

BEYOND BUDDHISM
REDISCOVERING THE ORIGINAL DHAMMA

Guy Eugène DUBOIS



*“Spiritual wisdom is a gift to be shared with insight and
compassion, never exploited for personal gain.
The moment wisdom is commercialized
—marketed—it ceases
to be a gift and becomes a commodity.
Once profound insight is assigned a price,
its transformative power is inevitably diminished.”*
(Guy E. Dubois)

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*“Nothing is exempt from investigation—
not even one's own spiritual practice.”*

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PREFACE

Books about Buddhism are abundant. Every tradition offers its own interpretations, practices, commentaries, and philosophical systems. Many of them have inspired generations of sincere practitioners and deserve respect for what they have preserved.

This book is not written against Buddhism.

This book is not an academic project. Nor is it an autobiographical account. It is the result of a long personal inquiry into the earliest layers of the Dhamma and the liberating insight to which they point.

It is an attempt to let the original clarity of the Dhamma speak for itself—free from later doctrinal accretions, free from appropriation, free from every claim to authority, and open, as insight itself is, to anyone willing to look.

Nor is it an attempt to establish a new school, defend a particular interpretation, or replace one tradition with another. Its purpose is much simpler: to return, as carefully as possible, to the question that lies at the heart of the Buddha's awakening.

What did the Buddha actually discover?

To approach that question faithfully requires more than historical curiosity. It also requires a willingness to look in a particular way.

Throughout this book, the earliest Dhamma is approached not as a metaphysical system describing

the ultimate nature of reality, but as a careful investigation of lived experience.¹

The Buddha's concern is consistently directed towards what can be observed directly: the arising and ceasing of dukkha, the conditions that sustain it, and the possibility of its complete cessation.

Throughout this book, a single functional question serves as the guiding criterion: “How does this contribute to the ending of dukkha?”

Every teaching, every practice, every interpretation, and every historical development is considered in the light of that question.

For that reason, this book deliberately avoids introducing metaphysical concepts—such as Ultimate Reality, Pure Consciousness, True Self, or similar formulations—that do not belong to the earliest discourses.

This is not a judgement upon later traditions, many of which developed rich philosophical and contemplative vocabularies of their own. It is simply a methodological choice.

The guiding question throughout these pages is therefore never, “What should we believe about reality?” but rather, “What can be observed directly in experience, and how does that observation contribute to the ending of dukkha?”

Whenever these two approaches diverge, the latter is given precedence, because this is the orientation that consistently characterises the earliest Dhamma.

The purpose of this inquiry is therefore not to replace one conceptual construction with another, but to follow, as closely as possible, the investigative movement of the early Dhamma itself.

It seeks neither to establish a new philosophical position nor to offer another view of reality to be adopted. Rather, it invites careful observation, allowing experience to be known and seen as it actually is (*yathābhūta-ñāṇadassana*), so that the distortions sustained by ignorance, craving, and identification gradually lose their hold.

Over the centuries, the Dhamma has been both preserved and interpreted. That is inevitable.

Every living tradition transmits what it has received, but it also expresses it through its own language, culture, philosophy, and historical circumstances.

In that process, something essential may remain clearly visible, while other elements gradually become overlaid by concepts, doctrines, and assumptions that belong to later periods rather than to the earliest teachings themselves.

This book is an attempt to distinguish, as carefully as possible, between the teaching itself and the historical forms through which it has been transmitted.

That distinction is important.

It is not made in order to diminish the traditions that have carried the Dhamma through history. Without them, these teachings would almost certainly have disappeared.

Yet preserving a teaching and interpreting it are not the same thing. History has both protected the Dhamma and, at times, made its original practical orientation more difficult to discern.

For that reason, the choice of the title *Beyond Buddhism* deserves a brief explanation.

Beyond does not mean against. It does not suggest abandoning Buddhism, rejecting its traditions, or dismissing centuries of sincere practice.

The word *Buddhism* is a relatively modern term. It does not appear in the early discourses and was not a name the Buddha used for his teaching.

