

Dharma Drum Mountain Toronto: Selected Readings from the Saṃyukta Āgama

Lecture 6 | May 30, 2026

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Lecture Outline: Right View, The Four Noble Truths, and the Noble Eightfold Path Training in higher wisdom (*prajna*)

I. Opening Icebreakers (5 min)

- Have you ever almost been fooled by a scam call? Why didn't you fall for it? It likely because you were not being controlled by greed. Good! That is the power of Right View.
- Have you ever posted something in a group chat that felt satisfying in the moment, but later regretted it? Why do you think that is?

Today we will explore how to know whether something is right or wrong *before* we speak.

2. How Right View Serves as the Foundation and Forerunner of the Noble Eightfold Path

2A. What Is Right View? (15 min)

(i) Right View is like the first light of dawn (5 min)

- The Saṃyukta Āgama, Sutra 748 ("The Sunrise Sutra")

The Buddha uses a beautiful metaphor, comparing Right View to the sunrise. He taught us that Right View is the forerunner to liberation, just as the first light of dawn before the sunrise. It is the sign that practitioners are moving toward the complete cessation of suffering and ultimate liberation."

- In Saṃyukta Āgama, Sutra 749:

- a. "When clarity (wisdom) arises, "慚愧" **Humility and Remorse** arise along with the Eightfold Path. If ignorance is the precursor, all evil and unwholesome qualities are generated."

What this means is that, without the manifestation of clarity (*vidya*), there can be no Right View. In such cases one's practices, like meditation and maintaining diligence, remain ungrounded. They feel like one is blindly groping around in the dark.

b. A diagrammatic Clarification of the Two Paths

(i) With ignorance as the precursor (the cycle of samsara):

Ignorance → Defilements → Rebirth and suffering → The Eight Wrongful Paths

(ii) With illumination as the precursor (the path of cessation):

Illumination → Humility and Remorse → Right View → The Noble Eightfold Path

→

Liberation

A note on the “Humility and Remorse”:

Regarding "慚愧" in Buddhism, "Humility and Remorse" is the decent Translation.

Cán (慚) originates from the Pali/Sanskrit term Hiri, which is most accurately translated as "moral shame," "inner conscience," or "self-respect."

Kuì (愧) originates from Ottappa (Pali) or Apatrāpya (Sanskrit), best translated as "moral compunction," "dread of blame," or "consideration for consequences."

In Chan practice, "慚愧" is a foundational and deeply positive mental state. Translating this concept can be challenging because the literal English translations—often "shame" and "guilt"—carry heavy, negative, and punishing psychological burdens in Western culture. The translation of "Humility and Remorse" elegantly avoids this misunderstanding and captures the true Dharma essence:

Humility (慚 - Cán): This represents inward reflection. It is the gentle, honest recognition of our own limitations, karmic obstacles, and the smallness of the ego. It is the softening of arrogance, which makes the mind open and receptive to the Dharma.

Remorse (愧 - Kuì): This represents outward awareness. It is the sincere regret for past unskillful actions, coupled with a genuine, active vow to improve and not repeat those mistakes. It is a productive energy, not a paralyzing one.

(ii) The Definition of Ignorance

The Samyukta Āgama, “Sutra on Ignorance:

What is ignorance? Ignorance means not truly knowing the difference between wholesome and unwholesome states. That includes not truly knowing what is blameworthy or blameless, inferior or superior, defiled or undefiled. More generally, one cannot distinguish the conditioned from the unconditioned, which is necessary in order to understand the difference dependent arising from non-dependent arising. If one does not know things as they truly are, one cannot attain Right View. The resulting wrong view leads to wrong intention, wrong speech, wrong action, wrong livelihood, wrong effort, wrong mindfulness, and wrong concentration.

This teaching emphasizes some essential truths. It tells us that:

- All evil and unwholesome states are rooted in ignorance.
- The root of distorted behavior is distorted perception — not seeing things as they truly are.
- The foundation of practice is restoring reality through clear seeing.

We may summarize the path of practice in this manner:

Clarity (knowing reality) → Humility and Remorse (ethical protection) → Right View (establishing direction) → The Noble Eightfold Path (purification of body, speech, and mind) → Complete freedom and peace

3. The Entanglement of Ignorance and Self-Clinging, and the Opportunity for Liberation Through “Contact”

If the root of ignorance is actually self-clinging, how do ignorance and the sense of self become entangled?

