

Night and Morning with Bhikkhu Tissa

Two Dialogues on the Dhamma

by

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Part One

It is a summer evening in the country. Outside a small Buddhist temple the breezes of the day have subsided, and the warm, humid fields and woods are full of the sounds of singing insects. The long twilight is ending, and the sky deepens into lavender and grey. Off in the west, above silhouetted trees, faint lightning flickers soundlessly. The lights of a car approach from up the road. The car slows, turns into the drive, and parks. A youngish man climbs out. His name is GENE. He stands looking thoughtfully at the temple for a moment. Then he steps up onto the porch and, a little hesitantly, knocks on the door. After a moment the door is opened by a Buddhist monk named BHIKKHU TISSA.

GENE: Bhikkhu Tissa? Hello!

BHIKKHU: Good evening, Gene.

GENE: I know you weren't expecting me.

BHIKKHU: That's all right. Would you like to come in?

GENE: I usually don't come during the week. And you might have things to do. But if you don't, I mean, would you have a few minutes to talk?

BHIKKHU: I have time.

He opens the door wider to admit GENE, who takes off his shoes and leaves them at the entrance. Then BHIKKHU TISSA leads him into the little shrine room, which is illuminated by a lamp. There is a small shrine against one wall and a few old rugs of various shapes and sizes. BHIKKHU TISSA settles himself on a rug. GENE sits down a little distance away, looking somewhat self-conscious.

GENE: I can't say I just happened to be in the neighbourhood. I was at home, actually, and I'd had supper and I thought I'd go out for just a short drive while the light lasted. Then there were these things that were on my mind, you see, so I thought maybe I'd drive over in this direction. It looked like it might rain but I seem to have avoided it. Uh, it's a warm evening!

BHIKKHU: (*placidly*): Yes, it is.

GENE: Anyway, I had some questions on my mind, and I was hoping you might help me out. You see, I've been studying Buddhism more, but still there are things that puzzle me.

BHIKKHU: I'll be glad to clarify what I can.

GENE: Thank you. Yes. Good. Oh, uh, by the way, Bhikkhu Tissa, I've noticed the way some people bow to you when they come to visit. Of course, you probably know that for most of us western people this is something we just don't do. We just don't, uh, feel comfortable with it.

BHIKKHU: That's all right. People have different customs.

GENE: Sure. For me, bowing and all that just seems too ... Well, I hope you aren't offended or anything like that.

BHIKKHU: No, it's just a custom for showing respect. It's the state of mind that matters most.

GENE: That's good to know. Now, if I might tell you what brought me here this evening. A couple of weeks ago I had a birthday, and for some reason this particular birthday really hit me. I began worrying about the overall purpose of my life. I don't mean the usual, boring worries about my youth slipping away without my having advanced in my career or achieved anything really remarkable. I think about those things from time to time like anybody else, I guess. But what bothered me particularly on this occasion was really a question of meaning.

BHIKKHU: Meaning?

GENE: Well, here I had indisputable evidence—with the calendar hanging on my wall—that my life was actually passing and I still had hardly any idea of the meaning of what was going on. Of course I have a sort of intellectual understanding, and I credit Buddhism for that. But as for knowing for myself, really knowing—there I am truly lacking. And, after studying Buddhism, it's becoming really clear to me that I am definitely going to get old and die someday and that I will definitely not get any wiser automatically. So, thinking about this stuff over the following days, I began to get somewhat depressed. Then, this evening, about sunset, after I had eaten supper in my apartment, I was sitting alone out on my little balcony, feeling full and sluggish and about ready to go and waste the rest of the evening watching the TV. I was just sitting there, brooding gloomily and looking out at apartment buildings and parking lots, when a big dragonfly came zipping out of nowhere and landed on the balcony railing beside me. I'd never seen one quite so close before. It was one of those big, greenish, shiny dragonflies, with transparent wings—kind of horrible and beautiful at the same time. Do you know the kind I mean?

BHIKKHU: Yes, I've seen them.

GENE: It sat there just for a second, like some amazing creature from another world, hardly long enough for me even to think anything. It was perched there, bright and almost glittering, and then—zip!—it took off and went soaring away across the parking lot and out of sight. I barely got a chance to look at it. But it was strange—this glimpse of beauty or mystery or power or whatever it was really affected me. I suppose I would have liked to study it or contemplate it. But it was gone, just like that. There was nothing more to be done. And then I thought, "Impermanence!"

BHIKKHU: (*smiling*) A very apt thought.

GENE: (*ruefully*) But after nearly two months of thinking of myself as a Buddhist, this was the best I could come up with.

BHIKKHU: Perceiving impermanence in the world and in yourself is very valuable work. Surely you know that, GENE.

GENE: Yes, sir, but what bothered me afterward was the symbolism of the event. I started wondering if maybe I was spending my whole life just sitting around and missing opportunities. I mean, why should I wait for some spectacular visitation of truth? And of course the Buddha was right, everything is impermanent. And that dragonfly, which was so rare and magnificent, so out of the ordinary, reminded me again that I was getting older and was still sunk in the ordinary—not paying attention, not really learning, not really finding meaning in my life. It seems like it should be possible to find satisfaction and peace in simple things, without needing great wealth and fame and excitement, but I don't exactly know how to go about that. It was bothering me a lot. So I got up and started pacing around, and I turned on the TV, and I turned off the TV, and then I thought I'd take a short drive somewhere to get some fresh air and calm myself down, and then once I got out on the road I just kind of naturally headed in this direction. Now that I'm here I wonder if I'm making any sense to you at all. Are there some Buddhist teachings that might help me straighten out my thoughts?

BHIKKHU TISSA *regards his visitor without speaking for a moment. Two windows in the room are open and the air is rich with the scents of woods and fields. The rhythmical chirping of insects is heard from near and far. In the increasing darkness just beyond the screens, the floating, yellow-green glows of fireflies can be seen.*

BHIKKHU: You mentioned "meaning." I wonder if you could tell me why you think meaning is important.

GENE: It's important because—really I don't know! But it seems that, apart from material satisfactions, I need or require some meaning or understanding.

BHIKKHU: But if your stomach is full and no specific sorrows are oppressing you at the moment, why should you?

GENE: I guess it's because I know that even though I've got enough money and comfort right now, those things aren't stable, and anyway they don't seem sufficient for a happy life in the deepest sense. Even though most of the time I feel fine—I think I'm happy—I'm afraid it won't last. The world is just so changeable and unreliable. That's something I suspected for a long time, but since taking up Buddhism I see it more and more clearly. And it's all passing away. The years are going by. And I wonder if there's any meaning or purpose here. It seems that, in order to be truly happy, or to keep off the trouble that often seems to be hanging around, it would be necessary to penetrate to some deeper level of knowledge. Now, I ask myself, am I just fooling around with meditation and philosophy? Can I actually get somewhere? Bhikkhu Tissa, I'm not being very clear, am I? And I don't even know what specific question to ask you.

BHIKKHU: I think these doubts and reflections of yours are useful things. Nobody is going to practise Buddhism, nobody is going to work to attain true freedom, if he isn't conscious of the deep problems of existence.

GENE: What I'm afraid of, I guess, is that I'm not really capable of doing good work, in a Buddhist sense at least. I'm just worried by the passage of time and my own inability to get meaning out of the moments as they pass by. I need wisdom but I don't have it.

BHIKKHU: I'm afraid I can't entirely sympathise with your gloom. It sounds to me as though you had an edifying birthday and then a most fortunate visit from a dragonfly.

GENE: But both have upset me, in fact.

BHIKKHU: Yes. Do you think a man who dozes his way comfortably through life would ever find any deep truth, let alone enlightenment?

GENE: No, I suppose not.

BHIKKHU: Given that the world is so changeable, could a careless, complacent person really be happy for very long?

GENE: No, probably not.

BHIKKHU: So I congratulate you on your dissatisfaction! If you turn it into skilful action it may bring wonderful results.

GENE: To tell the truth, I doubt that I have the necessary energy or perseverance.

BHIKKHU: That's like doubting you can swim across a river you have never seen or climb a hill you have only heard about. It's better to concentrate on the present. Now then, you said you thought of yourself as a Buddhist. Why is that?

GENE: Because Buddhism offers the best and clearest explanation of life that I've ever heard.

BHIKKHU: You admire it, then?

GENE: Oh, more than admire it. My experience is quite limited, but still I feel that the Buddha has really shown the healthiest, wisest, most inspiring path.

BHIKKHU: What is the purpose of a path?

GENE: Ah.... To lead somewhere. To provide a means of travelling to some place.

BHIKKHU: Should the traveller on a path concern himself with what is out of sight, around a curve?

GENE: Well, he might think about it, but he should pay most attention to where his feet are at the moment.

BHIKKHU: Could it be you're getting ahead of yourself with your worries?

GENE: That's possible, venerable. But I see trouble in every direction. It seems my feet are sunk pretty deep in the mud.

BHIKKHU: Oh, perhaps not so deep, Gene. You did, after all, exercise yourself in order to get here this evening.

GENE: And I'm probably wasting your time with my complaining. Whether it's real weakness or just lack of confidence, I find myself wondering if I can really make progress, if a truly Buddhist life is possible for me. And I'm thinking—this is something else that's been on my mind—that maybe I should lead a more energetic life, take up some more hobbies. Maybe that would give me more of a sense of meaning. Maybe I should start thinking about getting married and having a family, getting more serious about my career. I have to live in this world so maybe I should learn to live in it as it is and make the best of it. What do you think?

BHIKKHU: Certainly we ought to make the best of our life and exercise our strengths in the best way. But first we need to know what exactly we have to work with. In Buddhism we try not to take things for granted. We try to examine all preconceptions. For example, what is this world after all? The Buddha says that in this fathom-long body with its perceptions and thoughts there is the world and the world's origin and the world's end and the way to the world's end. It's all right here! Also he says that the "all" is only the eye and visible forms, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and tangible impressions, and the mind and mental objects.