Emerging in the nineteenth century through Western scholarship and the colonial encounter with Asia, it became a convenient label for a wide range of traditions, institutions, philosophies, and cultures associated with his teaching.

The title therefore points beyond this later historical category and back towards what the early discourses call the Dhamma.

It invites us to look through the historical forms towards the liberating insight to which those forms originally pointed. It is an invitation to ask whether the earliest Dhamma can still be encountered directly, before it is viewed through the lens of any particular philosophical system, cultural identity, or religious institution.

The pages that follow do not ask for belief. They ask only for careful investigation.

The early discourses encourage direct observation rather than acceptance on authority. They invite us to examine experience itself, to look carefully at the arising and ceasing of suffering, and to verify for ourselves what leads to bondage and what leads to liberation.

This book is written in exactly that spirit.

If it succeeds, it will not persuade the reader to adopt a different view. It will encourage something more valuable: the willingness to look again, with fresh eyes, at one of humanity's most profound discoveries.

The invitation is simple.

Not to believe.

Not to reject.

But to investigate.

Guy Eugène Dubois
Beerzel, August 2026

THE BUDDHA AND THE INVENTION OF BUDDHISM

The Buddha never referred to a religion called Buddhism. Instead, he spoke of the Dhamma and the Vinaya.²

This simple historical observation³ raises an important question: “if the Buddha taught Dhamma and Vinaya rather than Buddhism, how did Buddhism come into being?”

This question is not intended polemically.

It does not suggest that Buddhism is merely an artificial construction, nor that everything associated with Buddhist traditions should be dismissed as a later distortion. Rather, it points to a historical distinction that is both simple and far-reaching.

The name Buddhism belongs to a later world. It refers to the many religious, philosophical, cultural, devotional, and institutional forms that developed around the Buddha’s teaching after his death.

These forms preserved much of extraordinary value. They transmitted texts, established communities, developed disciplines of practice, inspired art and literature, and carried the memory of the Buddha across languages, cultures, and centuries.

But the historical forms of Buddhism cannot simply be identified with what the Buddha himself taught.

That distinction is the starting point of this book. Its purpose is not to separate the two, but to understand their relationship more clearly.

The early discourses do not present the Buddha's concern as the creation of a religious identity. He did not ask his followers to define themselves through adherence to a system of belief, a metaphysical doctrine, or a cultural tradition.

Again and again, the early discourses return to a far more immediate concern: dukkha, its arising, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation.

This was not one subject among others. It was the organising centre of the teaching.

The Dhamma was not presented as a speculative explanation of the universe. It was a path of investigation directed toward the structure of human bondage.

It examined how suffering arises through craving, clinging, identification, and becoming, and how it comes to an end when these processes are fully understood and relinquished.

The Vinaya served this same liberating purpose. It provided the discipline within which the monastic community could live, practise, teach, and preserve the Dhamma.

The Saṅgha was not an accidental addition to the teaching, nor was it absent during the Buddha's lifetime. A community existed. Rules existed. Forms of

training, recitation, ordination, instruction, and communal observance existed.

The earliest Dhamma was never formless. Yet form and function are not the same.

The institutions established around the Buddha were intended to support a path of liberation. Their purpose was practical and instrumental. They created conditions in which the teaching could be practised, embodied, transmitted, and tested.

The community existed for the Dhamma; the Dhamma did not exist to sustain the community as an end in itself.

This distinction becomes increasingly important as a living teaching passes through history.

Every teaching that survives must take form. It must be remembered in words, organised within communities, interpreted by teachers, protected by institutions, and transmitted through particular cultures.

Without such forms, it disappears.

But the very forms that preserve a teaching may also begin to shape it.

Language becomes terminology.

Terminology becomes doctrine.

Practice becomes custom.

Guidance becomes authority.

Community becomes institution.

Memory becomes tradition.

Tradition becomes identity.

None of these developments is necessarily corrupt or illegitimate. They may be unavoidable. They may even be indispensable.

Yet they introduce a tension that every religious tradition eventually faces: the tension between the original function of a teaching and the historical forms through which it continues to exist.

At what point does a living teaching become a tradition?

At what point does a means of liberation become an institution?

