

MASTERING THE CORE TEACHINGS OF  
THE BUDDHA



MASTERING  
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OF THE  
BUDDHA

AN UNUSUALLY HARDCORE DHARMA BOOK

REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION

BY  
THE ARAHANT  
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**AEON**

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This book is dedicated to the memory  
of the late Bill Hamilton.

His relentless dedication to the cultivation and promotion of  
wisdom, despite all the consequences, made  
him a truly great teacher.



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## PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

I started writing the small pamphlets and locally printed books that would one day become *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha* (MCTB1 hereafter) somewhere in early 1997, which seems quite a long time ago at this point. A lot has changed since then about my own practice, the world of meditation, my understanding of the world of meditation and mental development, and the world in general. The rise of the internet has facilitated unprecedented cross-pollination and collaboration, allowing obscure and isolated practitioners around the world to suddenly come together and share their experiences and ideas about practice. The effect on the dharma has already been profound. I doubt we have seen anything but the tiny beginning of what is possible.

I would like to thank the numerous people who gave me feedback on the first edition, as I have tried to incorporate every useful piece of advice they offered. In that vein, should you somehow provide feedback on this edition, either good, bad, or otherwise, the more practical and constructive the comments are, the more likely they will have some positive effect on this book.

The first print edition that was widely available came out in 2008, yet much of it was written during the period of 1997 to 2001, with one major update to the chapter on Models of the Stages of Enlightenment around 2006 to 2007. However, since then many important events have occurred and lots of useful reader and user feedback has been provided that have made me feel that my recently released work was already in need of revision, and so this second edition has come to be.

Numerous sections have been considerably expanded, particularly the section on concentration, and many things have been rearranged. I have also added an autobiographical section at the end that hopefully will help explain the backstory of some of what you will find in this book. People kept asking for those sorts of details, as well as getting parts of my history very wrong in the absence of that information. Hopefully these points will help clarify things of some

practical value. On the other hand, some people pleaded with me to remove even the small autobiographical details that were in *MCTB1*. I have clearly gone in the other direction, with the basic underlying principle being that I think we should talk (and write) openly about these topics, and not doing so in the previous book clearly had a hypocritical element to it and failed to convey some points that I think are useful for practice and life.

I have also added more map geekery, as that technical information doesn't appear in many other places that I am aware of, so I just basically let it rip. Again, these were the details that I wanted when I was coming up in dharma, so I pass these on assuming someone else out there will appreciate them as I did. If it is too much for you, then ignore it, as the basic practices work regardless of whether you are a map-freak like I am.

I would like to thank members of the Dharma Overground and its sister communities (both living and defunct), without which much in my life and practice simply would not be nearly as good, and for them I am very grateful, as they have enhanced my understanding of the wide world of what is possible and useful in countless ways.

I hope you will find something in this second edition that helps your practice and enhances your life.

## FOREWORD AND WARNING

When I was about fourteen or fifteen years old, I accidentally ran into some of the classic early meditation experiences described in the ancient texts, and my reluctant spiritual quest began. I did not realize what had happened, nor did I realize I had crossed something like a point of no-return, something I would later call the “Arising and Passing Away” (A&P). I had a very strange dream with bright lights, my entire body and world seemed to explode like fireworks, and afterwards I had to find something, but I had no idea what that was.

Since then, I have met a large number of people who have also crossed the A&P early in their lives in various circumstances, many totally unrelated to meditative training. It turns out this is not particularly special or unusual, and I now actually think of it as part of standard human perceptual development. At the time, however, I thought very little about it, having no formal words for it, context to place it in, or understanding of what it was. It got filed into a mental folder for memories of “other weird stuff I don’t know what to do with”, a file that wouldn’t make any sense for about ten more years. I philosophized frantically for years until I finally began to realize no amount of thinking was going to solve my deeper spiritual issues and complete the cycle of practice that had already started.

