on authority and unrestricted individualism. It offers a relational model of education in which teachers provide direction, learners examine experience wisely, and knowledge is evaluated by its capacity to reduce greed, hatred, delusion, and suffering.

Keywords: *yoniso manasikāra*, Buddhist education, wise attention, right view

Introduction

Modern education is frequently evaluated through the acquisition of information, professional competence, measurable skills, and economic productivity. Buddhist education includes these possibilities but adopts a broader understanding of human development. Its central concern is not merely what learners know but how knowledge changes their conduct, attention, motivation, and relationship to suffering.

In early Buddhism, ignorance (*avijjā*) is not simply a lack of information. It is a distorted way of understanding experience, especially a failure to recognize suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path leading to cessation. A highly educated person may therefore remain ignorant in the Buddhist sense if knowledge reinforces greed, hostility, conceit, or attachment.

Education must address the conditions through which views arise. The *Mahāvedalla Sutta* identifies two conditions for the arising of right view: *paratoghosa*, the voice or utterance of another, and *yoniso manasikāra*, appropriate or wise attention (Thanissaro

Bhikkhu, 2013a). The first represents an external source of instruction; the second represents the learner's internal way of attending, questioning, and understanding.

Neither condition is sufficient in isolation. External instruction without wise attention may produce dogmatism, misunderstanding, or dependence. Reflection without reliable guidance may reproduce personal prejudice or become directionless speculation. Buddhist education emerges from their interaction.

The concept of *kalyāṇamitta*, or spiritual friendship, helps connect these two dimensions. A good spiritual friend does not demand passive obedience but communicates teachings, demonstrates their application, asks productive questions, and encourages the learner to develop independent wisdom. The learner, in turn, does not accept or reject instruction mechanically but examines it through wise attention.

This article analyzes the movement from *paratoghosa* through spiritual friendship and *yoniso manasikāra* to *sammādiṭṭhi*. It argues that this movement constitutes a coherent Buddhist educational process in which knowledge progresses from hearing and learning to reflection, practice, and liberating realization.

Education as Training and Transformation

The meaning of *sikkhā*

The Pāli word most closely associated with Buddhist education is *sikkhā*, meaning training, learning, or discipline. Its corresponding verb, *sikkhati*, means to train or learn. Buddhist education is therefore fundamentally developmental. It involves repeated practice rather than the passive accumulation of information.

The threefold training consists of: Higher ethical discipline (*adhisīla-sikkhā*), Higher mental training (*adhicitta-sikkhā*), Higher wisdom (*adhipaññā-sikkhā*)

These dimensions form an integrated educational system. Ethical discipline regulates bodily and verbal conduct. Mental cultivation develops attention, stability, mindfulness, and emotional balance. Wisdom enables learners to understand phenomena according to causes and conditions and to recognize impermanence, suffering, and non-self (Gethin, 1998).

Education is incomplete when knowledge is separated from character and mental cultivation. Conversely, moral conformity without understanding can become mechanical. Buddhist education seeks the integration of knowledge and conduct—*vijjā* and *carana*—so that understanding guides action and disciplined action supports deeper understanding.

From information to liberation

The traditional distinction among *pariyatti*, *paṭipatti*, and *paṭivedha* clarifies the transformative structure of Buddhist learning: *Pariyatti* refers to learning the teachings. *Paṭipatti* refers to practicing them. *Paṭivedha* refers to penetrating or realizing their truth.

Textual and oral study provide the conceptual framework necessary for practice. Practice tests and embodies the teaching. Realization transforms knowledge from something learned through another person into wisdom directly understood by the practitioner.

The three dimensions should not be treated as mutually exclusive. Practice without adequate understanding can be misdirected, while textual learning without practice remains external. Realization does not render all earlier learning worthless; it fulfils its educational purpose.

Paratoghosa: The External Condition of Learning

The meaning of the “voice of another”

Paratoghosa combines *parato*, “from another,” with *ghosa*, “voice,” “sound,” or “utterance.” It refers broadly to knowledge communicated from an external source. In an early Buddhist context, this may include: Hearing the Buddha or a disciple teach. Receiving instruction from a teacher. Participating in Dhamma discussion. Listening to advice from

parents or community members. Learning through remembered or written teachings. Encountering ideas that challenge existing assumptions.

The concept recognizes that learning is socially mediated. Individuals do not begin with a complete understanding of suffering, causality, ethical action, or liberation. They require language, examples, practices, and interpretive frameworks transmitted by others.

The Mahāvedalla Sutta states that right view arises through the voice of another and appropriate attention. It further explains that right view develops toward liberation when supported by ethical conduct, learning, discussion, tranquillity, and insight (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2013a). Education is therefore dialogical and cumulative rather than an isolated act of private discovery.

External speech is not automatically authoritative

Paratoghosa should not be translated as “the teaching of a reliable person” without qualification. The expression means communication from another, and such communication can be wholesome or unwholesome, accurate or inaccurate.