At what point does a practical instruction become a doctrine to be defended?

At what point does an indication become a belief?

At what point do we begin to speak of Buddhism rather than simply the Dhamma?

At what point does Dhamma become Buddhism?

There is no single historical moment at which this transformation occurred. What we now call Buddhism did not arise through a single act of invention.

It emerged gradually through centuries of preservation, interpretation, organisation, expansion, debate, adaptation, and cultural encounter.

Even during the Buddha's lifetime, the teaching required structure. After his death, the need for preservation became more urgent. Discourses had to be

remembered and classified. Rules had to be maintained and interpreted. Disputes had to be resolved. Communities spread into new regions. Different lineages developed. New questions arose. Existing teachings were systematised, explained, expanded, and sometimes reimagined.

Over time, the Dhamma became increasingly embedded in complex religious worlds. Cosmologies grew more elaborate. Philosophical systems became more refined. Ritual, devotion, symbolism, merit, sacred geography, institutional authority, and communal identity assumed larger roles. Distinct traditions came to define not only how the Buddha's teaching should be understood, but also what it meant to be Buddhist.

The result is the rich and extraordinarily diverse historical phenomenon now called Buddhism.

To recognise this development is not to condemn it. It is to distinguish history from origin.

The distinction matters because the historical development of a tradition can alter the way its central questions are heard.

A teaching concerned with the ending of dukkha may gradually come to be understood as a religion centred on doctrine, belonging, ritual, cosmology, morality, meditation, philosophy, or future liberation.

These elements may remain connected to the original path, but they may also redirect attention away from its central purpose.

What was intended as a means may become an end. What was meant to point may, in some circumstances, become an object of reverence. What was offered for investigation can become something to believe. What was meant to release identity may become another identity.

The question, therefore, is not whether Buddhism is true or false, authentic or inauthentic, valuable or worthless. Such general judgements would be historically crude and doctrinally unhelpful.

The more precise question is this: “Within the many forms that Buddhism has assumed, can the original liberating function of the Dhamma still be clearly discerned?”

This book proceeds from the working hypothesis that it can.

But to discern it, we must learn to distinguish between the teaching and its historical expressions, without pretending that the two can ever be completely separated.

We encounter the Dhamma only through what history has preserved. The early texts themselves were transmitted, organised, edited, interpreted, and handed down by communities. There is no access to an untouched teaching existing outside all historical mediation.

The task is therefore not to reconstruct an imaginary purity. Nor is it to strip the Dhamma of every cultural, communal, ethical, or disciplinary form.

It is to ask a more careful question: “Which elements serve the liberating purpose of the teaching, and which belong primarily to the religious, philosophical, and institutional worlds that later developed around it?”

This is entirely in keeping with the way the early discourses present the Dhamma, repeatedly inviting us to “come and see” (*ehipassiko*)⁴ rather than merely to accept.

This requires both respect and discernment.

Respect, because the traditions preserved the very sources through which the early teaching remains accessible.

Discernment, because preservation does not eliminate interpretation, and continuity does not guarantee identity.

To look beyond Buddhism, in the sense intended here, is therefore not to reject Buddhism. It is to look through its historical forms toward the question that gave rise to them. It is to ask what remains when inherited assumptions, later classifications, sectarian loyalties, and religious identities are temporarily set aside.

What did the Buddha discover?

What did he identify as the cause of *dukkha*?

What did he mean by its cessation?

What kind of seeing brings that cessation about?

And what becomes of the teaching when these questions are no longer allowed to determine its meaning?

These are not merely historical questions. They concern the possibility of liberation here and now.

If the Dhamma is reduced to a historical religion, it becomes something we may study, admire, practise, defend, or identify with.

If it is understood according to its original function, it becomes an invitation to examine experience directly: to see how suffering is constructed, how identification is sustained, and how the conditions of bondage can cease.

The difference is decisive.

This book does not ask the reader to abandon Buddhism. It does not ask anyone to renounce a tradition, community, practice, or source of inspiration. Nor does it propose another identity to take their place.