GENE: But then is the world just some kind of illusion?

BHIKKHU: This world is a put-together thing that depends on conditions, and we should try to understand it in order to remove suffering and attain peace. I don't mean we have to torment ourselves with speculations about ultimate reality or unreality. What matters is understanding our experience as it happens, as it presents itself to us right in the present moment. The world we live in and need to understand is, according to Buddhism, not a permanent entity but only the built-up result of innumerable conditions, which we are aware of through the functioning of our senses. Light falls on the eye, or sound on the ear, and consciousness occurs. Out of the many operations of our senses there comes to be our idea of the world.

GENE: This world—I'm sure you'd agree—is full of all kinds of danger and suffering. I don't see, in my own case, much hope of avoiding all of it, so I wonder if I couldn't be more energetic and make better use of my time, so that at least I could have more real enjoyment from the world in order to make up for the pain. Perhaps just sitting around and thinking too much is unhealthy. Activity is a good thing, isn't it?

BHIKKHU: It depends on the quality of the activity. Conscious, wholesome deeds will certainly bring you benefit. But do you really think that just being absorbed in activities, even pleasant or amusing or good ones, will free your mind from worry about the impermanence of life? Will dragonflies no longer upset you or inspire you?

GENE: (*sighing*) That I don't know.

BHIKKHU: If the idea of impermanence has occurred to you, and if you are concerned about the passage of time and the need you feel for meaning, you have already made progress in the Dhamma, the truths made known by the Buddha.

GENE: Very little progress, it seems!

BHIKKHU: Now then, to go further it's necessary to return to primary matters.

GENE: I don't understand.

BHIKKHU: What does the Buddha teach first and return to again and again? The Buddha's teachings, in all their vastness and complexity, are all directed toward one goal. What would you say that is?

GENE: I would say, it must be the overcoming of suffering. Yes, suffering is the basic fact.

BHIKKHU: Yes, that's right. We mustn't lose sight of that. The Buddha, you know, would not answer purely speculative and metaphysical questions, because they are not useful in the great matter of doing away with dukkha, or pain, suffering, unsatisfactoriness. You are aware of this dukkha, I'm sure, or you wouldn't visit here or call yourself a Buddhist.

GENE: That's true. I'm just afraid I'm not prepared to make a direct assault, as it were, on this problem of suffering.

BHIKKHU: The problem of suffering is not just going to disappear by itself, you know. The first of the Four Noble Truths that the Buddha penetrated was the truth of suffering. The Buddha had faced up to this suffering and conquered it. Then he went on to explain how we also might conquer it. First, we must investigate and understand our situation as it really is. Now, while every thinking person is aware of suffering to some extent, the Buddha saw the problem as going much deeper than the world usually believes.

GENE: Yes, I understand that. He saw dukkha in its true dimensions. He also saw what the rest of the world did not—the cause and the solution of the problem.

BHIKKHU: He did indeed. And what is the extent of this dukkha? Birth, old age, death. Afflictions of all kinds, mental and physical. Illnesses, fears, doubts, regrets, longings. Loss of property, loss of relatives, failure, blame, poverty, grief—many, many kinds of suffering.

GENE: That's dukkha, all right. That about covers it!

BHIKKHU: No, actually that doesn't cover it. Those are only a few of the things that anybody can see as being suffering. The Buddha's vision was much wider.

GENE: Well, I mean, what else is there?

BHIKKHU: This condition of dukkha—of suffering or unsatisfactoriness—has three aspects. There is this familiar suffering that everybody knows—this pain or misery of body and mind. But there is another, subtler aspect. This is the suffering or unsatisfactoriness of the saṅkhāras, the formations or elements of worldly existence themselves.

GENE: How can mere formations “suffer”?

BHIKKHU: According to the Buddha, all formations are impermanent. They are unstable, dependent, transitory, forever arising and subsiding, subject to change and decay. Within this change, this vast unrest, there is no permanence to be found and thus no stable peace. The components of our bodies hold together only temporarily; gradually or swiftly they break up. Body and mind both are ultimately masses of mental and material happenings that will not hold still. Change never stops. Internally and externally the world on every level is always subject to arising and breaking up, rearranging, falling away, disintegrating.

GENE: What a thought! Ordinary pain, then, as bad as it is, is not the only kind of suffering.

BHIKKHU: The very processes of existence, which bring us ordinary pain and pleasure, are themselves flawed. Because of their instability, their unrest, they are untrustworthy—always tending to produce new suffering. They give us no firm floor to stand on.

GENE: But, Bhikkhu Tissa, there is happiness in the world. There are still joys and satisfactions and pleasures and many good and worthy things.

BHIKKHU: Yes, that's true. Certainly good things exist. But when the Buddha says that all formations are dukkha he means that even when they are not manifestly painful, even when they are pleasant, they always have a liability to affliction. They are dukkha because they can't last, can't hold up.

GENE: Suffering, then, is not always outright pain and misery? It can be just this elemental uncertainty or instability?

BHIKKHU: Yes. And that inevitably brings up, you see, another aspect of our suffering. Besides the felt, experienced pain of body and mind, besides the uncertainty of all formations, there is the suffering inherent in change. You see, even the good things, the beautiful and delightful things, become sources of actual pain on account of their fundamental nature.

GENE: How can that be?

BHIKKHU: They change, they pass away, and when they do we regret it; we suffer. Isn't this natural? Anything we like, we want to last. But it cannot. Can you in fact think of anything in this world, anything valuable and important to you, which is immune to change, which can never grow old, which can never disappear, which can never disappoint you?

GENE: (*frowning, thinking*) No.... I can't think of anything like that. All the good things—and the bad, too—are temporary, as far as I can tell.

BHIKKHU: And don't forget the desires themselves—the desires for the agreeable and pleasant things. They too arise and pass away unpredictably, and what you wanted yesterday you may no longer want today.

GENE: I guess that's true. Objects change and my opinions and desires change too. Likes and dislikes are variable.

BHIKKHU: There it is again, you see—the idea you came in with. Impermanence.

GENE: Well, yes, you're right. Impermanence!

BHIKKHU: The word that popped into your mind when the dragonfly flew away.

GENE: Impermanence again. This is what you meant, I guess, when you spoke of returning to primary matters. This dukkha, venerable sir, is more formidable than I imagined. What a universe this is! And here I thought you might cheer me up!

BHIKKHU: (*smiling*) Ah, but let's investigate more. Let's follow the Buddha a little further, shall we?

Outside, in the distance, lightning flickers suddenly. After a moment the rumble of thunder is heard. Gene raises his head and gazes out into the darkness.

GENE: Uh-oh, we're going to get some rain. Maybe a thunderstorm.

BHIKKHU: (*easily*) Quite likely. But it will pass; it will change. Just more impermanence, right?

GENE: I guess so. But, Bhikkhu Tissa, it seems that to search for meaning—to investigate as I would like to—is to encounter a lot of suffering.

BHIKKHU: That may be. But did you ever suppose that truth had to be something entirely pleasing?

GENE: Probably I did—unrealistically. Probably everybody does, at one time or another. We say we want to know the truth, but in fact we want it to turn out just a certain way. We want our opinions or hopes to be confirmed. But probably we want simple happiness more than meaning. And if to search for meaning is to find all this suffering, I wonder, why should we look, why should we try to learn at all?

BHIKKHU: Why indeed?

GENE: (*earnestly*) I suppose—to answer my own question—it's because I know, I feel, that whatever happiness I've had in life so far is not the highest, not the truest. It's been based too much on things that change. Perhaps it's mostly mere enjoyment, not any deep sense of well-being or serenity. So I'm willing, I guess, to look at suffering—to look through suffering, if that's what it takes.

BHIKKHU: Good! Spoken like a true philosopher.

GENE: (*chuckling*) I'm afraid I sound kind of pompous.

BHIKKHU: No, you don't. As the Buddha discovered and taught, the way to deliverance or perfect happiness is through the profound understanding of suffering. We need to comprehend our human situation as it actually is before we can make it better.

GENE: And yet, it's not very agreeable to contemplate suffering. There's so much of it. And now that I think about these two other aspects you've explained—the suffering of formations and the suffering that's potential in good things that change—well, I start to doubt again that I can get past it all.

BHIKKHU: Don't grow faint-hearted now, Gene, because there's more.

GENE: More?

BHIKKHU: There is something else important to be said about all the ills and troubles we have been discussing. They keep on coming.

GENE: They don't stop? But they're impermanent. Even the worst things pass away.

BHIKKHU: Yes, they do. Certainly they do. And that thought can help us over the rough spots of life. But what I mean is this: do we ever come to an end of the whole stream of trouble and misery? Can we realistically foresee a time when new suffering cannot possibly rise up for us? Suffering, after all, has a cause, an origin. The origin of suffering is craving, as the Buddha explained in the second Noble Truth. While craving still smoulders in the mind suffering will come up again, in one form or another.

GENE: I suppose so. As long as this life lasts....

BHIKKHU: Longer than that. Death is no barrier. The insatiable craving of living beings keeps the process going. It produces birth again, with renewed pleasures and pains. And where there is birth, there will always be a certain amount of dukkha. We never meet eternal, unchanging pleasure. All around us we see old age and sickness and death endlessly repeated. Because of craving, the cycle of becoming keeps turning relentlessly.

GENE: You are speaking of saṃsāra.

BHIKKHU: Yes, saṃsāra, the great wheel of birth and death. The Buddha said that no beginning to this cycle was discernible. To emphasise the immensity of past time and the suffering we have been through in our countless births through aeon after aeon, he said that in lamenting the deaths of our relatives we have cried more tears than there is water in the oceans.