The Aṅguttara Nikāya states that the voice of another combined with inappropriate attention can condition wrong view, while the voice of another combined with appropriate attention can condition right view (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2013b). External influence is epistemically ambiguous.

This is especially important in contemporary education. Learners encounter teachers, families, institutions, social media, algorithms, advertisements, religious authorities, and political messaging. All function as forms of paratoghosa. The mere existence of an external source does not establish its reliability.

Buddhist education must therefore address at least three questions: 1. Who is speaking? 2. What motivations shape the communication? 3. What consequences follow when the message is accepted and acted upon?

The need for source evaluation leads directly to the principle of spiritual friendship.

Kalyāṇamitta: Spiritual Friendship as Educational Mediation

The whole of the spiritual life

Kalyāṇamitta is commonly translated as good friend, admirable friend, or spiritual friend. The term does not refer merely to an agreeable companion. A spiritual friend supports ethical development, mental cultivation, wisdom, and progress toward liberation.

In the Upaḍḍha Sutta, Ānanda suggests that good friendship constitutes half of the spiritual life. The Buddha responds that it constitutes the whole of the spiritual life. A practitioner with good friends can be expected to cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path (Sujato, 2018a).

The statement does not mean that another person can practice or attain liberation on the learner’s behalf. It means that the entire path develops within relational conditions. The Buddha himself is presented as the supreme spiritual friend because, through his teaching, beings subject to birth, aging, and death can follow a path beyond them.

Functions of the spiritual friend

A kalyāṇamitta may perform several educational functions.

First, the spiritual friend communicates teachings that the learner does not yet know. This includes doctrines, ethical principles, contemplative methods, and interpretive distinctions.

Second, the friend embodies the teaching. Conduct provides evidence concerning whether the instruction produces non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion. The credibility of a teacher is partly practical and ethical rather than purely rhetorical.

Third, the friend corrects misunderstanding. Learners interpret teachings through prior assumptions, emotional needs, and cultural expectations. Guidance can reveal distortions that remain invisible to the learner.

Fourth, the friend provides encouragement. Buddhist practice requires sustained effort and often involves confrontation with painful habits, uncertainty, and discouragement.

Fifth, the friend gradually returns responsibility to the learner. The goal is not permanent dependence upon authority but the development of wisdom through which the learner can understand and act appropriately.

Spiritual friendship and educational authority

Spiritual friendship offers a middle position between authoritarian teaching and educational individualism. The teacher possesses experience and responsibility but should not demand unquestioning submission. The learner exercises critical reflection but does not assume that every personal preference is equally wise.

The Buddhist teacher's authority is functional. It rests upon knowledge, ethical conduct, compassion, pedagogical skill, and the capacity to guide others toward reduced suffering. When authority is used for wealth, status, manipulation, or exploitation, it contradicts the meaning of *kalyāṇamitta*.

The *Āṅguttara Nikāya* states that Dhamma should be taught sequentially, with causal explanation, compassion, freedom from material motivation, and without harming oneself or others (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2014). These criteria make teaching an ethical practice.

Yoniso Manasikāra: Wise and Systematic Attention

Etymology and meaning

Manasikāra means attention, directing the mind, or bringing something to mind. *Yoniso* is connected with *yonī*, meaning origin, source, matrix, or causal basis. *Yoniso manasikāra* can therefore be translated as wise attention, appropriate attention, thorough attention, or attention directed to origins and causal structure.

The concept is broader than logical reasoning. It concerns how experience is framed before and during thinking. Two persons may encounter the same event but attend to it differently. One may focus on blame, identity, and retaliation. Another may examine causes, emotional reactions, consequences, and possibilities for reducing harm.

Wise attention asks questions that contribute to the understanding and cessation of suffering. It directs the mind toward: Causes and conditions, Arising and cessation, Wholesome and unwholesome qualities, Short- and long-term consequences, The presence of attachment, The Four Noble Truths, Appropriate responses rather than fixed identities.

Appropriate and inappropriate attention

The *Sabbāsava Sutta* contrasts wise attention with unwise attention. Unwise attention focuses on speculative identity questions that reinforce views about self: whether one existed in the past, what one was, whether one will exist in the future, or what the self essentially is. Such attention can generate a “thicket of views.”

Wise attention instead attends to the Four Noble Truths: suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path. Through this orientation, fetters such as identity view, doubt, and attachment to rules and observances are abandoned (Sujato, 2018b).

The distinction is not between thinking and not thinking. It is between forms of attention that sustain suffering and those that lead toward its cessation. A question may be intellectually sophisticated yet unwise if it reinforces conceit or has no transformative relevance. A simple question may be wise if it reveals craving and enables an appropriate response.

Wise attention and causal analysis

Yoniso manasikāra is systematic because it examines relationships rather than isolated events. For example, when anger arises, wise attention does not merely label oneself an angry person. It examines contact, perception, memory, expectation, feeling, attachment, and the consequences of possible actions.

This approach resembles dependent origination. Mental and social phenomena are understood as conditioned rather than as expressions of permanent essence. Because they are conditioned, they can be transformed by changing their supporting conditions.