I had a friend named Kenneth Folk who played bass in the Motown and soul band that employed me as a sound tech and roadie. We met during my freshman year in college and ended up being housemates in my junior year in a skanky little band house in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. He was in a similar place, caught like me in something we would later call the “Dark Night” and other names. He had crossed the A&P before moving from California to North Carolina, and it had changed his life in numerous ways. He also realized logic and cognitive restructuring were not going to help us in the end.

We spent a lot of time playing Frisbee late at night and philosophizing, and finally began looking carefully at what other philosophers had done when they came to the same point, and noted that some of our favorites had turned to mystical practices. We reasoned some sort of

non-dual wisdom arising from direct experience was the only way to go, but acquiring that sort of wisdom seemed a daunting, if not impossible, task.

Kenneth was a bit further along in his spiritual crisis and finally had no choice but to give serious meditation a try. He quit the music business, moved back to the little agricultural desert town of Winchester (near Hemet), California, and lived in a rundown old mobile home his parents owned, driving pizza to save money so he could deepen his spiritual quest. He also was lucky enough to run into a guy named Bill Hamilton. On Bill's somewhat radical advice, Kenneth did a three-month intensive insight meditation retreat, and then eventually took off to Asia for a year of intensive practice under the guidance of meditation masters in the Burmese Theravada Buddhist tradition. When he came back, the benefits of his practice appeared obvious to me, and a few years later I began to try to follow a similar path.

In 1994, I began going on intensive meditation retreats and doing a lot of daily practice. I also had some very odd and interesting experiences, and began to look around for more guidance on how to proceed and keep things in perspective. Good teachers were few and far away, their time limited and often expensive to obtain, and their answers to my questions were frequently guarded and cryptic. Even my old music friend was keeping most of what he knew to himself, and issues around disclosure of meditation theory and personal practice details nearly cost us our friendship.

Frustrated, I turned to books, reading extensively, poring over texts both modern and ancient looking for conceptual frameworks that might help me navigate skillfully in territory that was completely outside my previous experience. Despite having access to an increasing number of great and detailed dharma books, I found they left out lots of details that turned out to be very important. I learned the hard way that using conceptual frameworks that were too idealistic or that were not fully explained could be as bad as using none at all. Further, I found that much of the theory about progress contained ideals and myths that simply did not hold up to reality testing, as much as I wanted them to. The complexities of exactly how this conflict between ideal and reality has morphed over the years are worthy of commentary, and I will discuss this later, after I have set up some important terms and concepts.

I also came to the profound realization that those darn Buddhists have worked a ton of good stuff out. They have come up with very simple techniques that lead directly to remarkable results if you follow instructions and titrate to the best dose for you. The essential premise that if you want to know more about something you should pay careful attention to it has a simple, elegant brilliance. I wanted to know something essential about my experience and so I paid a lot of attention to it and learned about it. It made sense then and still does. While some people don't like this sort of cookbook approach to meditation, I am so grateful for the recipes that words fail to express my profound gratitude for the successes they have afforded me. Empiricism has always appealed to me, and Buddhist meditation at its best allows you to see for yourself.

Thus, as promised, the simple and ancient practices of the Buddha and his followers revealed more and more of what I sought. I found my experiences filling in the gaps in the texts and teachings, debunking the myths that pervade the standard Buddhist dogma, and revealing the secrets meditation teachers routinely keep to themselves. Finally, I came to a place where I felt comfortable writing the book that I had been looking for, the book you now hold in your hands.



This book is for those who really want to master the core teachings of the Buddha and who are willing to put in the time and effort required. It is also for those who are tired of having to decipher the code often found in modern and ancient dharma books, as it is designed to be honest, explicit, straightforward, and rigorously technical. Like many of the commentaries on texts in the Pali canon, it is organized along the lines of the three basic trainings that the Buddha taught: morality, concentration, and wisdom.

Throughout this book, I have tried to be as utilitarian and pragmatic as possible. The emphasis is always on how to “get it” at a level that makes some difference. All sections also assume to some degree that you have a practice of some sort, hang out in some form of spiritual scene, and know a bit of the standard dharma lingo. All sections also assume that you are willing to do the work.

