

Take Your Rightful Share*

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A large section of lay people adhering popular Buddhism believe that Dhamma which were taught by the Buddha is not meant for them, it is only for monks who live in temples. They label the teaching of the Buddha as a religion and a handful of them only observe its devotional aspect while they utterly neglect the moral, ethical and spiritual (mental) – the cream of Buddha’s teaching. The word ‘religion’ had a very complicated meaning at one time, but later it has been upgraded into ‘organised religion’ then it has become a symbol, a ritual, a superstition under the stewardship of ‘high priests’. The Dhamma is entirely different, something which has nothing to do with rituals, with symbols, because all these have been invented by priests and the ruling society to establish authority over their followers.

There are, on the other hand, almost all the bhikkhu (monks) of the southern school of popular Buddhism, misquote that the books of Vinaya (Discipline) are their secret books, lay people are forbidden to read – to keep them in the dark so that they could be unable to see the fault of the bhikkhus. To boast their own religious class, many such monks propagate that those who attained nibbāna during the time of the Buddha, except four, were all bhikkhus.

These monks are the one who had gone through conservative, traditional monastic schooling and never occasioned to be in person at an audience of such discourses – do not feel what psychological impact it will grow and spread among the lay person. As such the common people are under the impression that, just because they are not bhikkhu, they cannot realise nibbana, so they do not follow the Dhamma. This is not correct, but is often an easy excuse for being lazy or doing just whatever they want to do. Lay people and the monks who say things like this have probably never tried to follow the perfect path of the Buddha. In the teaching of the Master one finds milk for the babe and meat for the strong, and it appeals equally to householder and ascetic.

Today, many Buddhists¹ are under the erroneous belief that only bhikkhus, in fact, are able to fully understand Dhamma, while ‘common householders’ are not. This is a sad misconception that comes from a lack of understanding of the Buddha’s teaching.

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¹ In this paper the word ‘Buddhist’ has been used to denote the section people who are attached to the popular form of Buddhism devoid of the Buddha’s message in their daily life.

The Buddha never taught that the understanding of his teaching conditional on wearing a yellow robe and having a shaved head. He did design the way of bhikkhus' life to make it easier for them to follow the Dhamma, free from the emotional entanglements of family life, the necessity to earn for living, and so forth. He never had said that one who is not a bhikkhu could not understand the Dhamma.

Sariputta once said that one man might live in a forest devoting him-self to ascetic practices, but might be full of defilement (*kilesa*). Another might be living a household life but his mind might be free from defilement. Of these two the one who lives a pure life in the village or city is definitely superior to the one who lives in the forest. There are ample references in the text of the Buddha's teachings, that man and woman living ordinary, normal household lives who realised high spiritual states by following the Dhamma correctly.

There are many people who think that to practice Dhamma they have to stay in the temples or meditation centres or secluded places, who don't, gives many lame excuses: 'O, I have to look after the children, I shall practice when they grow up'. But after 15/20 years he/she may find another excuse: 'These are my grandchildren; they cannot live without me!' These types of common mass think that Dhamma cannot be practiced outside the four walls of the temple, retreat or other religious establishments.

Such erroneous view may have been contracted from some of those places where the gurus or priests greedily seek for more and more devotees so as to increase their fame with the number of disciples. Some gurus do teach, but not for the self-reliance of the devotees. Hence among the lay household there exist two contrasting views, one group who stick to the temples and other group who refrain from visiting religious places. But both groups have one common notion is that Dhamma exists in the temple only, and Dhamma cannot be practiced outside its periphery.

The Buddha never had said that the Dhamma has to be practiced in the temple. But rather, the suitable places to practice Dhamma, the Buddha said, 'in the forest (*arañña*), underneath the tree (*rukhamūla*) and any solitary place (*suññāgāra*)'.²

He further explained in detail, the way, how to practice his teaching, as follows:
'*abhikkante paṭikkante, sampajānakārī hoti* – in going forward and in going back, [he] applies clear comprehension;

'*Ālokite vilokite, sampajānakārī hoti* – in looking straight on and in looking away from the front, [he] applies clear comprehension;

'*samiñjite pasārite, sampajānakārī hoti* – in bending his limbs and in stretching limbs, [he] applies clear comprehension;

'*sañghāti pattācivara dhāraṇe, sampajānakārī hoti* – in wearing the double robe, carrying the bowl and wearing the two other robes, [he] applies clear comprehension;

'*asite pite khāyite sāyite, sampajānakārī hoti* – in eating, drinking, chewing and savouring, [he] applies clear comprehension;

² *Mahāsatipaṭṭhānasuttaṃ* in *Dīgha Nikāya*, ii, 374 and in *Mijjhima Nikāya*, i, 107.

‘*uccāra passāvakamme, sampajānakārī hoti* – in obeying the calls of the nature i.e., in defecating and urinating, [he] applies clear comprehension;
‘*gate thite nisinne sute jāgarite bhāsīte tuṇhībhāve, sampajānakārī hoti* – in walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking, speaking, keeping silence, [he] applies clear comprehension.’³

From the above words of instruction the Buddha made it is very clear that Dhamma taught by him could be practiced everywhere and in all the functions we perform in our day-to-day lives. The temple-based as well as those who avoid temples can build their temple (spiritual awareness) in their temples (forehead), carry it with them and use it, wherever he goes whatever he does – in their words, thought and actions.

