

The Buddha's Last Word

On the night of his passing away, as he was lying on his side under a pair of flowering trees, the Buddha gave his last instructions to his followers. His final sentence was *appamadena sampadetha*: Reach consummation through heedfulness. English syntax requires that we place “heedfulness” last when we translate the sentence, which may explain why so many discussions of this passage focus on heedfulness as the Buddha’s parting message. There’s nothing really wrong with that—after all, as he said elsewhere (AN 10:15), heedfulness is the source of all skillful qualities—but in the original Pali sentence, the verb for “reach consummation” actually comes last. Because the Buddha probably gave careful attention to choosing the whole of his last sentence, it’s worth looking carefully at the word that usually gets overlooked: to gain a sense of what it means, how it connects with the rest of the Buddha’s teaching, and why he would emphasize it by making it the last word he would ever speak.

Consummation is a state of fullness or perfection. As the Buddha recognized, some forms of consummation come with little or no effort, as when you’re born into a large, well-connected family, consummate in good health and a wide range of possessions. But as he noted, this sort of consummation doesn’t put an end to suffering; when you lose these things, it’s not really a serious loss. The serious losses are when you lose your virtue or your correct understanding of which acts are skillful and which ones are not, for if you lose these things, your actions will lead to more suffering for yourself and for others, now and into the future (AN 5:130).

This is where the concept of meaningful consummation comes in. If you want to end your suffering, you need to develop consummate mastery of the skills that allow you to see the cause of that suffering and to perfect the inner qualities required to bring it to an end. As with the mastery of any really important skill, this calls for concerted effort.

The cause of suffering is *avijja*, a word that means both ignorance and lack of skill. There is no way we can trace back to a past point in time when ignorance began (AN 10:61), but we can learn both to detect the mental qualities in the present that sustain ignorance and to master the skills that put an end to them here and now. As Ajaan Suwat, one of my teachers, once said, even though ignorance has existed since time immemorial, consummate knowledge can end it, just as light can instantly end darkness regardless of how long that darkness has reigned.

Consummate knowledge is the knowledge that sees things in terms of the four noble truths, plus the skill mastering the task that each truth entails: comprehending suffering; abandoning its cause—i.e., the craving that sustains ignorance; realizing the cessation of suffering; and developing the path to its cessation.

Attaining consummation is part of developing the path, and in particular the path factor of right effort: making the effort to give rise to skillful mental

qualities and to bring them to the culmination of their development. Although the idea of consummation could logically apply to any skillful quality, the Buddha associated it with specific lists of qualities that relate to two distinct stages of the path. And even though consummation in these areas isn't fully reached until the path arrives at the noble attainments, you can work toward consummation, and reap the benefits that come from heading in that direction, from the very beginning of the path.

The first level of consummation deals with qualities perfected when a meditator reaches the first level of awakening, called stream-entry. Such a person is said to be consummate in view (*ditthi-sampanno*) and consummate in virtue (*sila-sampanno*)—the two forms of consummation that the Buddha, in AN 5:130, said are of utmost importance. Consummation in view comes when you drop ignorance long enough to see how, when the mental fabrications dependent on ignorance also fall away, all suffering ends and there's an experience of a deathless dimension outside of space and time. Consummation in virtue comes from stepping out of time long enough to see without a doubt how your own actions have sustained suffering for an immeasurably long time—it didn't start just with this lifetime—and, as a result, you never want to act in grossly unskillful ways ever again.

This experience of the deathless radically and permanently alters many things in the mind, but the experience itself is only temporary. And it's not enough to end craving, because many more qualities of mind need to be brought to consummation for awakening to be full, leaving no possibility of any further mental suffering.

One standard list of qualities that stream-enterers need to develop further is mentioned in MN 53: the fifteen types of conduct (*carana*), which are divided into three sets. Some of the qualities in the first two sets are actually mentioned elsewhere in the Canon as qualities already brought to consummation on the first level of awakening. Their inclusion in the *carana* may relate to the fact that even though they are already perfected, they still have to be put to use to complete the tasks of meditation.