GENE: What a sad thought, what infinite sadness.

BHIKKHU: So we need to consider soberly and then make wholesome efforts to free ourselves from the rolling on of birth and death again and again. Time alone won't free us.

GENE: No, I guess it cannot, as long as we have craving pushing us on from one life to the next.

BHIKKHU: Living beings are reborn according to the nature of their kamma, their intentional action, good and bad. The stream of mental and material factors that we look on as a "person" manifests itself again and again, in this world or some other world, in pleasant or painful or mixed circumstances, on and on. But every birth, every particular lifetime, even the most fortunate, is impermanent and limited. Every one of these abodes is a temporary abode.

GENE: So there is no permanent rest within saṃsāra.

BHIKKHU: That's right. So why—let me ask you—why do you think the Buddha revealed these truths? Why did he paint such a picture of the universe?

GENE: It might be, to let us see our condition. To give us some motive for improving ourselves.

BHIKKHU: If we know our true situation and if we understand how our own actions result in benefit or misery, then we will be in a position to undertake wholesome actions with good will and energy. We go on suffering so long because, not understanding the true nature of reality, we go on craving for unsubstantial, unreliable things. Our fortune in this life and in future lives will be guided by the degree to which we refrain from evil and actively apply the good and try to cleanse our own minds. The ideals the Buddha taught have a practical purpose, you see—to remove suffering, the small and the large. We should take a good, critical look at ourselves and at the world and then behave intelligently and morally. When the Dhamma is rightly practised it brings benefit here and now. You can see it for yourself.

GENE: Venerable sir, this cycle of existence has been going on a long time—without beginning, as I understand. Can I really expect to get out of suffering in the future? Or will it continue forever? Can I actually reach perfect happiness?

BHIKKHU: The Buddha discovered the path and made it known. But the walking, Gene, depends on you.

GENE: Ah, yes. On me. I guess it does.

Wind gusts suddenly in the trees outside. Lightning flashes, followed by a crack of thunder. Big raindrops begin to splash on the windowsills and spatter through the screens. BHIKKHU TISSA rises to shut the windows. When he returns to his seat, both he and his visitor remain silent for a few moments while the rain pours down and the yard brightens with each stroke of lightning.

GENE: (*slowly*) You know, I'm thinking about that dragonfly again. Maybe I saw it wrong. Maybe it wasn't beautiful at all, but rather something ferocious and terrible—like an embodiment of craving. Or a symbol of dukkha!

BHIKKHU: (*with a slight smile*) Do you think so?

GENE: Well... maybe. But at any rate it seems, venerable sir, that suffering does not have to occur for me in the future; it may or may not, depending on my actions. I might experience at least some degree of happiness.

BHIKKHU: Yes. That is an essential principle in Buddhism. Things arise out of conditions. Suffering is a result of craving; suffering arises with craving as a base or condition.

GENE: Yet it's almost an automatic process—craving and suffering again and again.

BHIKKHU: Automatic, maybe, the way we usually live, but not fated or absolutely determined.

GENE: What is the distinction?

BHIKKHU: The Buddha did not teach fatalism—the idea that our experiences are inevitable and fixed, that we will have to undergo helplessly certain pains or pleasures. And, on the other hand, he did not describe the universe as uncaused or accidental. Instead he explained how phenomena arise and last only as long as their supporting conditions are present. We living beings make choices and commit actions that provide the conditions for later happiness or misery. Although we habitually or even automatically give way to craving and other unwholesome tendencies and consequently experience suffering, we don't have to.

GENE: So an escape from the wilderness of saṃsāra is possible.

BHIKKHU: Yes. But even within the round of birth and death, right within this very life, we can reduce suffering and gain increasing peace of mind and happiness through good actions. Again, it depends on our actions.

GENE: You're just not going to let me off the hook, are you? It's my responsibility.

BHIKKHU: Would you really be happy, Gene, would you really be glad if I told you that suffering was merely an aberration which would vanish by itself and never return?

GENE: Well, it might be nice to hear, but in fact I wouldn't believe it. I couldn't.

BHIKKHU: The Buddha teaches suffering and the ending of suffering. Always keep that in mind. If we want happiness, if we want freedom from the many forms of pain, we must first learn the true nature of our affliction. We must understand that this dukkha doesn't come out of nothing. The origin of dukkha is craving.

GENE: I understand that in principle, in general. Still, isn't a certain amount of craving necessary? Don't we need some moderate pleasures? Since suffering is so pervasive in life, as you've been explaining, everybody probably feels they need certain things at least as consolation—to cover up or soften their pains. So, for instance, when I'm feeling low I naturally go looking for enjoyment and entertainment.

BHIKKHU: Do you always? What about this evening?

GENE: Oh. Well, this is different, certainly.

BHIKKHU: Clearly you didn't come here for entertainment.

GENE: No, I guess I didn't.

BHIKKHU: And didn't you turn off your television set quite intentionally?

GENE: Yes, I did.

BHIKKHU: So perhaps entertainment was not a consolation for you this evening?

GENE: Well, no, I have to admit it, Venerable Tissa.

BHIKKHU: What we think we must have and what we really need are not necessarily the same thing. Usually, being pummelled by strong desires, we believe that pleasures of the senses are a necessity; but sometimes, as perhaps for you this evening, the idea of some possible higher truth, some finer satisfaction or peace, comes into our minds.

GENE: But is all desire bad?

BHIKKHU: Not necessarily. While we are wandering in saṃsāra we experience desires which, when acted upon, bring us results both good and bad. The desire to practise Dhamma, for instance, is beneficial and wholesome. The desire to attain Nibbāna—supreme liberation—is a worthy desire. The desire to behave honourably or to support one's family or to do some charitable deed is likewise commendable. Desires which we act upon intentionally, consciously, start processes rolling which may work out well or badly, depending on many factors. But foolish desires and desires for the pleasures of the senses are always tricky and liable to cause trouble. Craving, which is obsessive, ignorant desire, gives rise to suffering because, as we've been discussing, all the things in the world we might grasp at or lean on are actually mere mist and foam. Within them no complete satisfaction is to be found.

GENE: This craving, Bhikkhu Tissa, which plays such a large part in Buddhism—could you explain it a little more specifically?

BHIKKHU: In explaining the origin of suffering the Buddha speaks of three primary kinds of craving or taṇhā. The first is kāma-taṇhā—craving for sensual pleasures. This means passion for the pleasing, stimulating experiences of the senses.

GENE: That's not hard to understand. I suppose I've spent most of my time pursuing one kind of pleasant sensation or another, without really recognising the fact. But, now that I think about it, I don't see what else beyond sense pleasures it would be possible to crave for.

BHIKKHU: There is a second kind of craving. This is bhava-taṇhā—craving for existence, for being.

GENE: Craving for existence? Do you mean that even the desire to be is a kind of craving?

BHIKKHU: Yes. This is the craving to go on existing eternally. We living beings want to experience things endlessly. Out of a fundamental ignorance about the nature of reality, we thirst, we crave, entranced with the flux of saṃsāra. Out of ignorance we want to go on and on asserting our supposed “self.”

GENE: And we can't even find any self.

BHIKKHU: That's right. And since all phenomena are not permanent, the craving to exist permanently must lead to grief. We want to last forever, but whatever mental and physical factors we take to be our “self” are changeable and temporary and sure to let us down. We can't find any real ego or essence in the dynamic processes of life. This is the great fact of anattā or non-self, on which the Buddha laid much stress. Now then, the third kind of craving is vibhava-taṇhā, craving for non-existence or annihilation. It also is founded on ignorance, on not seeing reality as it is.

GENE: So all three kinds of craving produce suffering. I think I have the idea. Sensual pleasures—well, I understand them, at least in theory. They are always mixed up with some degree of trouble or pain, and in any case they don't last; they fade away and leave regret. And craving for eternal existence seems like just the perpetuation of the miserable delusion of self, with all the suffering that that involves. And craving for non-existence surely would be trouble, too, because you can't annihilate a self that you can't find in the first place!

BHIKKHU: And you can't escape from suffering with such a desire. You can't stop the momentum of craving with more craving. The result of craving is suffering in its many forms, as we've discussed. So, to eliminate suffering, to attain true happiness and peace and freedom, we have to eliminate craving through wisdom. That is what the Buddha did. The third Noble Truth is the truth of the cessation of suffering—the supreme deliverance which is realised when craving is finally conquered.

GENE: But to know how to do that is so difficult. And then there is the problem of knowing if one has the ability....

BHIKKHU: Ability isn't a static thing. All the characteristics and tendencies that make up your personality are continually changing according to your actions and your reactions to experiences. You have certain skills and abilities now that you once didn't have. They came to be because you disciplined yourself and made efforts and practised.

GENE: That's so, but as for spiritual ability....

BHIKKHU: The same principle holds true. Through repeated, intelligent effort you gain strength and skill. Through bad habits and carelessness you grow weaker.

The rain, which had been slashing against the windows, has slackened noticeably. The thunder now sounds from the east, not so loud as before. The brief storm seems to be passing over. Gene falls silent for a moment, pondering. Then he rouses himself.

GENE: You know, that dragonfly—maybe I was rash to consider it hideous. Maybe it was just ambiguous—sort of both good and evil—just a striking symbol of the contradictions in life.

BHIKKHU: (*smiling*) Oh?

GENE: Well, it could be. Beautiful, powerful, yet utterly instinctive and ignorant. A creature of saṃsāra! Or ... does this sound far-fetched?

BHIKKHU: Let's say rather that we can find provocative ideas in dragonflies or any objects of our experience. But there's no end to speculation, and speculation won't free us from suffering. We need a clear, dispassionate view.

GENE: How can we get that?