Wise attention also connects cognition with ethics. The goal is not only to explain why something occurs but to determine which response reduces harm and contributes to liberation. It therefore combines causal understanding, moral evaluation, and practical transformation.

Is Yoniso Manasikāra the Same as Critical Thinking?

There are important similarities between wise attention and modern critical thinking. Both discourage passive acceptance, investigate assumptions, distinguish evidence from assertion, and examine the consequences of conclusions. Both require learners to evaluate external information rather than simply reproduce it. Nevertheless, they are not exact equivalents.

Modern critical thinking usually emphasizes logical validity, evidential justification, conceptual clarity, and independence of judgment. Yoniso manasikāra includes these qualities but locates them within a moral and soteriological framework. A line of reasoning may be logically valid yet arise from greed or serve harmful ends. Buddhist wise attention asks not only whether a belief is supported but also what mental qualities produce it and what consequences follow from acting upon it.

A useful comparison is presented below:

Dimension	Critical thinking	Yoniso manasikāra
Primary concern	Valid judgment and evaluation of claims	Attention leading to understanding and cessation of suffering
Object of analysis	Arguments, evidence, assumptions, and conclusions	Experience, mental states, actions, causes, and consequences
Ethical orientation	May be included but is not always necessary	Inherent and indispensable
Role of emotion	Often treated as a possible source of bias	Examined as a conditioned component of experience
Principal criterion	Rational and evidential justification	Wisdom, wholesomeness, causal understanding, and liberation
Ultimate goal	Sound judgment or problem-solving	Abandonment of ignorance, craving, and suffering

Calling yoniso manasikāra “critical thinking” can make it accessible, but the translation becomes reductive if its contemplative and liberating dimensions are omitted.

The Formation of Sammādiṭṭhi

Right view as the educational centre

Sammādiṭṭhi, or right view, is the first factor of the Noble Eightfold Path. Its position does not imply a rigid linear sequence, but it indicates that understanding gives direction to the remaining factors.

Right view shapes intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. If learners misunderstand happiness as unrestricted consumption, education

may strengthen greed. If they understand well-being through non-harming, contentment, wisdom, and responsibility, the rest of their development follows a different direction.

The Mahācattārīsaka Sutta distinguishes forms of right view. Mundane right view includes confidence in the moral efficacy of action, recognition that wholesome and unwholesome conduct have consequences, and acknowledgment of persons who have realized deeper truths. Supramundane right view is the wisdom associated with the noble path (Sujato, 2018c).

Right view is therefore both a starting condition and a developing realization. Initial right view motivates practice; practice purifies and deepens right view until it directly understands the Four Noble Truths.

From received view to realized view

The educational development of right view can be represented through four phases.

1. Encountering a teaching

Through paratoghosa, the learner encounters an interpretation of life that differs from habitual assumptions. The teacher may explain kamma, impermanence, non-self, or the origin of suffering.

2. Evaluating the source

Through the guidance and example of a kalyāṇamitta, the learner considers whether the teaching is ethically responsible, coherent, and conducive to welfare.

3. Applying wise attention

The learner examines experience through causality, ethical consequences, and the Four Noble Truths. The teaching is no longer merely repeated but used as an investigative framework.

4. Verifying through practice

Ethical discipline, mindfulness, concentration, and insight provide experiential verification. Right view becomes progressively less dependent on external authority.

This movement does not imply that social learning becomes unnecessary. Even advanced practitioners may benefit from discussion and correction. It means that authority is increasingly internalized as wisdom rather than maintained as dependence.

A Relational Model of Buddhist Education

The relationship among the principal concepts can be represented as follows:

Educational component	Pāli concept	Function	Possible failure
External communication	Paratoghosa	Introduces knowledge and alternative perspectives	Misinformation, propaganda, or passive acceptance
Trustworthy guidance	Kalyāṇamitta	Models, explains, corrects, and encourages	Abuse of authority or personality dependence
Internal examination	Yoniso manasikāra	Investigates causes, consequences, and suffering	Rationalization or speculative distraction
Orienting understanding	Sammādiṭṭhi	Directs conduct, meditation, and wisdom	Dogmatic identification with views
Integrated cultivation	Sīla–samādhi–pañña	Transforms conduct, mind, and understanding	Fragmentation of knowledge and practice
Experiential fulfilment	Paṭivedha/vimutti	Realizes truth and liberation	Mistaking temporary experiences for awakening

This model is relational because neither teacher nor learner is sufficient alone. It is developmental because right view progresses from provisional understanding toward direct realization. It is ethical because knowledge is evaluated through its relationship to wholesome and unwholesome qualities. It is emancipatory because its final purpose is freedom from ignorance and suffering.

Applications to Contemporary Education

The teacher as spiritual and intellectual friend

The concept of kalyāṇamitta can enrich contemporary educational ethics. Teachers should possess knowledge but also demonstrate responsibility, fairness, patience, and concern for learners. Their task is not merely to deliver content but to create conditions in which students can develop sound judgment.