It asks only that the distinction remain visible: between a path and the history that formed around it; between a teaching and the systems that interpreted it; between a functional community of practice and a religion as cultural identity; between the earliest recoverable Dhamma and the historical religions known as Buddhism.

The purpose of that distinction is not division. It is clarity. And clarity begins with careful distinction.



PART I - BEFORE BUDDHISM

This first part takes us back to the world before the emergence of what we now call Buddhism.

Its purpose is not to offer a comprehensive history of ancient India, nor to reconstruct a complete biography of the Buddha. Both subjects have been examined extensively by historians and scholars.

The aim here is more limited, yet more fundamental: to understand the context in which the Dhamma first arose.

If we are to understand the original meaning of the Dhamma, we must first ask what questions motivated the future Buddha, what religious and philosophical assumptions shaped the world into which he was born, what paths he explored, and why he eventually taught a way that differed in essential respects from the traditions in which he had been raised.

The chapters that follow therefore explore not the history of Buddhism, but the conditions that preceded it.

They examine the religious, cultural, and intellectual landscape of ancient India, the quest that culminated in the Buddha's awakening, and the fundamental characteristics of the Dhamma before its later interpretation, systematisation, and institutional development.

The purpose is not history for its own sake. As the Introduction has already suggested, the central ques-

tion remains the same throughout this book: What leads to the ending of dukkha?

Everything that follows is considered in the light of that question. Historical inquiry is valuable only insofar as it helps us understand more clearly the liberating purpose of the Buddha's teaching.



CHAPTER I - WHAT DID THE BUDDHA ACTUALLY TEACH?

Before we can examine how the Buddha's teaching developed through history, we must first ask a simpler and more fundamental question: "What did the Buddha actually teach?"

The question is deceptively simple.

It has generated centuries of interpretation, commentary, philosophical reflection, devotional practice, and scholarly debate.

Different Buddhist traditions have answered it in different ways, each emphasising particular texts, doctrines, practices, or ideals.

Yet beneath this remarkable diversity lies a more fundamental historical question: What can reasonably be identified as the central concern of the Buddha's own teaching as preserved in the earliest sources?

This book does not attempt to resolve every historical controversy surrounding the early tradition. Nor does it claim that the earliest discourses present a perfectly uniform body of material.

They do not.

Like every ancient textual tradition, they bear the marks of oral transmission, editorial organisation, and historical development.

Yet despite this complexity, a striking consistency remains visible. Again and again, the early discourses return to the same practical concern.

They do not begin with speculation about the origin of the universe, the nature of ultimate reality, or the destiny of the soul. They begin with human suffering, its causes, its cessation, and the possibility of liberation. Everything else is organised around that purpose.

This observation provides the point of departure for the present book.

If we wish to understand how the Dhamma developed into the diverse traditions now called Buddhism, we must first understand the function the teaching originally served.

Only then can we ask whether later developments clarified and supported that function, or gradually redirected attention away from it.

The chapters that follow therefore do not treat the Dhamma primarily as a philosophy, a religion, or a system of beliefs.

They approach it as the earliest discourses themselves repeatedly present it: as a practical investigation into the arising and ending of dukkha, undertaken for the sake of liberation.

The Starting Point: Dukkha

The earliest discourses present a remarkably consistent starting point. They do not begin with the

nature of the cosmos, the existence of God, the origin of life, or the ultimate nature of reality. Nor do they begin by asking what we should believe.

They begin with a fact that is immediately accessible to every human being: *dukkha*.

The Pāli word *dukkha* is often translated as “suffering,” but its meaning is broader and more nuanced. It encompasses not only physical and emotional pain, but also the subtle dissatisfaction, instability, vulnerability, and incompleteness that characterise all conditioned existence.

It points to a structural feature of human experience rather than to a particular emotion or circumstance.

The Buddha did not present *dukkha* as a pessimistic view of life. Nor did he suggest that life consists of nothing but suffering. Rather, he invited his listeners to examine a simple but profound question: “Why does suffering arise, and is its complete ending possible?”

This question gave the Dhamma its entire orientation. Every discourse, every practice, and every instruction ultimately served this single purpose.