BHIKKHU: By training ourselves to note just what actually appears to us. The Buddha said that in what is seen there should be only what is seen; in what is heard only what is heard; in what is sensed only what is sensed; and in what is thought or cognised only what is thought or cognised. That is the way to cut off the wild overgrowth of concepts.

GENE: Does that mean we should try to see things just as they are, without injecting our opinions?

BHIKKHU: Yes. But it's not easy, is it? We are so used to making mental connections and building up great complexities of imagination that we become confused; we imagine more than is really there. And what is there we miss.

GENE: I don't understand exactly.

BHIKKHU: Let's take a hypothetical case. Suppose that somebody you don't like should walk into this room now. What would happen in your mind?

GENE: I guess I would be annoyed and uneasy.

BHIKKHU: But why does that happen? Let's consider. From the bare sensory data and your mental habits you quickly compile an image of an existing ego and allow yourself to give way to aversion as you think about it.

GENE: Maybe so, but isn't that perfectly natural?

BHIKKHU: Natural, but wrong. It's a result of misperception.

GENE: Because all things are actually non-self?

BHIKKHU: Yes, but why are they non-self?

GENE: Uh, let me see. Because they are impermanent?

BHIKKHU: Yes, all formations are impermanent and compounded and unsatisfactory. And a person is, technically speaking, only the five aggregates or factors of material form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. So then, when you see a person you don't like walk into a room, what do you really see? What happens? Light strikes your eye, and visual consciousness arises; awareness of shape and colour occurs. Likewise sound vibrations strike your ears and sound consciousness arises. From these and other sensory events you build up a view of that person. But if that "person" actually consists only of five impersonal, changing aggregates, then who is it exactly that you would dislike?

GENE: I can't say, really.

BHIKKHU: Would it be the material form, the body of this person that you would dislike? Or his feelings? Or his perceptions or mental formations or consciousness?

GENE: No, it wouldn't be any of them, exactly. It's hard to say. If I disliked that person it could only be some general, overall idea that I disliked. It's kind of absurd to hate mere impersonal aggregates, I know. And hating them all together as some kind of ego doesn't make much sense, either. This is confusing!

BHIKKHU: Whether we're considering other people or ideas or material objects, we're liable to be confused when we build up piles of unjustified concepts. We need a fresh, uncluttered view. That's why the Buddha advises us to notice our sense experiences simply as what they are—just as occurrences of sight, sound, smell, and so on. If we do that we will have a better view of reality and become less oppressed by greed, hatred, and delusion.

GENE: And the complete ending of greed, hatred, and delusion would be Nibbāna, wouldn't it? Perfect peace. No more suffering.

BHIKKHU: That is what the Buddha attained. And that is what is possible for a truly diligent person to attain.

GENE: And I am wondering if I am a diligent person. You think I should be, I know. It seems that in looking for meaning or truth I have to apply myself to a serious path with real effort. Knowing even so little of the Buddha's teaching has made a tremendous difference to me already. I get lazy often; I get careless. But I can't forget the Dhamma. When that dragonfly appeared it made me think again, so that I had to come here. Now, from what I've learned and thought and from what you've said, I kind of feel I have a duty to try to make progress. I can't pretend I can just float along without a care through life. There is, I guess, this great challenge that the Buddha reveals.

BHIKKHU: The Buddha explains the bondage of the passions and the freedom of enlightenment. When we become aware of both we can't escape our responsibility, can we? Actually, we've had this responsibility all along, but now we are really faced with it. So we have to choose intelligently and conscientiously. And would you really wish there were no challenge? Would you now wish you were unaware of the extent of dukkha and unaware of the possibility of enlightenment?

GENE: No. I'm happy I understand even this tiny bit. It's very strange—even with all my doubts I'm glad I've learned about the Dhamma, and I want to go deeper into it.

BHIKKHU: The Buddha said that four wonderful things happen when a Fully Enlightened One appears in the world. Even though people delight in their attachments, when a Buddha teaches non-attachment they become interested and try to understand. Even though people delight in pride, when a Buddha teaches getting rid of pride they become interested and try to understand. Also, though people delight in restlessness, when they hear the soothing, calming Dhamma being taught by a Buddha the same thing happens. And even though people are enmeshed in ignorance, when a Buddha teaches the Dhamma for getting rid of ignorance, they likewise become interested and try to understand.

GENE: Well, that's true for me even today, so long after the time of the Buddha himself. That's just it—even though I suppose I like attachments and restlessness as much as the next man, the Buddha's message strikes home and makes me pay attention. Really, it's remarkable! After 2500 years the Dhamma is still having the same effect.

BHIKKHU: Do you remember the familiar phrase? The Dhamma is well proclaimed, visible, timeless, inviting inspection, leading onward, individually experienceable by the wise.

GENE: Timeless. Yes. It's as if the Buddha's words just leap across the centuries—or as if the centuries don't matter. Human problems are still the same.

BHIKKHU: And the answer to those problems is still the same. Remember, the Buddha taught for the purpose of encouraging living beings, helping them to get out of sorrow, describing the way to complete deliverance. We have come to this present situation in this life, with our shares of affliction and our strengths and weaknesses, because of our deeds, our good and bad actions, our wise and unwise actions, over immense periods of time. Now with the Dhamma to help us we can learn to act properly and consistently, and our good, skilful deeds and thoughts will carry us toward a purer reality.

GENE: Here am I with all my problems and hopes and worries, and yet I have an intuition—I think I do—that something higher and better is possible.

BHIKKHU TISSA says nothing. After a moment he rises and opens the windows wide. The rain has stopped; the storm is rumbling away into the east. Outside there is a great trickling, dripping darkness in which no insects sing. Fresh, cool air bearing the smell of vegetation fills the room. BHIKKHU TISSA stands looking into the darkness.

BHIKKHU: Look, Gene, what do you see out there? What do you notice?

GENE gets to his feet and peers out the window. There is darkness—measureless, cool, primeval, with flutters of lightning and thunder dying away.

GENE: There's just—nature. It's getting still now. Changing, of course, always changing. It's so mysterious, nature! So mysterious. Vast and wonderful and full of ... full of possibility. As if some magnificent adventure was waiting.

BHIKKHU: And are you an adventurous person?

GENE: I want to be.

BHIKKHU: Then you should study the map, discipline yourself, and see what you can do.

GENE: Yes, you're right, venerable sir. I can't just wish and complain, can I? I guess I have some work to do.

BHIKKHU: The world keeps on changing, and scenes appear and pass away in front of us. We need to take note of all this process in order to understand impermanence and to put out the fires of craving.

GENE: Impermanence. That's the thought I came here with—and, I think, the thought I should leave with. I'll go back now. You've given me a lot to think about. And to contemplate. I've still got a dozen questions spinning around in my mind, but maybe I need to think things through a bit first—or just to let them settle down. Thank you! I better go now and see if I can get home before another storm hits. You know, I feel full of energy. (He laughs.) As if I were just beginning an adventure!

BHIKKHU TISSA accompanies GENE to the front door and waits while he puts on his shoes, then goes with him out onto the dark, wet porch. Above them the clouds are already dwindling away, letting some moonlight spill through.

GENE: Summer weather is so uncertain. Just a constant illustration of impermanence! Thank you again, venerable sir. Good night!

BHIKKHU: Good night.

GENE crosses to his car and gets in. The engine rumbles and the car pulls away slowly, its tyres hissing on the wet road. Its lights recede up the road, then vanish over a rise. For a minute BHIKKHU TISSA remains standing on the porch, quite still in the still, fragrant night. Then he goes back inside the temple and closes the door. There is silence for a time. Then somewhere an insect chirps, and then another. By ones and twos and dozens, invisible in the vast night, they again take up their ancient songs.

Part Two

It is early the following morning. A grey mist surrounds the temple. The tops of trees are just beginning to glow with the new sunlight. All is still and silent. The yard in front of the temple and the road beyond are littered with twigs and leaves thrown down by the evening's storm. Up the road, a moving shape approaches out of the mist. It is GENE's car. It turns into the drive and stops. The engine stops; the lights go off; and GENE gets out. He stands for a moment looking at the mist-obscured temple. There is no sign of activity. Then he steps up onto the porch and knocks softly on the door. He backs off a step and waits. After a few moments the door is opened by BHIKKHU TISSA.

GENE: Hello, Venerable Tissa, it's me again.

BHIKKHU: Well, Gene, an early good morning to you.

GENE: I apologise for disturbing you. I'm on my way to work—by a kind of detour. I started early—to allow time. And again I've probably come at a bad time. I'm sorry. But could I talk to you, please? Would that be possible? I'd really appreciate it.

BHIKKHU: All right.

GENE: I shouldn't disturb you, I know. I can come another time if you're busy. I just thought I'd take a chance....

BHIKKHU: I wouldn't want such a detour to be for nothing. Come in.

GENE: Thank you! Say, it sure is misty this morning.

BHIKKHU: (*agreeably*) So it is, but it will change.

GENE takes off his shoes at the door and follows BHIKKHU TISSA again into the shrine room, which looks plain and dim in the grey light from the open windows. GENE waits for the monk to sit. Then he sits down in the same place as the night before. His expression is awake and animated.

GENE: Again, I apologise for showing up at this hour, but last night I realised there was still a lot I wanted to know, and I hated the thought of trudging through another day at work and maybe losing the enthusiasm or momentum I was feeling. And there's more, isn't there, venerable sir? You have more to tell me.

BHIKKHU: That depends on what you ask.