This does not require turning secular teachers into religious authorities. The relevant principles include ethical example, intellectual honesty, compassionate correction, and respect for the learner's growing autonomy.

Systematic reflection in the classroom

Yoniso manasikāra may inform classroom practices that encourage students to ask: What conditions produced this problem? What assumptions shape my interpretation? Which short- and long-term consequences may follow? Does this response increase or reduce harm? What role do desire, fear, prejudice, or identity play? What evidence would lead me to revise my view?

These questions can be applied to social conflict, environmental problems, digital communication, consumption, and personal decision-making.

Contemplative pauses may also help learners notice emotional and cognitive conditions before responding. Such practices should be implemented carefully and inclusively, without imposing religious commitment.

Digital paratoghosa

Digital media have radically expanded the “voice of another.” Learners receive information from influencers, anonymous accounts, commercial platforms, and algorithmic recommendation systems. Repetition and popularity can make claims appear credible even when they are false.

Buddhist educational principles suggest that digital literacy requires more than technical skill. Learners must examine the motivation, reliability, emotional effect, and social consequences of the information they consume and share.

The digital environment also demonstrates why external and internal conditions must operate together. Reliable information may be distorted by unwise attention, while a thoughtful learner may still be misled when credible sources are unavailable. Education must cultivate both trustworthy information ecosystems and reflective users.

Knowledge and moral development

An education system can produce highly skilled individuals who use their knowledge for exploitation, deception, or violence. Buddhist education treats this possibility as evidence that knowledge has been separated from training.

The integration of vijjā and carāṇa suggests that education should evaluate how knowledge affects character and relationships. This does not require replacing academic standards with moral preaching. It requires acknowledging that education always shapes values, motivations, and patterns of attention, whether intentionally or not.

Limitations and Critical Considerations

Applying Buddhist educational concepts to contemporary settings requires caution.

First, sammādiṭṭhi is a doctrinal concept embedded in the Buddhist path. It cannot be reduced to general open-mindedness or academic competence. In its complete form, it includes insight into the Four Noble Truths and liberation.

Second, spiritual friendship can be romanticized. Religious institutions may contain unequal power relationships and opportunities for abuse. A genuine kalyāṇamitta should encourage ethical accountability and increasing wisdom rather than unquestioning personal loyalty.

Third, yoniso manasikāra should not be used to dismiss historical, scientific, or social knowledge in favour of private introspection. External evidence remains necessary. Wise attention examines both inner experience and publicly available conditions.

Fourth, not every educational problem can be solved through individual mental development. Poverty, discrimination, institutional violence, and unequal access to education require structural responses. Buddhist causal analysis should expand awareness of conditions rather than reduce social problems to personal attitudes.

Finally, claims about the universal applicability of Buddhist education should respect religious and cultural diversity. Its principles can enter comparative dialogue with other educational traditions without being presented as the only legitimate model.

Conclusion

Early Buddhist education emerges through the interaction of external guidance and internal cultivation. Paratoghosa provides access to teachings, interpretations, and alternative ways of understanding experience. Because the voice of another can produce either right or wrong view, learners require trustworthy spiritual friends who communicate responsibly, embody ethical qualities, and encourage examination rather than passive obedience.

Yoniso manasikāra transforms received information into an instrument of wisdom. It attends to origins, causes, consequences, and the Four Noble Truths. Although it overlaps with critical and systematic thinking, its purpose is explicitly ethical and liberating: to identify and remove the conditions of suffering.

Through the reciprocal operation of these conditions, sammādiṭṭhi arises and develops. Right view is not merely a correct opinion acquired from a teacher. It progresses from provisional understanding to contemplative verification and transformative wisdom. It then guides the remaining factors of the path.

The Buddhist educational model consequently avoids two extremes. It rejects authoritarianism because external speech must be examined. It also rejects isolated subjectivism because personal reflection needs reliable instruction, ethical criteria, and communal correction. Teachers and learners participate in a relational process directed toward greater responsibility and freedom.

In an age of information abundance, algorithmic influence, polarization, and rapid communication, this model retains considerable relevance. Education requires credible voices, ethical relationships, disciplined attention, and the ability to distinguish information that reinforces ignorance from knowledge that contributes to understanding and the reduction of suffering.

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From Right Effort to Right Concentration: The Structure of Mental Training for Self-Regulation and the Arising of Wisdom in the Noble Eightfold Path

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Abstract

This article examines right effort (*sammā-vāyāma*), right mindfulness (*sammā-sati*), and right concentration (*sammā-samādhi*) as an integrated structure of mental training within the Noble Eightfold Path. Rather than treating these three factors as independent meditation techniques, the article argues that they constitute a mutually supportive process: right effort regulates motivational energy and mental tendencies; right mindfulness sustains ethically informed awareness of present experience; and right concentration unifies the mind, making it sufficiently stable and lucid for insight. Together, they transform reactive patterns into disciplined responsiveness and prepare the mind for wisdom (*paññā*). Nevertheless, concentration does not automatically produce liberating knowledge. The arising of wisdom also requires right view, careful investigation, and insight into impermanence, suffering, and non-self. Although Buddhist mental training can be interpreted through contemporary concepts of self-regulation, such an interpretation must preserve its ethical and soteriological framework. Its final objective is not merely greater concentration or emotional efficiency, but freedom from ignorance, craving, and suffering.