The disciplinary code of conduct laid down for lay people shows how they can live a virtuous and harmless life without renouncing the household life. Some noteworthy advices for lay people that are to be found in such discourses as *Siṅgālasuttaṃ*, *Maṅgalasuttaṃ*, *Parābhavasuttaṃ*, *Vasallasuttaṃ*, *Vyggghapajja suttaṃ* which are rightly called the layman’s code of discipline (*gihi-vinaya*) clearly show the Great Master’s concern for both the material welfare and spiritual development of his lay disciples.

In the discourse to young Siṅgāla⁴ the Buddha explains in plain language the full duties of a layman to all with whom he has relations: The reciprocal duties of parents and children; teacher and pupil; husband and wife; friends and relatives; master and servant; and duty to the religious recluses. In this way the Buddha encourages the layman to live a righteous life, doing his duty to the best of his ability and leaving nothing undone.

Likewise, there are thirty-eight bliss mentioned in the widely recited, *Maṅgalasuttaṃ*⁵ – intended primarily for the welfare and happiness of the householders. Interested persons may also go through *Parābhavasuttaṃ* where the Buddha mentioned about the things that tend to one’s downfall. The readers who wish to go through in detail may find these in *Buddhist Rules for the laity* written by D. J. Subasinha (first edited in 1907 but Taiwanese reprint is available) and *Constitution for Living* written by Venerable P. A. Payutto published by Buddhadhamma Foundation, Thailand. These two books are worth reading for any lay person.

In another discourse the Buddha explained to Anāthapindika⁶ the four kinds of bliss or happiness a layman ought to enjoy. They are:

- (i) *atthisukha* – the ownership, or economic security, so that he has sufficient means acquired lawfully;

³ *Mahāsatiipaṭṭhānasuttaṃ* in *Dīgha Nikāya*, ii, 376 and in *Mijjhima Nikāya*, i, 109. For detail in English see Sīlānanda, Ven. U *The Four Foundation of Mindfulness* (Wisdom Publications, Boston, USA, 1990), 50-62.

⁴ *Siṅgālasuttaṃ* in *Dīgha Nikāya*, iii, *Pathikavaggapāḷi*, 242 - 274.

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Maṅgalasuttaṃ in *Khuddaka Nikāya i*, *Khuddakapāṭṭhapāḷi* 5 and in *Khuddaka Nikāya iv*, *Suttani pata pāḷi* 2, *Cūlavagga* 4, 261 - 272.

⁶ *Āṇāyasuttaṃ* in *Āṅuttara Nikāya iv*, *Pattakammavagga* (7) 2.

- (ii) *bhogasukha* – the happiness gained by the judicious expenditure of lawful wealth;
- (iii) *ānanyasukha* – the bliss of debtless-ness and;
- (iv) *anavajjasukha* – the bliss of blameless acts of body, speech and mind.

All these show that the layman as a member of society should work hard to earn a living and strengthen his economic and social position lest he becomes a burden to himself and others, but at the same time he should avoid wrong and unrighteous ways of living and not deviate from the path of duty and rectitude.

Once a man named Dīghajāṇu⁷ of Koliya approached the Buddha thus: Venerable Sir, we are ordinary laymen leading a household life (*gihī kāmabhogino*) with wife and children; would the Blessed One teach us some Dhamma which will be conducive to our well-being & happiness in this world (*diṭṭhadhammahitāya diṭṭhadhammasukhāya*) and well-being & happiness hereafter (*samparāyahitāya samparāyasukhāya*)?

For the well-being and happiness in the world, the Buddha gave him the four pieces of advice:

- (i) *uṭṭhānasampadā* – he should be skilled, efficient, earnest, and energetic in whatever profession he is engaged;
- (ii) *ārakkhasampadā* – he should protect his righteously well earned income with the sweat of his brow;
- (iii) *kalyānamittatā* – he should associate with good, honest, learned, intelligent and faithful friends; and
- (iv) *samajīvitā* – he should utilise his income reasonably, neither too much nor too little, should not hoard wealth stingily and greedily nor should he spend excessively and extravagantly.

And then, for the well-being and happiness hereafter, the Buddha expounded the four virtues:

- (i) *saddhasāmpadā* – he should have faith and confidence in moral, spiritual and intellectual values;
- (ii) *sīlasampadā* – he should maintain the five-precept i.e., abstaining from (a) harming living creatures, (b) stealing and cheating, (c) adultery, (d) speaking lies, and (e) intoxicating substances;
- (iii) *cāgasampadā* – he should not crave for wealth, but practice detachment while giving charity without seeking any return; and
- (iv) *paññāsampadā* – he should develop knowledge and wisdom which leads to the eradication of his sufferings and attain nibbāna.