GENE: Well, well.... Again I'm kind of at a loss. Let me start by telling you what I was thinking. Last night when I got home I was restless. I was pacing around my apartment all full of nervous energy and not knowing exactly what to do with it—as if I was ready for some splendid adventure but didn't know where to begin! Then I thought I'd sit outside on my balcony and have a soft drink and just cool off. And that's what I did. There's really no view, even in the daytime, but I sat there in my lawn chair and looked out at the other apartment buildings and the parking lots that were mostly dark but lit up here and there. And while I was mulling over what to do with myself and how to practise the Dhamma better, I happened to notice what was going on around me—a few cars going by out on the street, a couple of airplanes overhead, people driving into the parking lot, opening and shutting doors, talking and laughing. I could hear faint bursts of music and noise from TV sets, and I happened to notice some moths whirling around one of the security lights. Not a great amount of activity, you understand, just a little of this and that—living beings going on about their ordinary business in one insignificant night. The difference to me was that I was conscious of noticing it, being aware of these little pieces of life floating by. So as I was sitting there I couldn't help thinking about saṃsāra and impermanence, as we'd been discussing. There it was, right in front of me. This time, though, I wasn't feeling depressed—just kind of neutral and easy—and I thought, "Well, here's the world going on as usual. How am I going to get started on the path?" And I found myself wondering if maybe

that incredible dragonfly might show up again, if it might just appear mysteriously out of the night and land on the porch railing again. I was almost hoping for it, absurdly. Well, of course it didn't show up, but I wasn't really disappointed. If those fantastic creatures were present all the time I probably wouldn't notice them any more than the mosquitoes. They are plentiful!

BHIKKHU: You should pay attention to mosquitoes, too, Gene. Who knows what you might learn?

GENE: Ah, well, that's true, venerable sir. I should. And I wasn't really expecting the dragonfly to come back just on my account. Anyway, I was thinking over what you had told me, and while I sat there without any particular inspiration or symbol in front of me, I remembered you had said that things arise from conditions. So I knew I had to get busy and make do with what I had around me in the world—to produce good supports or conditions. And then, venerable sir, I realised that I had neglected to ask you specifically how to get rid of suffering and acquire blessings and strive for enlightenment. So I went to my books, because you said I should “study the map.”

BHIKKHU: That's good. When you have momentum, make use of it.

GENE: I did some reading, and later in the evening I spent a while meditating, sitting on the rug in my living room. I felt calmer, as if I were starting to find the right direction. But still a lot of questions came up. Then this morning, for some reason, I woke up early, and I thought I should try to carry on that momentum I had. So I took off on this de-tour, Bhikkhu Tissa—and I've brought my questions along!

BHIKKHU: (*smiling*) All right, then, what's on your mind?

GENE: You said I should remember that the Buddha teaches both suffering and the ending of suffering. Now, this ending of suffering is Nibbāna. That's the third Noble Truth. But Nibbāna seems to be described often in negative terms. I know what it's not—it's not a heavenly world that one lives in, and it's not annihilation of a self. But what is it, actually?

BHIKKHU: Nibbāna is so beyond worldly experience that worldly concepts cannot contain it; language cannot describe it except indirectly. For example, could you describe the taste of salt to someone who had never known it?

GENE: That would be very difficult—probably impossible.

BHIKKHU: You might say it's not sweet and it's not sour, but beyond that how far could you go with language? The only way really to know the taste of salt is to taste it. Likewise Nibbāna is to be realised and experienced for oneself.

GENE: But Nibbāna seems so remote. If it's an unthinkable something, how do we know it's worth attaining?

BHIKKHU: First of all, we have the testimony of the Buddha and some of his enlightened disciples. When the Buddha realised Nibbāna he knew he had reached the highest; he had finished his heroic journey; he had attained liberation. For the rest of his life he taught so that others might have the chance to experience this highest happiness and escape the cycle of saṃsāra. Moreover, even in our ignorance we have an intuition of something greater, don't we? We are weighed down with worries and fears and all kinds of trouble, but we can faintly imagine some release from all of this, some liberation and peace. This intuition suggests, very vaguely, the wonder of Nibbāna. We would all like to be free from suffering and to gain perfect happiness, and these are ultimately the same thing, which is Nibbāna.

GENE: I doubt that most people even know what perfect happiness would be. It seems people think of happiness as the fulfilment of their desires.

- BHIKKHU: Desires have no limit; the appetite is endless. Real happiness—perfect happiness—is not the satisfying of desire but the calming, the abolishing of desire. Now, this is an unusual idea, but it's not unthinkable, is it?
- GENE: No. I understand it to some degree. I feel an attraction toward that goal, toward wisdom and freedom.
- BHIKKHU: Well, Nibbāna is what lies in that direction. And the Buddha teaches that Nibbāna can be realised in this life; it is inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise. He says that when a man is overcome by greed, hatred, and delusion, he aims at his own ruin, the ruin of others, and the ruin of both, and he suffers pain and grief as a result. But if he gives up greed, hatred, and delusion, he does not aim at his own ruin or the ruin of others or the ruin of both, and he does not suffer pain and grief anymore. Insofar as he accomplishes and realises this destruction of greed, hatred, and delusion, so far does he realise Nibbāna in this life. So you see, it is a gradual process—the more we diminish these defilements the closer we approach the goal.
- GENE: Well, I can understand that. Then Nibbāna is not just something that happens after death?
- BHIKKHU: Nibbāna is known in two ways. The arahat, the perfected one, achieves liberating knowledge, realises Nibbāna in the present life, and he continues to live out his lifespan. The five aggregates of his personality—material form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness—continue to function with the remaining impetus of past kamma, but he has completely abandoned the craving that would lead him on to another rebirth. As long as his body lasts he continues to live, and his senses continue to operate, but there is no more greed, hatred, or delusion whatever in him. This is the first aspect of Nibbāna. Then, at the destruction of the body, he is liberated entirely. This is the aspect of Nibbāna without any remainder left.
- GENE: I guess you know what I want to ask next. What happens to an arahat, a fully enlightened person, after death?
- BHIKKHU: That, Gene, is beyond the limits of language and concept. Such a person escapes from birth and death and all categories of thought. He is completely released, liberated from all suffering.
- GENE: Still, that sounds good. It sounds like the ultimate happiness, even if no one can exactly describe the state in mundane language.
- BHIKKHU: When the Buddha went forth from home into homelessness he was looking for what he called the “unborn, unaging, unailing, deathless, sorrowless, undefiled supreme surcease of bondage, Nibbāna.” And that is what he found at last. Also, even though language is inadequate, the Buddha did outline Nibbāna in positive terms, too, referring to it as the wonderful, the marvellous, purity, freedom, the island, the shelter—and more. But the most he could do for those not yet enlightened was to inspire them with an ideal and to explain how they might reach the ideal themselves.
- GENE: Buddhism is certainly a way of action, not just of contemplation.
- BHIKKHU: The attainment of Nibbāna is the highest thing possible. And when we consider the depths of dukkha, it seems even more marvellous.
- GENE: How do you mean?
- BHIKKHU: As we discussed last night, suffering is not simply these familiar, obvious pains of mind and body, but also the unthinkably vast, beginningless cycle of saṃsāra, which is unsteady, afflicted, unreliable, insecure, and endlessly deceptive. Out of that the Buddha and the noble ones after him made their heroic climb to ultimate deliverance. The Buddha said that all is burning with the fires of lust, hate, and delusion—burning with the many forms of suffering. Nibbāna is the putting out of those terrible fires; it is

the cooling of fever, the calming of all trembling, the purest peace, the absolute end of all suffering.

- GENE: Even though language is inadequate, it certainly can suggest a great wonder here.
- BHIKKHU: There are two things in particular it would be good to keep in mind: Nibbāna is wonderful, and it can be reached. If it were totally inaccessible, or if language and teaching were useless, then the Buddha would not have taught at all. But, knowing what he did know, he taught. He roused his disciples to make an effort to attain the highest.
- GENE: That involves a great effort, surely.
- BHIKKHU: Of course. It's by no means easy. The habits of craving we have formed through so many aeons in saṃsāra are very tenacious, but they can be broken.
- GENE: So one who strives and removes all craving in himself naturally reaches Nibbāna?
- BHIKKHU: Yes, but one has to go about this in the right way. Even a superhuman effort won't result in liberation if it's wrongly directed.
- GENE: What if somebody doesn't believe in liberation or Nibbāna but just tries to live a virtuous, noble life?
- BHIKKHU: Saṃsāra keeps on going according to actions whether or not anyone is aware of them or approves of them. Good actions bring good results and bad actions bring bad results, on and on, in the natural order of things. The person who acts virtuously will experience the effects of his good deeds; he directs himself toward a happy life in the future. This is an important teaching in Buddhism. But still we must remember that all worldly states—even the most tranquil and beautiful—are impermanent. Even rebirth in the higher, delightful planes of existence is only temporary. If one's craving continues then the sequence of birth and death and further dukkha will continue.
- GENE: And what if somebody does believe that liberation is possible?
- BHIKKHU: Well, then, he should try to attain it.
- GENE: But it seems, Venerable Tissa, that a terrific change of mind is required of the ordinary person. I mean, aren't most of us just looking for a little peace and calm right now? Aren't most of us just hoping for some mundane prosperity and comfort and relief from troubles? How many people, after all, are going to focus all their energies on achieving Nibbāna?
- BHIKKHU: The Dhamma is for the happiness and peace of living beings here and now, as well as in the future. The basic principles of Dhamma—morality, concentration, and wisdom—benefit everyone in perceptible ways. Through observing the moral precepts of not killing, not stealing, not committing sexual misconduct, not lying, and not taking intoxicants, a person keeps himself out of trouble, soothes his mind, acquires a clear conscience, and gains the affection and respect of others. Through the practice of concentration he steadies himself and becomes able to act deliberately, with clear sight. Through wisdom he realises how suffering and happiness both come to be. He learns patience and detachment. He knows when to speak and when to keep quiet. To the degree that a person possesses morality and concentration and wisdom, he is increasingly secure in an insecure world. And all of this practice, all of this everyday religious effort, advances the practitioner toward the ultimate security, Nibbāna. The more he sees the blessings of the Dhamma the more he will be inspired to exert himself to gain the highest. Besides, there is this to consider: all of us human beings need, for our own peace of mind right now, an ideal to give significance to life, an ideal to be revered. And if we honestly contemplate our situation we will likely want to set out to reach such an ideal.