Keywords: right effort, self-regulation, wisdom, Noble Eightfold Path, Theravāda Buddhism

Introduction

The Noble Eightfold Path represents the practical dimension of the fourth noble truth: the way leading to the cessation of suffering. Its eight factors are commonly classified under the threefold training: wisdom (*paññā*), ethical conduct (*sīla*), and concentration or mental cultivation (*samādhi*). Right view and right intention constitute the training in wisdom; right speech, right action, and right livelihood constitute ethical conduct; and right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration constitute mental training (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995).

This classification is analytically useful, but it should not suggest that the factors operate in isolation. The path functions as an interconnected system. Right view gives ethical and cognitive direction to effort, mindfulness, and concentration. Ethical discipline reduces remorse and interpersonal disturbance, thereby supporting mental stability. Mental cultivation, in turn, enables the practitioner to understand experience more clearly and deepen right view (Gethin, 1998; Harvey, 2013).

The final three factors are especially important for understanding Buddhist psychology. Right effort concerns the intentional regulation of mental states; right mindfulness concerns the sustained observation and appropriate recollection of experience; and right concentration concerns the unification and stabilization of the mind. In contemporary language, these practices may be interpreted as a sophisticated system of self-regulation. Yet their Buddhist purpose extends beyond behavioral control, stress

management, or improved productivity. They are cultivated to weaken greed, hatred, and delusion and ultimately to generate liberating wisdom.

This article argues that the movement from right effort through right mindfulness to right concentration is neither a rigidly linear progression nor a collection of unrelated exercises. It is a dynamic structure in which effort directs mental energy, mindfulness monitors and guides experience, and concentration stabilizes attention. Their integration establishes the conditions in which insight can arise.

Mental Training within the Noble Eightfold Path

The Mahācattārīsaka Sutta explains that right view plays a leading role in recognizing both wrong and right forms of the other path factors. It also presents right effort and right mindfulness as accompanying the cultivation of each factor: effort works to abandon what is wrong and develop what is right, while mindfulness maintains awareness of this process (Sujato, 2018a). Mental training is therefore never ethically neutral. It is “right” because it is oriented by right view and directed toward liberation.

This point distinguishes Buddhist mental training from concentration employed for morally harmful purposes. A person may concentrate intensely while planning deception, exploitation, or violence. Such concentration is psychologically focused but cannot qualify as right concentration because its motivation, object, and ethical context are unwholesome. Similarly, effort motivated by craving and mindfulness directed solely toward achieving selfish objectives do not constitute factors of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration should consequently be understood through at least three dimensions: 1. **Ethical direction:** They are grounded in non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion. 2. **Psychological function:** They regulate, observe, and stabilize mental activity. 3. **Soteriological purpose:** They contribute to the cessation of craving, ignorance, and suffering.

The relationship between these dimensions prevents Buddhist meditation from being reduced to attention training alone.

Right Effort: Directing and Balancing Mental Energy

Right effort is traditionally described through four tasks: preventing unarisen unwholesome states, abandoning arisen unwholesome states, developing unarisen wholesome states, and maintaining or perfecting wholesome states that have already arisen (Bodhi, 2000; Sujato, 2018b). These four efforts reveal that Buddhist training includes both restraint and cultivation.

The first effort is preventive. Practitioners learn to recognize situations, objects, memories, and habitual reactions that are likely to provoke greed, hostility, or confusion. Prevention does not necessarily mean avoiding every difficult experience. Rather, it involves wise management of attention and the sense faculties so that harmful tendencies are not needlessly stimulated.

The second effort concerns the abandonment of unwholesome states already present. Early Buddhist texts describe several possible methods, including replacing an unwholesome thought with a wholesome one, recognizing its harmful consequences, withdrawing attention from it, relaxing its mental formation, and, when necessary, applying firm restraint (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995). This plurality of methods indicates that Buddhist mental discipline is context-sensitive. A single technique is not assumed to work for every state or every person.

The third effort cultivates wholesome qualities that have not yet become established. These include mindfulness, compassion, loving-kindness, investigation, energy, tranquillity, concentration, and equanimity. The fourth protects and strengthens wholesome qualities after

they arise. This dimension is crucial because a temporary experience of calm or generosity does not by itself constitute stable transformation. Wholesome states must be repeated until they become increasingly reliable dispositions.

Right effort can thus be interpreted as the regulation of attention, motivation, and habit. It does not merely suppress unwanted thoughts; it changes the conditions that produce them. Repeated intentions become habits, habits shape character, and character influences future perception and action. Right effort intervenes in this cycle by weakening unwholesome patterns and reinforcing wholesome alternatives.