I have tried to include enough information to make this book capable of standing on its own as a manual of meditation and for walking the spiritual path. However, I have also tried to focus on those areas that I consider to be my core competencies and those areas of the spiritual path that I do not feel have been adequately covered in works that have come before this one. This book shines in areas of technique, the maps of meditation, and the fine points of high-level practice. However, the spiritual life is vast beyond measure and cannot possibly be adequately covered in a single book, so I haven’t even remotely tried to make this the complete encyclopedia of meditation or spiritual practices. Thus, I will often refer you to other excellent sources for more details on those topics that I feel have already been covered quite well (and probably better than I could) by other authors. I strongly suggest checking out at least some if not all of those other sources.

Like my own practice, this book is heavily influenced by the teachings of the late, great Mahasi Sayadaw, a Burmese meditation master and scholar in the Theravada Buddhist tradition, and by those in his lineage and outside it. There are numerous references to other excellent traditions as well, some Buddhist and some not. It is my sincere wish that all diligent students of meditation find something in this book that is of practical value to them, and it is that practical concern for functionality that I hold of greatest value.

Speaking of pragmatism, there are significant downsides to having the title of this book include the name “Buddha”, as it will likely alienate lots of people who could benefit from the techniques and technical information about the cool, useful, and profound things they can learn to wire their brain to do and perceive. This dismissal based on Uncle Sid’s name might arise in groups as diverse as hyper-rational scientific materialist, or fervent Southern Baptist, or whatever. Also, it is likely that something in my presentation style, which has a bite at times, may cause even some Buddhists to react negatively to valuable Buddhist meditative and conceptual technology. This broader problem of brand and tribal loyalty is rife among nearly all humans. If I say something that offends you based on your rigid allegiances to your particular Buddhist, paradigmatic, or religious brand, and you then dismiss these empowering teachings and fail to employ them to your benefit, the primary loss will be yours, though the effects will likely impact those around you also. This effect is likely to become stronger the farther you proceed into this book. My apologies in advance if I tactlessly play into your knee-jerk tendencies.

That basic problem of sorting out the gold nuggets of the pragmatic, universal, applicable, technical, helpful, useful, and true from the dogma, proprietary branding, obscure and alienating

terminology, religious craziness, ancient taboos, archaic paradigms, primitive and inaccurate biological assumptions, needlessly rigid frameworks, and other unfortunate aspects of old (and new) traditions is a perpetual problem. This work must be done with care and intelligence, realizing that most of the time we will not get it quite right, as whatever background we come into this task with will limit us to some degree, and this applies to me as much as anyone. So, for those who can go into the old texts, traditions, techniques, communities, cultures, lexicons, and conceptual frameworks with an eye to gleaning why they got so excited about whatever it was that they were doing that they thought was so good (and very likely may be in ways), there is a rich journey of discovery that awaits you.

One side of me very much wants to write something that is purely secular, utterly devoid of any explicit reference to any ancient frameworks, totally scrubbed of anything religious, and free of any term that is in any way alien to the predominant linguistic sensibilities in the area of the world where I reside. Were this book free from those terms, I naively imagine that it could serve as a general textbook in schools and for scientific study without raising any red flags related to its religious and spiritual references.

The other side of me rebels equally against this, knowing that for thousands of years the vast majority of the most deeply developed, sophisticated, effective, time-tested, and refined mind-training traditions and insights came straight out of the nunneries, monasteries, jungle huts, mountain caves, and the like from individuals practicing in frameworks of explicitly religious and spiritual traditions, the majority of whom are unlikely to have written things down in the languages you are comfortable with unless you have truly world-class linguistic abilities. There are times when there is no substitute for being able to delve into that vast, complicated, rich treasure trove of artifacts in the old traditions to find what you are looking for. Until that massive amount of theory and practice technology has been translated both linguistically and culturally, which is unlikely to happen anytime soon, we will likely exist in a strange hybrid between ancient and modern, foreign and indigenous, familiar and alien. Luckily, if you are willing to adopt the attitude of the pragmatist over that of the cultural defense warrior (either of your modern culture or of the ancient ones), then you and those in your mind-training social circles can benefit from what you discover.