GENE: That's true, certainly. It's true for me. I only wish the way were a little clearer. (He points out the window at the scene of misty stillness.) This whole world seems to be covered with a confusing mist, like the yard out there.

BHIKKHU: (Looking out the window): Ah, don't you think the morning is getting a little brighter? And as for the way, it's been marked out very clearly. But making the journey is of course our business and our responsibility.

GENE: That journey might be very long, considering my weaknesses.

BHIKKHU: Never mind how long. Our task—our useful task—is to act in the light of the Buddha's teaching right now.

GENE: The ideal of Nibbāna is truly inspiring to me, venerable sir, and you've convinced me I can't just sit around and hope. And I realise I have to make the effort myself. But you know, to live in this world I have to work and deal with other people and take care of all sorts of mundane business. This takes up so much time. I wonder, is it really possible to make progress toward enlightenment in the middle of all these activities? How exactly can I go about it?

BHIKKHU: Certainly it's possible. And the way to go about it is along the Noble Eightfold Path. This is the fourth Noble Truth. This path leads to Nibbāna, to the complete ending of suffering. We need to make a conscientious effort to apply the factors of this path.

GENE: Venerable sir, when I read descriptions of the eight factors I feel like those are mostly virtues that I don't have. How do I get from here to there, if you know what I mean?

BHIKKHU: It's always good to take a look at the fundamental teachings. The Noble Eightfold Path consists of eight factors which we should practise and develop, both for peace and comfort right now and for the attainment of ultimate liberation. First of all, let's consider right view. Do you understand what that means?

GENE: Well, more or less. It means understanding cause and effect. Seeing things as they really are.

BHIKKHU: Yes, but there is more to it. Right view is composed of several important kinds of understanding. With respect to kamma, or volitional action, right view is the view that our intentional deeds bring appropriate results to us.

GENE: Isn't this common knowledge?

BHIKKHU: No. People often seem to think that their deeds, especially their bad ones, simply will disappear after they've been done and no longer trouble them. Or they think that once they have justified some action in their own minds it cannot cause them any harm in the future. Of course, this is a wrong idea. Right view is the understanding that we are the owners and the heirs of our own deeds and are liable to experience the natural results of those deeds. In addition, a person with right view understands what is wholesome action and what is unwholesome action and also what are the roots of each. Such a person knows that the actions he performs are significant, and that he is responsible for them—both generous, kind actions and cruel, selfish ones. Right view is also the understanding that all the mental and physical factors that make up the person are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and empty of any self. This present life or stream of existence comes into being on account of conditions; it is sustained by conditions; it passes away and re-arises according to conditions. All of this is called right view.

GENE: It seems, then, that this is a world of processes that depend on conditions.

BHIKKHU: Yes. So if we want happiness we have to provide the conditions or causes that make for happiness.

GENE: Right view is certainly a comprehensive view. It really seems to require a vast stretch of wisdom.

BHIKKHU: In the widest terms, right view is the understanding of suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path leading to the cessation of suffering—the Four Noble Truths themselves.

GENE: But, venerable sir, complete understanding of the Four Noble Truths would be enlightenment itself, wouldn't it?

BHIKKHU: Yes, but there are degrees of right view. We need at the start a certain understanding of the true nature of this life and a willingness to practise basic principles. The more we practise, the more we come to understand deeper matters.

GENE: I suppose if we don't have at least some amount of right view we will just wander endlessly in theories, or in momentary passions.

BHIKKHU: The Buddha said that just as in the morning the red sky is the first indicator of the rising sun, so right view is the indicator or forerunner of wholesome things.

GENE: That's an appealing idea. And speaking of morning, venerable sir, I do believe it's getting brighter outside. (The mist outside has thinned, and the trees and the dew-soaked grass have become visible, glowing in the new sunlight. Gene sighs.) Now that is really beautiful! That's a scene I wish would last forever. But I know it can't.

BHIKKHU: And that is right view. The scene will change.

GENE: So I guess I better not cling to it! But, venerable sir, just having this preliminary sort of right view isn't enough, is it? The Buddha taught a lot more.

BHIKKHU: Right view is extremely important because as we believe so we tend to act, and our intentional action, our kamma, determines our fortune or misfortune. But then how do we actually go about behaving rightly, living rightly? The second factor of the Noble Eightfold Path is right intention. How shall we discipline the mind? What kind of intentions should we develop and what kind should we abandon? The Buddha says that right intention is the intention of renunciation, the intention free from ill will, and the intention of non-harming. These three good qualities should animate our minds and define our attitude toward the world.

GENE: What does "renunciation" mean here?

BHIKKHU: When someone observes with right view that pleasures of the senses bring little joy and much pain and distress, he or she will incline toward the higher happiness to be found in calming desire, letting go, and forsaking craving. The intention of renunciation is the conscious turning away from greed.

GENE: How about being free from ill will? I have to confess I sometimes have hostile thoughts about some people. I'm usually polite on the outside, but on the inside I don't always wish them the best.

BHIKKHU: Our thoughts and volitions should not be ignored. They define our character. They lead us to pain or to tranquillity. Therefore we should try to get rid of ill will and replace it with good will. Furthermore, our intentions should be harmless. Buddhism, you know, advocates sympathy for all living beings, because all of them, all of us, are rushing on through saṃsāra and enduring suffering.

GENE: That's one of the beautiful things that drew me to the Dhamma—the ideal of compassion and loving kindness. It's truly inspiring.

BHIKKHU: And true compassion or sympathy depends on the mind behind the action. Therefore we should purify our intentions, for our own benefit and the benefit of others.

GENE: Even the highest ideals require preparation and practical efforts, don't they?

BHIKKHU: Certainly. The Noble Eightfold Path that leads to deliverance is a practical and realistic path. Consider the next factor on the list: right speech. We live with other people. Simply to get along in society we must speak with care. And for our own betterment,

for our own religious progress, we cannot neglect right speech, because speech, like intention, is a kind of action which will affect us for good or for ill.

GENE: Right speech basically means not telling lies, doesn't it?

BHIKKHU: It means that and more than that. Specifically, it means abstaining from false speech, from slanderous speech, from sharp, malicious speech, and from vain, foolish talk or babble. A follower of the Dhamma speaks the truth and avoids all kinds of lies and deceit. He or she is a truthful person whose word can be counted on.

GENE: Truthfulness certainly is a good thing here and now, for society and the world, let alone for attaining enlightenment. An honest person is really a blessing to others.

BHIKKHU: Right speech also means not indulging in slander or malicious talk. It means being discreet. We should not speak words that cause strife. We should instead be glad to promote harmony and friendliness between people. In addition, we must abstain from malicious, vindictive speech. Sharp words are painful to hear. Right speech is speech that is gentle, considerate, polite, agreeable. This is what we like to hear; it's what we should speak to others, too.

GENE: These are high standards! Now, what was it you said about foolish talk?

BHIKKHU: To practise right speech is also to abstain from idle, nonsensical, foolish talk.

GENE: (*laughing*) In other words, most of everybody's talk!

BHIKKHU: Be that as it may, we do seem to spend a lot of time talking about trivial, silly things, don't we?

GENE: I do, anyway. And I hear a lot of that, too. I suppose it's better to say something meaningful or to keep silent.

BHIKKHU: The Buddha says that one should speak at the right time, truly, talking about what is useful, about the Dhamma. One's speech has effects on others and on oneself. Therefore one should speak carefully, thoughtfully, moderately, sensibly—not just blurt out the notion of the moment.

GENE: Oh, I've got a long way to go, venerable sir. Often I say whatever is in my mind without thinking about it or considering the consequences. And people are sensitive about how they are spoken to.

BHIKKHU: If we make an effort to control our speech, we not only improve our relationships with other people, we also lighten our minds and give worthy thoughts a chance to grow. Like our intentions, what we say matters. If we govern our speech, not lying or slandering or abusing anybody or talking foolishly, and if instead we speak sensibly and kindly, then we will be acting properly—doing good in the world and weakening the defilements that cause suffering.

GENE: It's surprising how down to earth the Dhamma is. Maybe I had been expecting sublime, otherworldly teachings.

BHIKKHU: The Dhamma is both sublime and down to earth. The Buddha teaches the practical things we should do to live honourably and to reach the highest. Now, right action is the next factor of the path.

GENE: Excuse me, venerable sir, but aren't intentions and speech kinds of action? Isn't this what you've been saying?

BHIKKHU: Yes, indeed. I see you've been listening. Good! Right intention refers to volitional activities of the mind. Right speech refers to what we do through our speech, our activities of language. Now, the factor of right action concerns that which everyone can recognise as action; namely, activities of the body. In the simplest terms, right action means abstaining from killing, abstaining from stealing, and abstaining from misconduct in sensual desires.