3A. From the *Samyukta Āgama*, Suttas 63 and 45, we learn that:

(i) The starting point of self-identity is self-clinging. Mistakenly identifying the Five Aggregates as containing a self. That is, viewing form as self, distinct from self, or mutually coexisting. It is likewise for feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness. This leads to further sensory grasping: not letting go of “me” and “mine.”

(ii) The intersection of the three realms produces “Ignorant-Contact.” The generation of ignorance-contact is identified as the intersection of the mind realm, the dharma (phenomena) realm, and the ignorance realm.

(iii) Speech (views, opinions) and awareness (psychology, emotions): driven by the prejudices of ignorant thoughts and emotional impulses. Because of ignorance, rigid views arise, emotional impulses intensify, and distorted reactions follow.

(iv) The Path to Liberation from ignorance. By maintaining mindfulness and awareness at the very moment of contact, “illuminated contact” can arise in place of ignorant contact.

3B. A revealing story: The Blind Man Carrying a Torch (5 min)

- Being knowledgeable without Humility and Remorse is like a blind person carrying a torch. He lights the way for others but cannot light it for himself.
- The process:
Illumination → Humility and Remorse → Right View → Noble Eightfold Path

3C. Here is an interesting and challenging question for us to discuss:

When was the last time you sincerely admitted you were wrong?

4. The Core Meaning of the Training in Wisdom: Right View and Right Intention

4A. Supporting Practice — Humility and Remorse

(i) The Dharmapada Avadana Sutra, Story 1

“Though one has heard much, if one becomes arrogant and belittles others, it is like a blind man carrying a lamp — illuminating others while not illuminating himself.”

(ii) The Dharmapada Avadana Sutra, Story 2

The Buddha asked Rāhula to bring water to wash his feet. Afterward, he asked whether the dirty water could still be used for cooking food. Then the Buddha overturned the basin with his foot and asked whether Rāhula would feel regret if it broke. This event taught Rāhula the importance of purity, humility, and moral integrity.

(iii) The Two Protective Principles of the World.

In the **Samyukta Agama, sutra 1243/1244**, the Buddha teaches that “Humility and Remorse” are the foundation stones that protect the world.

4B. The Two Levels of Right View

The following chart illustrates the two levels of Right View, according to *the Saṃyukta Āgama*.

	Worldly Right View	Supramundane Right View
Core	Understanding karma and ethical causality	Direct realization of the Four Noble Truths
Goal	Leads to fortunate rebirths	Leads to complete liberation from suffering

- It is important to note that the teaching “all phenomena are non-self” is not a nihilistic slogan. Rather, it points to the Middle Way of Dependent Origination.
- Take some time to reflect upon these questions: how many times have you felt completely shattered just because of one sentence from another person? Can you see how the pain arises because we cling too tightly to the idea of a separate and distinct “me”?

4C. Right Intention: three shifts of the mind (5 min)

According to the *Saṃyukta Āgama*:

Traditional Term	Modern Language
Intention of Renunciation	“I no longer want this matter to consume my life.”
Intention of Non-Ill Will	“I choose not to let anger control my judgment.”
Intention of Non-Harm	“My success does not require me to hurt others.”

(ii) The Threefold Structure of Practice

a. Right View as the Sole Forerunner

As taught in the “**Sunrise Sutra**” (SA 748), Right View is the locomotive of the entire path. Without Right View, the other seven factors lack liberating direction.

b. From the Worldly to the Supramundane. A Gradual Progression

- Worldly Noble Eightfold Path (**SA 784**):
ethical causality → wholesome rebirths
- Supramundane Noble Eightfold Path (**SA 785**):
wisdom free from defilement → cutting off craving and attachment → cessation of suffering

Master Sheng Yen taught us that we must first affirm the self on the worldly/mundane level. Then we can dissolve the self on the supramundane level. One should not skip the worldly foundation and prematurely speak of non-self.

The Sequence of Morality, Concentration, and Wisdom:

Right View and Right Intention (wisdom) → Right Speech → Right Action → Right Livelihood (morality)

→ Right Effort → Right Mindfulness → Right Concentration (meditation) → Realized Wisdom

V. The Threefold Wisdom of Hearing, Reflection, and Cultivation

A. From the *Saṃyukta Āgama*:

The Buddha asked:

“Sāriputta, what is the stream?”

Sāriputta replied:

“The stream spoken of by the World-Honored One is the Noble Eightfold Path.”

The Buddha further asked:

“What are the factors for entering the stream?”

Sāriputta answered:

“There are four factors:

Associating with good spiritual friends,

Hearing the true Dharma,

Proper internal reflection,

Practicing in accordance with the Dharma.”