On a different note, I have included some of my own experiences in various places and labeled them as such. This is done to try to add some sense of the reality of what is possible, both in terms of successes and failures. They should add a human dimension to the theory. However, if you find that these stories get in the way, or if they seem to have too much of the quality of "let me tell you about my personal spiritual quest," please do us both a favor and skip over them without a second thought. In this second edition, I have added a more extensive autobiographical section for those who really do want more of the story, but I realize that is not everyone's cup of tea, so the main body of the theory and practice will leave much of that out and just give you the summary advice that I derived from going through it and learning about the experiences of other fellow adventurers in this amazing territory.

I have also written this book in what is clearly my own voice. Those who have read this work and who know me tell me that they can almost hear me saying it. I have also left in a lot of my neurotic stuff and made it as obvious as I can. I will assert that anyone who writes puts their neurotic stuff in there even if they try to hide it, so at least you should be able to see it clearly

rather than it being hidden and covert. If you want a book that is just the straight dogma and theory without this sort of voice, there are lots to choose from and I will mention a number along the way.

I have also included a modicum of social commentary, some of which has a definite bite to it. Some of you may find it not only unhelpful, but even quite distasteful and off-putting. Some of you may quickly dismiss it as harsh or wrong speech. I am torn between the feeling that there really are some important points in those sections, yet understanding that not everyone will be able to make good use of information and opinions presented in such strong terms. Thus, I ask you to please skip over those chapters and get to the friendlier or more technical sections beyond them if you don't find them helpful. To facilitate doing so, I have included a lightning bolt in the titles of those chapters that contain potentially inflammatory material so that they may be treated appropriately.

While I feel that the points made in those chapters are important, valid, and useful, they are not absolutely necessary for understanding the chapters that follow them. The world is brimming with very nice and friendly dharma books. There are hundreds available on the shelves of any mega-bookstore. However, I believe that there is room for a book that sometimes conveys its message in a different voice, though I respectfully give you the option to choose how much of that voice you want to hear. It is the unrestrained voice of one from a generation whose radicals wore spikes and combat boots rather than beads and sandals; listened to the Sex Pistols rather than the Moody Blues, wouldn't know a Beat poet or early '60s dharma bum from a hole in the ground, and thought the hippies were pretty friggin' naive, not that we don't owe them a whole lot. It is also the unrestrained voice of one whose practice has been dedicated to complete and unexcelled mastery of the traditional and hardcore stages of the path rather than some sort of vapid New Age fluff or pop psychological head-trip. If that ain't you, consider reading something else.

As a highly regarded senior meditation teacher and scholar (who will remain anonymous) said to me after skimming through an earlier draft of this book, "Most Buddhists are just aging boomers who want to do something to feel better about themselves as they get older and are not really interested in this sort of thing." I wish them great success in getting those valid needs met. I must reluctantly advise such individuals to avoid reading this book or at least the chapters marked with a lightning bolt. This is simultaneously an admission of the limitations of this work, an invitation to adopt a more empowering view of what is possible on the spiritual path, and a warning.

I have also been accused of being uncompassionate because I have refused to speak and write in the soft "dharma voice" that is often expected and perhaps seemingly required of people who care deeply about the dharma. I assure you I do deeply care that people eliminate what suffering they can by whatever skillful means necessary and available. I have a real enthusiasm for sharing these truly remarkable concepts and techniques with whoever is interested, hence the free online versions of the book and the free support of a forum for fellow travelers on these strange paths to share the dharma and explore it together.

I have had other motivations for writing this book. A few people have attempted to have me be their meditation teacher. I have done what I can to encourage them to practice well, go on retreats and explore, but as soon as I get the sense that they are not into really doing the work

or are trying to idolize or deify me in even small ways, I go out of my way to return them to themselves, point out distortions caused by transference, and refer them to resources elsewhere. I greatly prefer the company of fellow adventurers who wish to explore the mysteries of this life together than any other sort of relationships, particularly those that potentially disempower one or more of the parties involved.