Nevertheless, effort must be balanced. The *Soṇa Sutta* compares mental cultivation to tuning the strings of a lute: strings that are too tight cannot produce the proper sound, but neither can strings that are too loose. In the same way, excessive exertion produces agitation, while deficient effort leads to laziness and dullness (Bodhi, 2012; Sujato, 2018c). Right effort is therefore not maximum force. It is energy adjusted with intelligence, sensitivity, and awareness of present conditions.

Right Mindfulness: Remembering the Framework of Practice

Right mindfulness is frequently translated into modern psychological language as nonjudgmental awareness of present experience. Although this formulation captures an important aspect of mindfulness, it does not exhaust the meaning of *sammā-sati*. The Pāli term *sati* is related to remembering or keeping something in mind. In the Buddhist path, mindfulness involves maintaining the appropriate object, purpose, and ethical framework of practice rather than merely noticing whatever happens (Anālayo, 2003; Sharf, 2015).

The standard canonical account of right mindfulness is the contemplation of four domains: body, feelings, mind, and phenomena or categories of teaching (*dhammā*). In each domain, the practitioner observes experience diligently, with clear comprehension and mindfulness, while setting aside covetousness and distress concerning the world (Sujato, 2018d).

Mindfulness of the Body

Contemplation of the body includes awareness of breathing, posture, ordinary activities, anatomical constitution, material elements, and bodily decay. These practices reduce automatic identification with the body and reveal it as a changing physical process rather than a permanent possession or self.

Mindfulness of Feelings

Feelings are observed as pleasant, painful, or neither painful nor pleasant. This practice is particularly important for self-regulation because craving and aversion commonly arise as immediate reactions to feeling. By recognizing feeling before it becomes compulsive desire or resistance, mindfulness creates a space in which a wiser response becomes possible.

Mindfulness of Mind

The practitioner recognizes whether the mind is affected by greed, hatred, delusion, distraction, contraction, concentration, or liberation. Such awareness involves more than introspective description. It enables ethical discrimination: one knows which states should be abandoned, which should be cultivated, and what conditions sustain them.

Mindfulness of Phenomena

Contemplation of *dhammā* organizes experience through Buddhist analytical categories such as the five hindrances, the five aggregates, the six sense domains, the seven awakening factors, and the four noble truths. This demonstrates that right mindfulness is not conceptually empty awareness. It observes experience within a framework designed to disclose causation, impermanence, attachment, and the possibility of cessation (Anālayo, 2003).

Mindfulness performs a monitoring function between effort and concentration. Without mindfulness, effort may become forceful suppression, and concentration may become mechanical absorption. Mindfulness recognizes the current condition of the mind, remembers the purpose of practice, detects imbalance, and determines whether energy should be increased, relaxed, or redirected.

Right Concentration: Unifying and Stabilizing the Mind

Right concentration is the collectedness or unification of mind directed by the other factors of the path. The standard definition associates it with the four absorptions (jhānas). In the first jhāna, the practitioner is secluded from sensuality and unwholesome qualities and experiences rapture and pleasure accompanied by directed thought and evaluation. In the second, discursive mental activity subsides and internal unification becomes stronger. In the third, rapture fades while equanimity, mindfulness, and bodily pleasure remain. In the fourth, pleasure and pain are abandoned, leaving purified mindfulness and equanimity (Bodhi, 2000; Sujato, 2018b).

These descriptions portray concentration not simply as narrow fixation but as a progressive transformation of mental organization. The mind becomes less dependent on sensory stimulation, less fragmented by conflicting desires, and less vulnerable to distraction. Its stability produces calm, clarity, and emotional balance.

The Mahācattārisaka Sutta further defines noble right concentration as mental unification supported by the other seven path factors. This formulation is philosophically significant because it prevents concentration from being separated from morality and wisdom (Sujato, 2018a). Right concentration is not right merely because it is intense. It becomes a liberating path factor when supported by right view, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, and mindfulness.

Concentration also depends upon the preceding factors. Right effort repeatedly abandons the hindrances and develops wholesome qualities. Right mindfulness prevents the meditation object and purpose from being forgotten. When these functions operate consistently, attention becomes continuous and the mind settles naturally. Concentration is thus less a product of coercion than a result of properly arranged conditions.

An Integrated Structure of Self-Regulation

The relationship among the three factors may be summarized as follows:

Path factor	Principal function	Regulatory role	Major danger when isolated
Right effort	Directing energy	Prevents and abandons unwholesome states; develops and maintains wholesome states	Strain, suppression, or perfectionism
Right mindfulness	Monitoring experience	Recognizes mental states and remembers the ethical purpose of practice	Passive observation or ethically neutral attention
Right concentration	Stabilizing the mind	Reduces fragmentation and establishes sustained unification	Attachment to tranquillity or morally misdirected focus

This table presents a functional sequence, but actual practice is recursive. Effort establishes mindfulness, mindfulness regulates effort, and both support concentration. Concentration then strengthens mindfulness by reducing distraction and makes effort more precise. Improved mindfulness detects increasingly subtle hindrances, while a concentrated mind can abandon them without excessive force.