The teaching was organised not around speculation, but around investigation; not around belief, but around understanding; not around explaining the world, but around understanding the processes through which suffering arises and ultimately comes to an end.

The significance of this starting point cannot be overstated. It establishes the criterion by which every aspect of the teaching is to be understood.

A practice, a doctrine, a discipline, or a form of community has value insofar as it contributes to the ending of dukkha. If it loses that function, it may still possess historical, philosophical, cultural, or religious significance, but it no longer expresses the primary purpose for which the Dhamma was taught.

This criterion is neither dismissive nor polemical. It does not suggest that doctrines, rituals, institutions, or traditions are inherently misguided or without value.

It simply places them in their original perspective.

Within the early Dhamma, their significance is functional rather than absolute: they are to be understood according to the extent to which they clarify, support, and embody the ending of dukkha.⁵

This functional perspective will serve as the guiding criterion throughout the chapters that follow.

The Structure of the Teaching

The Buddha's teaching is often presented as a collection of doctrines, philosophical ideas, or religious beliefs.

The earliest discourses, however, reveal a very different structure. Rather than offering a system of thought, they present a coherent framework for un-

derstanding dukkha, its arising, its cessation and the path leading to its cessation.

At the heart of this framework lies a simple progression.

First, dukkha is recognised. Next, its underlying causes are carefully investigated. As these causes become fully understood, the possibility of their cessation becomes evident. Finally, a practical path of cultivation is presented through which this understanding may be realised.

This movement—from observation, to investigation, to understanding, and ultimately to liberation—gives the Dhamma its characteristic structure.

It is neither speculative nor dogmatic. It is grounded in direct observation of experience and verified through practice rather than belief.

The Dhamma is therefore not a theory about experience, but an invitation to investigate experience directly. Its structure reflects not a philosophical system to be accepted, but a practical process to be understood and realised.

The Four Noble Truths are best understood within this context. They are not abstract propositions requiring assent, but a practical framework for investigation. They describe a process to be understood rather than a doctrine to be defended.

Seen in this way, the Dhamma possesses a remarkable internal coherence.

Every major teaching—whether concerning ethics, meditation, dependent arising, non-self, or wisdom—finds its place within this single liberating structure.

None exists independently of the others, and none serves an end separate from the ending of dukkha.

For this reason, understanding in the early Dhamma does not arise primarily through accepting propositions, but through seeing directly how experience unfolds. This principle will be explored more fully in the following section.

The Character of This Structure

The structure outlined above is easily misunderstood if approached through familiar categories.

Modern readers often expect a religious tradition to offer a philosophy of life, a system of beliefs, or a collection of spiritual practices.

The early Dhamma fits none of these descriptions comfortably.

It is not primarily a philosophical system.

The Buddha did not begin by constructing a theory about the nature of reality, nor did he seek to establish a comprehensive metaphysical worldview.

Questions concerning the eternity of the world, the ultimate substance of reality, or the nature of a permanent self were not placed at the centre of his teaching.

This was not because such questions were necessarily meaningless, but because they did not address the problem that most urgently concerned him: the arising and cessation of dukkha.

The Dhamma is therefore philosophical in its clarity and rigor, but not in its primary purpose. Its aim is not to explain reality as such, but to understand those aspects of experience that lead either to bondage or to liberation.

Neither is it primarily a system of beliefs.

The earliest discourses repeatedly invite investigation rather than unquestioning acceptance. The value of the teaching does not rest upon revelation, tradition, authority, or intellectual agreement, but upon careful observation and direct understanding. Confidence may inspire the practice, but insight alone brings liberation.

Nor is the Dhamma simply a collection of spiritual techniques.

Ethics, meditation, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom are not independent methods that may be selected according to personal preference or spiritual taste.

They form mutually supporting aspects of a single path whose purpose is the complete cessation of dukkha.

Removed from that context, they may retain psychological or cultural value, but they no longer express the full intention of the Buddha's teaching.

The unity of the Dhamma therefore lies neither in a shared philosophy, nor in a common creed, nor in a prescribed set of practices.