B. Master Yin Shun’s Explanation

Yin Shun explained that disciples differ in sharpness of faculties.

- The “Dharma followers” pertains to wisdom, and it emphasizes:
 - spiritual friendship,
 - hearing the Dharma,
 - reflection,

- and practice
- The path emphasizing the “Four Factors of Indestructible Faith” is suited for those stronger in faith.

C. Associating with virtuous people and hearing the true dharma

(i) Wisdom develops in three stages:

1. Wisdom from hearing,
2. Wisdom from reflection,
3. Wisdom from cultivation.

(ii) There are three types of spiritual friends:

1. Teaching spiritual friends,
2. Companion spiritual friends,
3. Protective/supportive spiritual friends.

(iii) **Samyukta Āgama 726 — “Half the Holy Life” and “The Whole of the Holy Life”**

• “Half the Holy Life” — Ānanda’s Reflection

While the Venerable Ānanda was meditating alone in a quiet place, a thought arose in his mind:

“Good friends, good companions, and good associates — this is what is meant by *half of the holy life*; not bad friends, bad companions, or bad associates.”

After emerging from meditation, Ānanda reported this insight — that “having good spiritual friends is half of the holy life” — to the Buddha.

• “The Whole of the Holy Life” — The Buddha’s Correction

The Buddha immediately corrected Ānanda:

“You should not say such a thing — that ‘good friends, good companions, and good associates are half of the holy life.’”

The Buddha emphasized:

“When one is entirely and purely endowed with them — when the holy life is completely pure — that is what is called good friends, good companions, good associates.”

This means that good spiritual friendship is not merely half of the path — it is the whole of the holy life.

D. Proper Internal Reflection (*yoniso manasikāra*)

(i) Proper internal reflection means observing things from their root source and guiding the mind's attention in the right way. It is the starting point of wisdom. This concept is on a different level from right thought and Right Thought (Right Intention) in the Noble Eightfold Path, that refers to the volitional direction of mind that leads to renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness.

(ii) The Path of the Dharma-Follower. Four factors of stream-entry provide people with a logical reconstruction of this process. It reminds us that there is no shortcut to true spiritual immunity. One must follow the process:

Seeking wise guidance → Receiving right understanding → Independent reflection → Concrete practice

There is no shortcut to true spiritual immunity.

The Samyukta Agama, sutra 716 explains the cognitive chain reaction that follows from improper reflection.

Improper reflection leads to:

- failure of wholesome effort,
- the Five Hindrances (sensual desire, ill will, drowsiness, restlessness/worry, and doubt),
- the inability for the Seven Factors of Awakening to arise.

On the other hand, proper reflection lead to the desired results:

- abandonment of hindrances,
- cultivation of awakening factors.

Samyukta Āgama, sutra 752 points directly to the concrete goal of practice. It directly states that cultivating the Noble Eightfold Path leads to abandoning the Five Sensual Desires.

“Illuminated Contact” as the Way to Break Ignorance. Proper inner reflection first gives rise to the manifestation of clarity. This clarity (*avidya*) is symbolized by light of dawn breaking through the darkness of ignorance. It is the awakening of clear rationality and the beginning of wisdom.

Illuminated Contact arises from two sources:

- (i) External Conditions (Dharma Conditions). Following the four factors of stream-entry, one immerses oneself in the dharma, seeking wise guidance from virtuous spiritual friends and mentors. One is thereby able to receive a correct understanding of the dharma, which serves as the basis for independent reflection, and concrete practice. One's understanding then becomes aligned, gradually, with truth.
- (ii) Internal Observation (Contemplation). Through direct observation, we see through the illusion of "self," and shift our sense of security away from unstable external conditions toward enduring truth.

The real issue is not external objects themselves, but the defiled and craving mind that arises within.

Conclusion

In Saṃyukta Āgama, the famous simile of "the two oxen tied together" illustrates the relationship between subject, object, and craving:

Two oxen, one black and one white, are tied together by the same yoke. Is the black ox bound by the white ox? Is the white ox bound by the black ox? No. They are bound by the yoke and rope between them.

Likewise, the eye faculty (subject) and visible form (object) are not inherently binding.

For example, when an eager and aspiring person sees a luxury sports car speeding down the street, his or her eye simply contacts its form. But this is merely perception. But the thought might arise: "If only if I owned that car, I would be considered successful." It is at that point that craving becomes the heavy yoke. That attachment enslaves the person to endless anxiety, competition, and restless striving.