The process may be described as a feedback system. When anger arises, for example, mindfulness recognizes its presence and associated bodily and emotional conditions. Right view understands anger as conditioned, impermanent, and potentially harmful. Right effort prevents its escalation or cultivates an alternative such as patience or loving-kindness. When attention remains stable, concentration prevents the mind from repeatedly returning to the hostile narrative. The practitioner can then observe the anger as a process rather than identify with it as “my permanent anger” or “my true self.”

This structure differs from control based on repression. Buddhist regulation does not require denying that an emotion exists. It requires knowing the emotion, understanding its conditions, refraining from feeding it, and cultivating conditions for its cessation. Regulation gradually becomes less dependent on force because wisdom changes how the experience is understood.

From Mental Stability to the Arising of Wisdom

A collected mind is an important condition for wisdom, but concentration does not automatically produce liberating insight. A practitioner may attain profound calm yet retain attachment to refined experience or interpret it as evidence of a permanent self. The arising of wisdom requires the investigation of experience in accordance with right view.

Wisdom in Theravāda Buddhism principally involves understanding the four noble truths and directly seeing conditioned phenomena as impermanent (*anicca*), unsatisfactory when appropriated (*dukkha*), and without an independent self (*anattā*). Concentration makes such investigation possible by reducing distraction and emotional turbulence. Mindfulness keeps the relevant phenomena present for observation, while effort maintains the investigation and abandons distorted reactions.

The relationship may therefore be expressed in conditional rather than mechanical terms. Concentration makes the mind capable of sustained and penetrating observation; mindfulness supplies continuity and clarity; right effort protects the process; and right view directs observation toward liberating understanding. Wisdom emerges when this cultivated mind sees the arising and passing of phenomena without constructing them as permanent, satisfying, or self-owned.

Early Buddhist teachings recognize both tranquillity (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*) as necessary dimensions of cultivation. Tranquillity calms and unifies the mind, whereas insight understands the nature of conditioned experience. They may develop in different sequences, but their mature integration weakens both emotional defilements and cognitive ignorance (Bodhi, 2012). Concentration without insight risks attachment to peaceful states; insight attempted without sufficient stability may remain conceptual, fragmented, or overwhelmed by reactivity.

Wisdom also transforms the meaning of self-regulation. Initially, practitioners may restrain harmful behavior because they remember rules or fear consequences. At a more developed stage, mindfulness detects craving and aversion before they determine action. Ultimately, wisdom sees that the mental events conventionally called “self” are conditioned processes. Ethical restraint then arises not only from external control but from diminishing identification, attachment, and hostility.

Contemporary Relevance and Necessary Cautions

The threefold structure has clear relevance to contemporary discussions of self-regulation. Right effort resembles the intentional modification of habits and motivational patterns; right mindfulness contributes metacognitive awareness; and right concentration develops attentional stability. These capacities may assist in managing digital distraction, impulsive communication, emotional reactivity, and compulsive consumption.

For example, responsible engagement with social media requires more than concentrated attention. A user must prevent harmful impulses, recognize emotional reactions, assess information carefully, and sustain an ethically appropriate response. Right effort restrains the impulse to publish hostile content; mindfulness recognizes anger and remembers communicative responsibility; concentration allows careful consideration rather than fragmented reaction; and wisdom examines both motivation and probable consequences.

Nevertheless, translating Buddhist practices into modern psychological concepts creates several risks. First, mindfulness can be separated from right view and ethics and presented as bare attention. Sharf (2015) argues that modern presentations sometimes obscure the doctrinal, ethical, and communal contexts in which Buddhist mindfulness historically functions. In the Noble Eightfold Path, awareness cannot be considered right mindfulness when it serves greed, hostility, deception, or exploitation.

Second, concentration may be interpreted primarily as a tool for productivity. This reduces mental training to the ability to work longer or compete more effectively. From a Buddhist perspective, greater efficiency is not necessarily moral improvement. A concentrated mind guided by craving may simply pursue harmful goals more successfully.

Third, right effort may be misunderstood as aggressive self-control. Practitioners might treat unwanted thoughts and emotions as enemies, producing guilt, anxiety, or psychological rigidity. The canonical principle of balanced energy suggests a more responsive approach: firmness when needed, relaxation when appropriate, and continuous adjustment through mindfulness.

Finally, meditation should not become an escape from ethical and social responsibility. The Noble Eightfold Path joins mental cultivation to right speech, right action, and right livelihood. Genuine calm should therefore become visible in reduced harm, greater compassion, more responsible communication, and clearer moral judgment.

Conclusion

Right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration form an integrated structure of Buddhist mental training. Right effort supplies and regulates the energy needed to prevent and abandon unwholesome states and to develop and maintain wholesome ones. Right mindfulness monitors body, feelings, mind, and phenomena while preserving the ethical and cognitive framework of practice. Right concentration gathers the mind into stability, clarity, and unification.