In the right or perfect livelihood (*sammā ājīva*) one of the Noble Eightfold Path, the Buddha, categorically prohibited the five harmful means of livelihood, they are: dealing in;

⁷ Dīghajāṇusuttaṃ in *Aṅguttara Nikāya viii, Gotamīyaga 54.*

- (i) arms and lethal weapons [weapons of mass destruction (WMD) as well as weapons of small-scale destruction] ,
- (ii) animals for slaughter,
- (iii) human being – trafficking human (men, women, children, slave, prostitution to human organ trade),
- (iv) narcotics and intoxicating drugs, and
- (v) poisons and pesticides.

We should bear in mind that the Buddha was addressing Indian society in the sixth century B.C., which consisted mostly of farmers, herdsman and traders. In the present world scenario there are so many kinds of trade and business that are harmful to the people, society, nation and Nature. They are so numerous to name, a few may be like: dishonest advertising and false publicity, yellow journalism, money laundering, business that includes usury, uncontrolled logging, racketeering, nuclear warfare industries, nuclear waste dumping etc.

Once on his visit to the house of Anāthapiṇḍika, the Buddha heard an unusual uproar inside the house and on enquiry he was informed that it was Sujātā, their daughter-in-law, having been brought from a wealthy family, paying no heed to her mother-in-law, father-in-law, nor to her husband, neither did she venerate the Exalted One. Sujātā was summoned to appear before the Buddha and preached her an illuminative discourse on seven kinds of wives, they are:

- (i) *vadhā ca bhariyā* – a troublesome wife,
- (ii) *cori ca bhariyā* – a thievish wife,
- (iii) *ayyā ca bhariyā* – a lordly wife,
- (iv) *mātā ca bhariyā* – a motherly wife,
- (v) *bhaginī ca bhariyā* – a sisterly wife,
- (vi) *sakhī ca bhariyā* – a friendly wife, and
- (vii) *dāsi ca bhariyā* – a handmaid wife.

“These Sujātā, are the seven kinds of wives a man may have; and which of them are you?” the Buddha asked.⁸ It is unpleasantly true that this question mark is still current in this twenty-first century human society.

The *Jataka* text mentions ‘ten duties of a king’ (*dasa rājā dhamma*).⁹ They are:

- (i) *dāna* – generosity in giving,
- (ii) *sīla* – morality,
- (iii) *pariccāga* – self-sacrifice or unselfishness,
- (iv) *ajjava* – honesty or gentleness,
- (v) *maddava* – not being given to luxurious living,
- (vi) *tapa* – self-restraint,
- (vii) *akkodha* – non-anger,
- (viii) *avihiṅsa* – non-violence,
- (ix) *khanti* – patience, and

⁸ Bhariyāsuttam in *Aṅguttara Nikāya vii, (63)*.

⁹ *Jataka*, ii, 21: 533; 176, Khuddaka Nikāya in Piyadassi Thera, *The Buddha’s Ancient Path*, 1987 (reprinted by The Corporate Body of the Buddha Education Foundation, Taiwan), 156.

(x) *avirodha* – non-enmity, non-hostility or non-antagonistic.

Referring the above points, what the Buddha wanted to mean that, it is the head of the nation, society, institute and family, who should first establish himself in Dhamma; if he is unrighteous the whole realm, domain, arena, sphere goes corrupt and the people therein live in woe; if he lives upright, the others emulate him and the people live peacefully.

From the few illustrations given above, it would be clear that the Buddha considered family, social and economic welfare as a requisite for human happiness, he also emphasised that he categorically discouraged the outward material progress devoid of moral and spiritual footings. All the development that lacks moral and spirituality are absurd and selfish, they are sham pleasure seekers – it is contrary building a harmonious society. What did the Buddha taught us is that, while we enjoy the material comforts we should value the moral, ethical, devotional, spiritual and practical aspects of our lives – without being overly attached to materialism that hinders our happiness in this world and the happiness hereafter.

The Buddha emphatically stressed that the laymen should strive hard to observe at least the *pañcasīla* – the five precepts and he should earn his living by right means. What he earns by unjust and unrighteous means – by killing, stealing, cheating, through dishonesty and deceit, cannot be regarded as right living. The laymen and laywomen who form the bulk of the society, which ultimately is an assemblage of ‘sociological units’ so the welfare or ills of the society depends on the individuals. If each individual person leads a decent life his family would be fine, society would be peaceful, nature would be beneficial and the people would be able to live in harmony.

Though the Buddha advised people not to do evil (*sabbapāpassa akaranam*), to do all that is good (*kusalassa upasampadā*) and to purify one’s own mind (*sacitta pariyodapanam*) but the unskilled people are not interested in doing, saying and thinking thus. Instead, they prefer to cling to the other practices that have no substantial dhammic values. Despite its superb quality, it is also true to say that the organised religious establishments are at large a fertile soil for the development of superstitions and devotional hypocrisy, wrapped under the cloak of religiosity. The teaching of Buddha should be a reliable and reasonable method for all people to live in ‘here and now’ (*idha ca idāni*) – visible in ‘this life’ (*sandiṭṭhiko*) or ‘hereafter’ (*saṃparāya*), as cultured and understanding being, and set a good example for the new generations to walk the Way.