The first set of qualities contains four factors: virtue, restraint of the senses, wakefulness, and moderation in eating. These qualities deal with practical issues in how you manage your day-to-day activities so that they are conducive to awakening. Although these qualities may seem extremely mundane, if you're intent on awakening, you can't afford to neglect them.

The second set of qualities contains seven factors: conviction, shame, compunction, learning, persistence, mindfulness, and discernment. This is a list that the Buddha in AN 7:63 compares to a frontier fortress, indicating that when they're mastered they protect the mind from being invaded by unskillful habits. Conviction in the Buddha's awakening is like the foundation post for the fortress; shame and compunction at the thought of acting in unskillful ways are like a moat and road encircling the fortress; learning the Dhamma is like stocking the fortress with weapons; persistence is like a troop of soldiers; mindfulness is like a gatekeeper who recognizes who should and shouldn't be allowed into the

fortress; and discernment is like the fortress wall, well-plastered so that the enemy can't find any handholds or footholds to climb up and invade the fortress of your mind.

The third and final set of carana consists of the four jhanas—levels of strong concentration—which the Buddha compared to the provisions needed to keep the gatekeeper and the soldiers of the fortress well-nourished and strong in performing their duties.

These fifteen qualities, when brought to a consummate level of mastery, counteract the craving that sustains avijja. This is why they lead to the three cognitive skills or knowledges (*vijja*) that bring about full awakening: knowledge of your own previous lives; knowledge of the passing away and rearing of beings in line with their kamma; and knowledge of the ending of mental effluents—deeply rooted unskillful qualities that “flow out” of the mind. The first two of these skills affirm the principles of kamma and rebirth and the interconnection between the two. The third skill, however, is the most crucial of the three, as it clearly sees experience in terms of the four noble truths and completes the duties appropriate to each, so that the effluents no longer flow. In this way, this third skill leads directly to the ending of kamma and rebirth, and to full release from suffering and stress.

The Buddha himself was consummate in these fifteen types of conduct and in the three cognitive skills they engender, which is why “consummate in knowledge and conduct” (*vijja-carana-sampanno*) is included in the standard list of his virtues chanted daily in Buddhist communities throughout the world. By concluding his teachings with “reach consummation,” he was encouraging his followers to develop these same virtues as well.

What's remarkable about these forms of consummation is how unremarkable they are. As the Buddha once said, he wasn't a close-fisted teacher, saving a secret or esoteric doctrine for last. Instead, the word “reach consummation” simply reiterates the main teaching he had stressed openly from the very beginning of his career: Develop the eightfold path—which is the same thing as training in virtue, concentration, and discernment—so as to release the mind from its effluents and the suffering they entail. The forms of consummation that don't fall directly under this teaching are practical, down-to-earth steps for keeping you on the path, moment-by-moment, day-by-day.

Shame and compunction develop the healthy sense of self-esteem and heedfulness that sees even the slightest unskillful actions as beneath you and as carrying fearful consequences. When you master these qualities, they prevent you from doing things you would later regret.

Sense restraint: When you look at anything, notice why you're looking and what happens to the mind as a result. If unskillful qualities are doing the looking or flare up from the looking, change the way you look at things. Apply the same principle to all your senses, and it will protect your powers of mindfulness and concentration from leaking out your sense doors in the course of the day.

Wakefulness: Sleep no more than is absolutely necessary, and spend your waking hours in cleansing the mind, regardless of whatever else you're doing.

Moderation in eating: Keep careful watch over your motivation for eating, and eat only enough to maintain your strength and health for the practice.

By including these issues under the term "consummation," the Buddha was emphasizing the point that no possible opening for craving to sneak into the mind, however small, should be overlooked. Perhaps it was because he knew how easy it is to become complacent and to rationalize carelessness in these fundamental areas that he wanted his disciples to use heedfulness in viewing them as consummate skills, worthy of scrupulous attention.

By ending his teachings with the verb *sampadetha*, "reach consummation," he was using a shorthand term to give these basic principles the last word in the Dhamma. And he was encouraging us to give them the last word in our lives.