Their relationship is functional but not rigidly sequential. Effort supports mindfulness; mindfulness balances effort; both establish concentration; and concentration strengthens their continued operation. Together they enable a movement from reactive behavior toward conscious and ethically informed responsiveness.

Yet mental regulation is not the final aim. A calm and controlled mind remains within suffering if it continues to grasp experience as permanent, satisfying, or self. Liberating wisdom arises when mental stability is joined with right view and penetrative investigation. The practitioner then understands the conditioned, impermanent, and selfless character of experience.

The movement from *sammā-vāyāma* to *sammā-samādhi* is therefore a movement from the responsible direction of mental energy to the unification of consciousness and, ultimately, to the conditions for seeing reality as it is. In its complete Buddhist context, self-regulation is not the construction of an invulnerable self but part of the gradual relinquishment of ignorance, craving, and attachment.

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Journal of Religions and Various Sciences (JRS)

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Journal of Religions and Various Sciences (JRS) is a trilingual (English) and an interdisciplinary journal seeking an engagement between scholars working across a range of disciplinary fields, including world philosophical studies, religious studies, cultural studies, critical theory, and interdisciplinary humanities and social sciences. Lying at the interface between the study of philosophy, religion and other academic studies of culture. In particular, the journal will consider why philosophical, religious and cultural studies have hitherto neglected the significance of religious manifestations in cross-cultural perspectives, and define ways in which religious studies needs to engage with contemporary areas of cultural critique.

The principal aim of the Journal of Religions and Various Sciences (JRS) is to promote critical investigation into all aspects of the study of philosophy, religions, cultures, and interdisciplinary humanities and social sciences, particularly with an innovative and global interactive focus.

Frequency of Issue

Twice per year (June and December) (1st issue January-June, 2nd issue July-December).

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The Journal of Religions and Various Sciences (JRS) is an interdisciplinary journal encouraging multidisciplinary working scholars in humanities, social sciences, philosophical studies, religious studies and cultural inquiry to explore cross-cultural and religious perspectives with an innovative and global interactive focus. The Journal of Religions and Various Sciences (JRS) is an open-access journal, hosted by the Research Center for Dhammsuksa Phrapariyattidhamma of Watawutwikasitaram School, biannually publishing research papers (January-June, July-December) and special issues, both via a double-blind peer review process.

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1. The journal will not charge a fee for publishing articles. The journal encourages contributions that present innovative findings and creative approaches including novel methodologies and research designs.

2. Editorial Board reviews articles according to follows guidelines, namely:

- Formal requirements stated in the guidelines
- Usage of appropriate methodology, presentation of evidences and synthesizing of findings
- Societal relevance

3. The article is neither under review nor published elsewhere. The article must be in the form of an academic essay, presenting the discussion of the research in an objective way.

4. Elements of the article:

- Title in English
- name of the author(s)
- 300 words abstract in English
- Author(s) affiliation(s)
- Keywords (maximum 7)
- Content of the article:

Research article:

- ☐ Abstract
- Introduction
- Research methodology
- Results
- Discussion
- References

Academic Article, Review Article:

- Abstract
- Introduction
- Content
- Conclusion
- Suggestions
- References

5. An original article should range between 3000 and 7000 words excluding abstract, references, diagrams and data sets.

File format: Microsoft Word (*.doc or *.docx), Times New Roman 12, in (English) journal.

The submitted file which includes graphs, charts and images should be located at appropriate locations in the text, between paragraphs, not within them. All figures should have figure numbers and titles (title case) and should be referred to by figure number in the text. A figure's number and the title should be placed above and outside the figure, for example, table 1 or image 1 and Figure. Figures need to be clear and the author must have the original copyright.

6. Book Review should have the name of the author, the title of the book, name and place of publisher, and the year of publication. Book Review should be between 3000-5000 words.

7. To submit an article online.

Example of writing reference

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- Author's name needs to be placed in front of a sentence that is being quoted, for example, Kamnuansilpa (2006)
- Citations need to be placed after the sentence (author's name, year of publication).
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- More authors: write the name of all authors and follow by the Year of publication or last name of 1st author et al., publishing year. For example, (Kaiser et al., 2021)

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The referencing **style**: APA (latest edition). The following are requirements and examples for common reference types.

1. Books

Author's name, (publish year). Title. (Edition). Place of publication: name of press. etc.

- Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University. (1996). Thai Tipitakas. Bangkok: MCU Press.
- Wasee, P., (2007). Sufficient Economics and Civil Society if Social Economic Revived Way. (2nd ed.). Bangkok: Pimdee.

2. Article in Journal

Author's name. (Publishing year). Title. Name of journal, year (Volume), page. etc.

- Dhillon, K. (2001). Challenges and strategies for improving the quality of the information in a university setting: A case study. Total Quality Management, 12(2), 167-177.
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Author's name. (Publishing year). Title. Accessed access date Day Month Year, Url of the website. etc.

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