- GENE: Well, the first two are clear enough to me. Killing living beings or stealing is bad kamma which must bring bad results. But what about the third? I thought it was just refraining from committing adultery.
- BHIKKHU: That is the principal application. Sensual desires are desires for the various objects of our various senses. Lust and passion can arise in many ways. But here the Buddha is referring specifically to sexual desire, which is such a driving passion in human beings. It needs to be watched and governed carefully. A follower of the Dhamma should not have any sexual relations with anyone else's wife or husband. He or she should not commit adultery. Moreover, one must not have sexual relations with any other under-age, unsuitable, dependent persons. It follows that one must refrain from seducing or coercing anyone sexually. To put it in positive terms, one should be honourable and respectful of others in such matters.
- GENE: I'm afraid that killing and stealing and sexual misbehaviour are all too common in this world.
- BHIKKHU: Yes, and on account of them living beings suffer tremendously. Right action, then, is abstaining from these harmful actions and cultivating instead harmlessness, respect for others' property, and integrity regarding sexuality. These principles are very broad, you can see, and require us to be thoughtful and self-controlled in all aspects of our lives.
- GENE: One thing I notice is that if people would practise these factors of the path diligently it would be very beneficial to others, to society as a whole, as well as to themselves. It looks like these teachings would promote good in the world as well as good in the individual.
- BHIKKHU: The way of Dhamma always promotes the happiness and security of living beings. Our conscious actions through body, speech, and mind are significant; we are responsible for them; so we ought to pay attention to them and try to develop the wholesome and abandon the unwholesome.
- GENE: I'm a little unclear as to what actually constitutes the wholesome and the unwholesome. And also, you said something before about "roots."
- BHIKKHU: Unwholesome, bad actions are those that arise from the three unwholesome roots. These are greed, hatred, and delusion. We have these defilements deep in our minds, and when we act on them we commit unwholesome actions which will harm ourselves and others. There are also three wholesome roots. These are non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion—the exact opposites. In positive terms: liberality, good will, and wisdom. When our actions arise from these roots we call them wholesome actions.
- GENE: Aren't people often ignorant or unaware of these roots?
- BHIKKHU: Yes. We might not pay attention, or we might not admit the real sources of our actions, but that doesn't change their true character. We should therefore try to look closely and honestly to distinguish the good from the bad, and then act judiciously.
- GENE: These factors of the Noble Eightfold Path that you are describing are much wider than I had thought. They seem to cover every aspect of human life.
- BHIKKHU: Both ordinary and extraordinary things must be considered by one who wants to travel the path all the way to deliverance. The fifth factor of the path, right livelihood, shows that the Buddha did not overlook the importance even of how we make our living.
- GENE: Why should something as routine as a job be so important?
- BHIKKHU: Because it also involves our intentional action—repeated action and habitual action. Our livelihood is a major part of life and a focus of our interests and energies. Basically, to have right livelihood means to earn our living through respectable and honour-

able means, not causing loss or harm to living beings. We must abstain from all kinds of deceit, fraud, trickery, and avarice. We should be devoted to honesty and fair dealing.

GENE: At least I don't have to worry about this too much right now. My present job is pretty benign and the people I work with are mostly all right. But I've never given much thought to being ethical in this way.

BHIKKHU: We are going to receive the results of our own actions, so it's important to pay attention to what we are doing and to make sure we are behaving properly.

GENE: Venerable sir, I can see that Buddhism lays great stress on individual responsibility. We are free to strive for enlightenment, and we are encouraged to do so. At the same time we are responsible for what we do, for our own kamma. But, you know, it's just not easy to do the right thing all the time. Purity of mind or speech or bodily action just doesn't come naturally to me!

BHIKKHU: Well, Gene, you are hardly unique in that. Virtue doesn't just happen without any exertion on our part. We need to use the factor of right effort. There are in fact four particular kinds of right effort. The first kind is the effort to avoid or prevent unwholesome states of mind to begin with—to keep them from rising and swelling up. Because we often come into contact with attractive and repulsive objects of the senses, we can easily give way to greed, hatred, or delusion. So we must strive to stop the arising of unwholesome states.

GENE: What if we can't stop them? Sometimes they just spring up. I might go from minor irritation to anger very quickly. It's frustrating.

BHIKKHU: The second kind of right effort is the effort to overcome bad, unwholesome states that have already occurred. We should not tolerate them; we should try to rid our minds of them. Now then, for good states of mind—and I'm sure you must have some of them, too—we shouldn't simply wait around to feel kindly or generous; we should make the conscious effort to generate wholesome states. That is the third kind of right effort. Then, whenever we are aware of having such wholesome states of mind we shouldn't be careless or complacent; rather we should maintain or develop these states. That is, when we notice good in ourselves, we should by all means try to cultivate it and increase it. That is the fourth kind of right effort.

GENE: A lot of energy is required for this path!

BHIKKHU: Yes, certainly. We need to restrain our senses, sharpen our understanding, and walk in the right direction. Let's consider the last two factors on the list: right mindfulness and right concentration.

GENE: Those refer specifically to meditation practice, don't they?

BHIKKHU: No, not just that. They have much wider significance—as wide as life itself. If we are going to act wisely we will need an accurate perception of the world, won't we? If our observations are superficial and our attention is fickle and shaky we will acquire false notions. So we need to be sure we are seeing things deeply and truly, not as we habitually imagine them or want them to be. Right mindfulness means impartial attention, watchfulness, alertness, unbiased contemplation. It is an extremely important quality that the Buddha says will lead to purity, to overcoming sorrow, to realising Nibbāna. As long as a person lacks clarity in his perception of reality he will be subject to misunderstanding and misjudgment, even if he is trying to do right. But with mindfulness it becomes possible to see phenomena in their true nature as impermanent, unsatisfactory, and devoid of self—having no essence at all that could be grasped. This individual, penetrating understanding is what ultimately destroys craving.

GENE: But is right mindfulness just a kind of general awareness? That seems kind of vague.

- BHIKKHU: The Buddha describes the practice quite specifically. There are four foundations of mindfulness, or four ways of setting it up and developing it. First, there is contemplation of the body. One pays attention to the physical body in its many aspects, noticing the changes in it, its breathing, its postures, watching its activities as they occur, considering the organs that compose it, observing its characteristics without liking or disliking—with a calm neutrality.
- GENE: Why should we pay such attention to our bodies?
- BHIKKHU: To gain a realistic understanding and then detachment. The body is an object that causes much attachment and confusion. It ages, it gets sick, it gives pain—and we can't prevent this. Thus we need to see it with wisdom for what it is—merely a temporary physical compound without any ego inside it. We must practise contemplation of the body in order to arrive at a mature understanding and detachment. Now, the mental side of life also requires contemplation. The second foundation of mindfulness is contemplation of feelings; that is, the pleasant feelings, unpleasant feelings, and neutral feelings that arise in conjunction with our sensory experiences.
- GENE: How are we supposed to regard these feelings?
- BHIKKHU: We should regard them objectively, without clinging to them or getting excited about them. They too have the characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and non-self. The job of the observer is to notice them, seeing how they arise and how they pass away.
- GENE: Without regarding them as “my” feelings?
- BHIKKHU: Yes, exactly. Now, the rest of our experience also needs careful attention. The third foundation of mindfulness is contemplation of the mind. Is the mind lustful or not lustful, hateful or without hate, unconcentrated or concentrated? We simply try to know the mind as it is—without clinging or attachment—noticing consciousness arising and passing away, being clearly and calmly aware of its quality.
- GENE: What about specific activities of the mind, like thoughts and ideas and intentions and so on? I mean, all the buzzing mental activity that goes on.
- BHIKKHU: That is dealt with in the fourth foundation of mindfulness—contemplation of mental objects. This contemplation is concerned with the specific objects of our knowing and thinking. We must try to notice very clearly and dispassionately those things that draw our attention from moment to moment. In other words, we don't give ourselves up heedlessly to the great chaos of thought but instead take note of what exactly is going on within our minds. If there is sensual desire present in us, we know it. If there is ill will, we know it. If there is dullness and drowsiness, restlessness and agitation, or doubt, we likewise know it. We should take note in our own experience of the fundamentals taught by the Buddha, observing, for example, the five aggregates of material form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness, learning how they arise and pass away. Also we should pay attention to our senses of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind as they operate, seeing how objects arise and what they lead to. The good and bad factors that appear in our minds should be noted as they occur. Also we should dispassionately observe in ourselves and in the world around us the Four Noble Truths themselves—contemplating suffering as it really arises and passes away. No object of our experience should escape the eye of right mindfulness.
- GENE: I notice that you emphasise that we should observe dispassionately, without clinging. It sounds like we should try to regard objectively what we usually look at quite subjectively.
- BHIKKHU: The ideas of liking and disliking, of me and what belongs to me, twist our view of reality. The Buddha says that one who practises these four foundations of mindfulness remains independent, not holding on to anything in the world. It's not hard to understand that when we cling to objects, when we regard them with greed, we cannot have

a truly free and accurate view of them. Therefore we must try to step back from our usual biases and contemplate the world freshly, with objective mindfulness.

GENE: Venerable sir, this factor of the path certainly seems to require a change from the usual way of looking. It's perfectly reasonable but still quite challenging.

BHIKKHU: If we are ever going to perfect our understanding, if we are ever going to break the bonds of craving, we have to make a steady effort to resist our habits and prejudices and see things in their actual nature, according to reality.

GENE: Yes, I understand how vital that is. We need reliable information in order to work properly and to get anywhere. Well, by now it would seem you've covered every possible aspect of life. What is left for right concentration? What does it do?

BHIKKHU: Right concentration, the eighth of the eight factors, means the attainment of the jhānas, which are very refined states of immense peace and concentration. More generally, right concentration means one-pointedness of mind together with wholesome mental states. It is the centering of the mind firmly on an object. It is the focusing of attention on something which we wish to know in depth.

GENE: Don't we all do that already?

BHIKKHU: No, usually our concentration is weak and unsteady, barely sufficient for daily living. To help mindfulness to do its work of discerning what is happening we must have a sharp focus. Good qualities develop properly and bring benefits as they are concentrated, sustained, put to work. If we run around distractedly, never lingering long in one spot, we won't be able to investigate anything deeply. Talent, intelligence, good will, and energy won't yield results unless they are patiently concentrated on a problem or object. To drive a nail straight into a board you can't just swing your hammer wildly; you have to control yourself, watch closely, and strike the nail again and again. To take another example, you might have a powerful microscope that can show you minute objects in beautiful detail. But if you don't adjust it and focus it properly you won't be able to get a satisfying look at anything. Concentration is the steadying and the focusing of your faculties so that you will be able to perceive things clearly.