It lies in a single liberating purpose. Every discourse, every practice, every discipline, and every insight ultimately serves one question: “What leads to the cessation of dukkha?”

This perspective is entirely consistent with the earliest discourses. They do not dismiss philosophical reflection, confidence, ethical discipline, or meditation. Rather, they consistently place each within a larger liberating framework. None is presented as an end in itself. Each derives its significance from the role it plays in understanding and bringing about the cessation of dukkha.

Seen in this light, the Dhamma is best understood not as a worldview to be adopted, but as a path of investigation to be undertaken.

Its coherence does not arise from adherence to doctrine, but from the remarkable consistency with which every aspect of the teaching is directed towards the cessation of dukkha.

This understanding naturally gives rise to another question. “If the Dhamma is not realised through philosophical speculation, belief, or the mere performance of practices, how does liberating understanding actually arise?”

The earliest discourses give a remarkably consistent answer. Liberation does not result from adopting a new set of ideas, but from seeing clearly. Under-

standing certainly involves careful reflection, inquiry, and discernment, but these remain incomplete until they culminate in direct insight into experience itself.

For this reason, the Dhamma asks not, "What should I believe?" but, "What can be seen directly when experience is carefully observed?"

This principle forms one of the defining characteristics of the early Dhamma and will therefore occupy a central place in the discussion that follows.

Seeing Things as They Are

One of the most distinctive characteristics of the early Dhamma is not simply what it teaches, but how it invites understanding.

The Buddha does not ask his listeners to adopt a particular philosophy, to profess a set of beliefs, or to place their trust in religious authority. Nor does he suggest that liberation can be reached through intellectual mastery alone.

Consistently, the earliest discourses return to a single principle: genuine understanding must arise from direct observation of experience itself.

This does not diminish the importance of study, reflection, or careful reasoning. On the contrary, each has an important place within the path. Reflection clarifies. Inquiry removes confusion. Wise consideration prepares the mind. Yet none of these, by itself, brings the deep transformation that the Buddha describes.

Liberation becomes possible only when experience is seen directly.

This methodological orientation is nowhere expressed more clearly than in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, ⁶ one of the foundational discourses of the early Dhamma.

The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta is often read primarily as a discourse on mindfulness. This book argues that its deeper function is to show how liberating wisdom arises through sustained observation of experience.

Rather than presenting a collection of meditation techniques, it describes the experiential path through which paññā emerges. Mindfulness is not the final goal of the practice but the indispensable quality of attention that makes direct seeing possible. Through this sustained observation, liberating wisdom gradually emerges.

Its repeated refrain does not ask the practitioner to adopt a doctrine, formulate an interpretation, or reach a philosophical conclusion. Instead, it directs attention towards the careful observation of experience itself.

Repeatedly, the practitioner is invited to contemplate phenomena as they arise, as they pass away, and as they arise and pass away:

• *Samudayadhammānupassī vā viharati... —
He abides observing the nature of arising...*•

• *Vayadhammānupassī vā viharati... —
He abides observing the nature of passing away...*•

• *Samudayavayadhammānupassī vā viharati... —
He abides observing the nature of arising and passing
away...’*

The methodological significance of this refrain reaches even further.

The three characteristics that later came to be formulated as impermanence (*anicca*), unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*) are not presented here as philosophical doctrines to be accepted. They emerge as the natural outcome of careful observation.

When experience is observed as continually arising and passing away, impermanence is no longer an abstract proposition. It becomes directly evident. Every sensation, every perception, every feeling, every thought reveals itself as conditioned, changing, and incapable of remaining the same even for a moment.

From this observation another insight naturally unfolds. Whatever is conditioned and constantly changing cannot provide lasting security or lasting fulfilment. Clinging to what is inherently unstable inevitably gives rise to *dukkha*. This, too, is not accepted on authority but recognised within experience itself.

The same investigation then reveals something even more fundamental. If every aspect of experience arises through conditions, changes continuously, and passes away again, then nowhere within all these changing processes can a permanent, independent, controlling self be found.

What the early discourses call *anattā* is therefore not a metaphysical denial of the self, but the direct recognition that no enduring self can be identified with-in conditioned experience.