Dharma friends may be at different stages in the practice and one friend may teach another something useful, but this has a very different feel from people who are formally ascribed “teacher” and “student”. Thus, writing this book allows me to hand them the better part of what I know and to say, “If you are really into it, there is more than enough here and in the included references to allow you to plunge as deeply as you care to.” If not, I have wasted little of my time and can avoid being put on some strange and dangerous pedestal or pillory, at least to my face.

That said, I do have the explicit goal of facilitating others to become living masters of this material so that they may go forth and help to encourage more people to do so. The more people can teach from a place of deeply established personal experience, the more people will be able to learn the dharma well, and the saner and happier the world will be. Also, it can just be such great fun to hang out with people who have a real depth of practice and understanding.

This brings me to the question of the issue of what some would call hierarchy. The simple fact is that there are those who have attained to various degrees of mastery of various aspects of the skills of clear comprehension and the amazing ways we can modify our minds, and there are those who have not. There are those with strong concentration abilities, and those without. There are those who have their morality trip together, and those that do not. There are those who are masters of some techniques and practices, and those that have more work to do.

While there is a strangely pervasive movement in the West to try to imagine everyone is equal in the world of spirituality (or any other realm for that matter), it is obviously completely delusional and wrong-headed. When I went looking for teachers and friends to practice with and help me along, rather than get mad that some people claimed to know more than I did, and they definitely did, I was excited by the opportunity, however rare, to study with people who knew what they were doing. This just makes sense. Read this as another warning: if you get good enough at these practices, people will often have bad reactions to you if you go around talking about it, and the number who will instead find your achievements a source of inspiration and empowerment, an opportunity to learn something for themselves, as they rightly should, will likely be few.

On that same front, it is a very strange thing to have such a completely different language, set of experiences, and perspectives from most of the people around me. I can often feel like an alien wearing a trench coat of normalcy, and I dream of a world where conversations about the sorts of events and insights that have come to dominate my everyday experience are much more common and normal. Just like anyone who is truly a fan of some endeavor, in this case one that is fundamental to all the others as it enhances consciousness and attention, it is hard for me to imagine that everyone wouldn't be totally into this stuff, but for some strange reason most people clearly aren't.

Reading between the lines, you should take this admission as yet another warning. If you go way into this stuff, you will discover this same loneliness. Luckily, the online world allows

communities of those who wish to take this deep to gather and support each other. That said, meatspace is still generally far behind these specialized communities at this point, and so the warning remains valid.

This should be seen as another warning: this book and the path presented in it are not for those who at this time find that they are unstable spiritual seekers. Meditation at the levels I am about to describe requires a baseline mental and material stability; and with respect to the latter, not necessarily wealth or even a 401(k), but ethically acquired requisites such as food and a safe, conducive shelter. You must have your psychological trip very together to be able to handle and integrate the intense techniques, side effects, and results I am about to discuss. In this book, I will explain in detail what is meant by “have your psychological trip very together”, with the key requisite skills being an ability to identify difficult mind states when they arise and handle them with kindness and aplomb. Luckily these are learnable skill sets.

There are plenty of gentle techniques and schools of practice available for people for whom it would be more skillful and constructive to apply those techniques. There are also many skillful healing modalities available today to help those who need to heal psychological trauma or clear up barriers to more intense practice. If you need those, you are highly encouraged to do that crucial work first. Many of the techniques and doses recommended in this book are for those who already have a solid platform of mental health and are willing to accept the risks inherent in intensive training.

Stated much more explicitly: people who do strong and intensive practice can hurt themselves and freak out. Just as serious athletes can hurt their bodies when they take a misstep or push themselves beyond their limits, just so serious mental athletes can strain their minds, brains, and nervous systems, and strained brains can sometimes function in very strange ways. To rewrite the operating system rapidly while it is running doesn't always go so well in the short term or occasionally in the long term. Thus, while I will include nearly endless exhortations to find the depths of power and clarity that you are capable of, I will also add numerous warnings about how to keep from frying yourself.