GENE: That makes sense. It's something else I'd hardly thought about before. But of course it's unrealistic to expect progress in understanding if one can't concentrate one's energies long enough or faithfully enough. And I'm afraid I need a lot more concentration; I have trouble keeping my mind on any one thing for very long. It just keeps jumping and running when I want it to be still!

BHIKKHU: The nature of the untrained mind is to scamper around. Don't feel discouraged. That's nothing unusual or surprising. Most of your life, perhaps, you have not really tried to discipline your mind, so naturally when you first begin to try, you discover how unruly it really is. But the mind can be trained; we can build up concentration gradually.

GENE: So here is something else to look into.

BHIKKHU: Looking into reality—investigating things—is just what a follower of the Buddha should do. These eight factors of the path complement each other, you see. So you should investigate them and practise them.

GENE: The more you explain it, the more I realise how comprehensive this Noble Eightfold Path is. And I know you're just sketching a bare outline for me. There's so much to practise, so much to investigate here.

BHIKKHU: Now then, knowing what you know so far, do you think this path is impossibly difficult? Is it entirely beyond you?

GENE: It's challenging, that's for sure. But I couldn't say it's impossible. If I did I would be defeatist—I would just be evading and shirking without knowing what I'm capable of. I'll just have to try to follow the path and see how far I can go.

BHIKKHU: That's right. It depends on you. The Noble Eightfold Path is the unsurpassed way to the ending of suffering which the Buddha has taught to us.

GENE: Well, I see it, venerable sir, at least in theory. It's like I'm standing on a road and trying to look ahead to where it leads, but there are hills and turns and I can only see this one place where I'm standing.

BHIKKHU: Which is exactly what you should see. The present moment is where we stand and where we have to do our work. All that we have is the present flashing before our senses. Never mind about what is over the next hill on the road—what about here and now? The Buddha said we must reach the end of the world in order to overcome suffering, but he also said, as I told you, that right here in this body with its perceptions and thoughts there is the world, the origin of the world, the end of the world, and the way to the end of the world. One cannot get there just by walking; but one who purifies himself and who comes to understand the world wisely can reach the goal. Consider your own mind and body, and your senses of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind, and the corresponding objects of each—aren't these all right here, all within reach?

GENE: Yes, they're all right here. I just hope all of these things will continue to get clearer—just like those trees out there emerging from the mist.

They both sit quietly for a moment, looking out the windows. The scene of damp green grass and trees has grown much brighter, suffused with light. A very slight breeze has begun to stir a few leaves, and the illusion of stillness begins to give way. The day perceptibly advances.

BHIKKHU: The fog, the mist out there, comes and goes according to the conditions of nature. The fog in our minds is likewise subject to conditions. But we are the ones who have been unwittingly setting up the wrong conditions, through our craving. Do you wonder why so much of the path is concerned with avoiding and abstaining? It is because we are the authors of our suffering through wrong ideas and wrong behaviour. It is the stopping of harm that gives peace. It is the putting down of the burden that is enlightenment. Do you see? When the sun comes and the wind comes the mist is driven away. Then the world appears to our eyes. The Dhamma is like sun and wind.

GENE: Then I need plenty of it to get rid of my defilements. Let me ask you, Venerable Tissa, what can I do to keep greed and hatred and delusion from getting a grip on my mind and deceiving it?

BHIKKHU: Sharpen your mindfulness. And, particularly, try to look at the world with wise attention. This means not to succumb to the superficial appearances of things, but to contemplate them dispassionately, remembering their true nature. Our senses are indiscriminate—they feed us great volumes of perceptions which can overwhelm us if we're unwary. We need to restrain our senses, to govern them and control them so that we don't get swept away helplessly by the emotions they arouse.

GENE: That's an interesting idea—to restrain the senses. I guess I've always more or less assumed that my senses should take in as much as possible.

BHIKKHU: No, the functioning of the senses needs intelligent restraint. For example, do you leave the windows of your apartment wide open all the time?

GENE: No, I adjust them depending on the weather.

BHIKKHU: You need to close them when the rain comes or when it gets cold outside. When you need fresh air you open them a little or a lot. And you might have windowshades or awnings to regulate how much light comes in. In a similar way, we need to keep watch over our senses so we don't get overwhelmed and distracted.

GENE: Some perceptions I have are more trouble than others.

BHIKKHU: Yes, some things especially provoke greed, some aversion, and some confusion or delusion. That is, they may do this if we leave our senses unguarded. If we are alert and apply wise attention, reflecting on the teaching of the Buddha, unwholesome states will have less chance to develop.

GENE: How exactly should I reflect?

BHIKKHU: You should observe phenomena carefully, noting that they all arise and pass away.

GENE: They are impermanent.

BHIKKHU: You should reflect also that all phenomena are dukkha—unsatisfactory, incapable of giving lasting pleasure. And also you should observe that all this jumble of shape and colour and sound is like foam on a river—mere bubbles, empty of any eternal essence. Just let the foam go rushing by. Watch it in peace, without grasping. Seeing in this way you will be less likely to fall under the spell of the attractive and the repulsive. Real happiness is to be found in the calming of the passions, not in feverish craving for the inconstant pleasures of the sensory world.

GENE: Real happiness is what I want.

BHIKKHU: All of us want it, but it doesn't come just because of our wanting. We have to do the work—avoiding evil, doing good, cleansing our own minds.

GENE: I would like to do that work. If I could do it—even slowly, even a little bit—I think it would make my life better and would make life better for those around me.

BHIKKHU: You are free to work, and the right method is still accessible in the world. When the Buddha discovered and made known the Dhamma he gave living beings the most wonderful gift.

GENE: It's amazing to me, venerable sir, that a teaching so old, from so far away, should now appear so fresh and true in my own life today.

BHIKKHU: What the Buddha realised and taught was timeless truth—something to be known individually by the wise. He was one lone ascetic bent on the good, striving for realisation in the midst of the ignorance and misery of the world. There was rain and wind and sun and solitude, and through it all he sought the ineffable, highest peace. He sought it, not giving up, not content with lesser splendours, until he overcame the last barriers of ignorance and attained perfect enlightenment.

GENE: After that, he didn't need to do anything further, did he? He had reached the goal. Why—I can't help wondering—why did he then go on to teach?

BHIKKHU: (*smiling*) He looked around the world and saw living creatures afflicted and lost, and he had compassion for them. Then for the rest of his life he taught, explaining the way to reach Nibbāna, encouraging and guiding other seekers.

GENE: And still the Dhamma is known in this world. So the Buddha's compassion is still bearing fruit, even after all these centuries—bearing fruit even for me, maybe.

BHIKKHU: Yes, but Buddhas only show us the way to travel, remember. We must make the effort ourselves.

GENE: (*slowly*) I feel ... fortunate. I can't say that everything is perfectly clear to me, but I have a good idea. And it seems to me, venerable sir, that I could put meaning into my life if I travel that path.

BHIKKHU: Your life is right now. The path is right now. The Buddha explains suffering and the way to put an end to suffering. We have all endured much confusion and pain, guessing and struggling, driven on by uncontrolled craving. Haven't we hoped for clarity and peace? The Buddha has done what a master could do for his students, wishing for their welfare and happiness. Now it is up to us. So here is the day. This is the day you

live in, Gene, with body and mind and all the amazing formations of the world. See what you can make of it all.

Gene sits listening. Then he looks around the room, looks out the window at the green woods. He smiles, makes a vague, embarrassed gesture.

GENE: You've answered my questions, venerable sir. Whatever else was on my mind—doubts and things like that—they seem to have gone away, dissolved. Oh, I expect they'll come back—I'll have more questions, certainly. But now I don't have anything else to say or ask. I think I should go on to practise more. And I have to go now, I do. My job—it's time—ah, I hardly care about the time, but I shouldn't trouble you any more this morning. I better go.

BHIKKHU: We all have our duties. You have your work to attend to.

GENE: Yes, I have my work, and then I have my real work, my Dhamma work.

BHIKKHU: The Dhamma should fill and brighten *all* your hours. Keep practicing, GENE.

GENE sits quietly for a moment, then bows to the monk.

GENE: Thank you very much, venerable sir.

BHIKKHU TISSA smiles easily. They both rise. At the front door GENE stops to put on his shoes. BHIKKHU TISSA steps out onto the porch, and a moment later GENE comes out smiling.

GENE: Oh, look at this weather! It's going to be a beautiful day. It smells so wonderful. All that fog is gone. Now if only I can deal with this fog in my mind!

BHIKKHU: Just keep watching, Gene, keep observing. All of this changing world, within and without, can teach us if we're patient and attentive. We can find the truth in the beautiful and the ugly, in the painful and the pleasant, in trees and wind and rain and fog.

GENE: Here are all these broken-off twigs and branches from last night's storm. I see them clear enough! Impermanence once again.

BHIKKHU: Ah, you're getting the idea. All these things can teach us. Our bodies and breath and thoughts can teach us.

GENE: And dragonflies!

BHIKKHU: And dragonflies.

GENE moves with a light step to his car. He looks around and takes a deep, glad breath of air.)

GENE: Thank you again, venerable sir. Oh, isn't it a spectacular morning! It's so beautiful. Isn't this wonderful weather?

BHIKKHU TISSA looks up at the blue sky with a wry smile.

BHIKKHU: Hmm... Yes, but it will change.

GENE: *(laughing)* Yes, venerable sir!

GENE hops into his car, bangs the door shut, starts the engine, and drives away, a joyful smile still on his face.

The Author

The author, Bhikkhu Nyanasobhano, is an American Buddhist monk ordained in Thailand in 1987. His *Two Dialogues on Dhamma* (BPS Wheel No. 363/364) also features Bhikkhu Tissa.

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