Seen in this light, the three characteristics are not philosophical premises from which the Dhamma begins. They are discoveries towards which careful observation naturally leads.

The practitioner is not asked to believe them in advance, but to investigate experience so thoroughly that they gradually become impossible not to see.

The contemplation of arising and passing away is therefore far more than one meditation technique among others.

It is the experiential gateway through which the central insights of the Dhamma gradually reveal themselves. It is therefore significant that the Buddha introduces the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* by describing this practice as “the direct path” (*ekāyano maggo*)⁷ leading to purification, the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, the disappearance of *dukkha* and distress, the realisation of the right way, and the direct knowledge of *Nibbāna*.⁸

This understanding is reflected throughout the language of the early discourses themselves. The Dhamma repeatedly describes itself as something to be seen, investigated, and known directly, inviting not belief but verification through experience.

At this point, the overall movement of the discussion begins to emerge clearly.

The early Dhamma invites us to see rather than merely to believe. The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta describes how this seeing is cultivated through sustained observation of experience. Its repeated refrain directs attention to the arising and passing away of phenomena. From this careful observation, the three fundamental characteristics of existence—anicca, dukkha, and anattā—gradually reveal themselves, not as doctrines to be accepted, but as insights to be discovered.

Yet an important question still remains. “Why should this observation—this way of seeing—lead to liberation?”

The answer lies at the very heart of the Buddha's discovery.

Suffering is not maintained by the mere existence of changing phenomena, but by the mind's habitual tendency to cling to them, identify with them, and seek lasting security within them. As long as these deeply conditioned movements remain unnoticed, they continue to shape experience automatically.

Careful observation gradually changes this.

As the arising and passing away of experience become increasingly clear, the tendency to grasp what cannot be held begins to weaken.

Identification becomes less convincing. The illusion of permanence slowly dissolves. What had previously been taken for “I,” “me,” and “mine” is recognised as a conditioned process rather than an enduring identity

Liberation therefore does not arise because one adopts a new philosophical view of reality. It arises because direct seeing gradually undermines the ignorance and clinging that sustain dukkha.

Wisdom is not added to experience from outside. It reveals itself as confusion falls away.

For this reason, the early discourses consistently present seeing and liberation as inseparable. One does not first believe and then see. One sees, and through seeing, becomes liberated.

The early discourses repeatedly express this orientation in a remarkable series of recurring formulations. Rather than asking for belief, they invite investigation, direct verification, and personal realisation.

The methodological orientation outlined above is not a modern interpretation imposed upon the early Dhamma. It is repeatedly expressed in the language of the earliest discourses themselves.

This orientation is perhaps expressed most explicitly in the well-known Kālāma Sutta.⁹

Addressing a community confused by competing religious teachers, the Buddha does not ask the Kālāmas to replace one authority with another. Instead, he encourages them not to rely merely on tradition, hearsay, scripture, logical speculation, or the prestige of teachers, but to investigate carefully for themselves what leads to welfare and what leads to suffering. The invitation is not to scepticism for its own sake, but to disciplined verification through experience.

Consistently, the Buddha describes the Dhamma as something to be seen, investigated, verified, and realised through direct experience.

Rather than presenting a system of beliefs to be accepted, the early texts consistently point towards a mode of inquiry in which understanding arises through careful observation.

This experiential orientation is reflected in a remarkable series of Pāli expressions that occur throughout the early discourses. Considered individually, each illuminates an important aspect of the path.

Taken together, they reveal a coherent way of knowing—a consistent account of how liberating wisdom arises.¹⁰

The first step is expressed in a single Pāli word.

Ehipassiko — “Come and See”

This expression is both simple and profound.

Among the traditional qualities by which the Dhamma describes itself, one stands out for its remarkable directness: ehipassiko.

Although brief, this invitation captures the very spirit of the Buddha's teaching. The Dhamma does not begin by asking for belief, allegiance, or philosophical agreement. Instead, it invites an immediate investigation of experience itself.

The invitation is not simply to approach a teaching, but to enter a process of inquiry. One is encouraged