By “frying yourself”, I mean explicitly severe mood instability and psychotic episodes, as well as other odd biological and energetic disturbances, with some practitioners occasionally ending up in inpatient psychiatric facilities for various periods of time. Exactly how much of this is nature (their own “inherent wiring” and potential for mental pathology), how much of it is nurture (practicing hardcore meditation techniques in high doses such as those presented here), and how much is related to other unidentified factors is a question that is still being worked out, just so that you are not in any way uninformed about the still-developing state of modern science as it applies to the art of intensive meditation.

Some who have read this book apparently have only noticed the former message, that being to find the depths of power and resolution you are capable of (a message put in to counterbalance a culture full of people who are underutilizing or not recognizing their inherent potential), and they missed the parts that discuss how and when to back off, a message found in numerous places in this book, much to their chicken-fried detriment. Hopefully putting this here right up front will again help people to hear both messages and find the balance between the two that works, as I am a firm believer in people being informed not only of the benefits but also of the risks so that they can make informed decisions and practice accordingly. You wouldn't want to

do power lifting without proper training, spotting, and technique, nor run marathons without lots of careful training, stretching, hydration, great nutrition, and the like: same with hardcore meditation practice. You also would be naive to imagine that you can push your body to its limits without risk: same with your brain and hardcore meditation practice.

I hope that you will find my take on the dharma refreshing, empowering, clear, practical, honest, fair-minded, and open. I have done my best to make it so.

I would like to thank the very many people whose influence, friendship, support, and kindness went into making this work what it is, though they are way too numerous to list here. This is an interdependent universe, and so to write that this work is simply by me is not in accord with reality. The ideas presented here contain a bit of my synthesis, organization, and phenomenology, a ton of ideas that came to me from people who came before me, and much from contemporaneous practitioners. I feel compelled to mention the specific support of Carol Ingram, Sonja Boorman, David Ingram, Christina Jones, Christopher Titmuss, Sharda Rogell, Bill Hamilton, Kenneth Folk, Robert Burns, Tarin Greco, Vince Horn, and my other friends at the Dharma Overground and its sister sites, all of whom were very instrumental in making what is good in this book and my own practice possible.

I give a great power-surge of gratitude to my anonymous main editor for this second edition, whose long hours of hard work, kindness, wisdom, heartfulness, patience, and deeply humble love of the dharma both in theory and practice helped to raise this book to a level that it otherwise would not have attained. I would also like to extend deep gratitude to an anonymous patron who helped support this book and shield it from complexity.

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A few notes on style. The English language has no great way to use pronouns that refer to a single person without getting gender-specific. Various solutions exist, such as constantly using "he/she" (which can be very distracting), alternating between "she" and "he", and recasting sentences in the plural, where the pronoun "they" may be used. For better or for worse, I am often going to use the pronoun "they" to mean "he/she", thus using what is ordinarily a plural pronoun with verbs in the singular. I am not particularly thrilled with this solution, but I don't think it is much worse than the others. Should a reader disagree, I hope that he/she will find a way to forgive me, or at least that she will understand the problem, making room in his heart for one more author struggling with this linguistic limitation.

I must also admit that I am somewhat erratic in my use of capital letters, and you may just have to Live with It. I have left in only a few diacritical marks above a few Pali and Sanskrit words, removing most of the rest, as I felt that they are slightly off-putting for many who are not very familiar with them already and thus don't need them. If you want to look up a specific



word and its diacriticals, this information is all widely available on the internet and in libraries. I have also gone slightly rogue in my positioning of commas and periods in relation to quotation marks, mixing a bit of US and UK styles, as I prefer some aspects of both, so my apologies to anyone this disconcerts.

May this work be for the benefit of all beings. May your practice be for the benefit of all beings. May you aspire to be of benefit to all beings. May you realize what you are truly looking for, pursue it relentlessly despite all obstacles, and find it.