

# The Greatest Blessings

In the Maha-Mangala-sutta (The Highest Blessings, Sutta-Nipata II, 4, Khuddaka Nikaya)<sup>1</sup> we read that a deva came to see the Buddha when he was staying at Anathapindika's monastery at the Jeta Grove, and asked him what the highest blessing was. In reply the Buddha spoke to him about the highest blessings. All the blessings of life full of Dhamma are to be found in this sutta. We read that the Buddha said:

Not to associate with fools, to associate with the wise, and to honour those who are worthy of honour this is the Highest Blessing.  
To reside in a suitable locality, to have done meritorious actions in the past, and to set oneself in the right course this is the Highest Blessing.  
Vast learning, (skill in) handicraft, a highly trained discipline, and pleasant speech this is the Highest Blessing.  
Supporting one's mother and father, cherishing wife and children, and peaceful occupations this is the Highest Blessing.  
Liberality, righteous conduct, the helping of relatives, and blameless actions this is the Highest Blessing.  
To cease and abstain from evil, abstention from intoxicating drinks, and diligence in virtue this is the Highest Blessing.  
Reverence, humility, contentment, gratitude and the opportune hearing of the Dhamma this is the Highest Blessing.  
Patience, obedience, seeing the Samanas (holy men), and (taking part in) religious discussions at proper times this is the Highest Blessing.  
Self-control, Holy Life, perception of the Noble Truths, and the realisation of Nibbāna this is the Highest Blessing.  
If a man's mind is sorrowless, stainless, and secure, and does not shake when touched by worldly vicissitudes this is the Highest Blessing.  
Those who thus acting are everywhere unconquered, attain happiness everywhere to them these are the Highest Blessings.

“Not to associate with fools, to associate with the wise, and to honour those who are worthy of honour” is the first blessing. The last blessing, which is the blessing of the arahat, cannot be attained if one lacks the first blessing. If one does not know the right conditions for enlightenment, nibbana cannot be realized. We read in the Kindred Sayings (V, Mahavagga, Book XI, Kindred Sayings on Streamwinning, Ch I, par 5) that the Buddha asked Sariputta to tell him what the conditions are for “stream-winning”, the attainment of the first stage of enlightenment. We read that Sariputta answered:

“Lord, association with the upright is a limb of stream-winning. Hearing the good Dhamma is a limb of stream-winning. Applying the mind is a limb of stream-winning. Conforming to the Dhamma is a limb of stream-winning.”

Conforming to the Dhamma is applying the Dhamma, practising it. We cannot hear the Dhamma, investigate the truth of it and practise it, unless we have met the right person

<sup>1</sup>I am using the translation by Walpola Rahula, in “What the Buddha taught”. The P.T.S. translation is by K.R. Norman

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who can point out to us the meaning of the Buddha's teachings and the way to practise them.

Do we want to associate with foolish people or with wise people? It is of no use to apply ourselves to mental development if we do not scrutinise ourselves first with regard to this question. We are inclined to associate with people who have the same ideas and who like or dislike the same things as we ourselves. In the Kindred Sayings (II, Nidana-vagga, Ch XIV, Kindred Sayings on Elements, par 14) it is said that "through an element" beings come together. In the teachings realities are sometimes called "elements" (dhatu). An element is an ultimate reality which has its own characteristic. Elements are devoid of self. Our accumulated inclinations are like elements; the same elements attract each other. We read:

Through an element it is, monks, that beings low together, meet together. Beings of low tastes low together, meet together with them of low tastes. They of virtuous tastes low together, meet together with them of virtuous tastes. So have they done in the past. So will they do in the future. So do they now in the present.

When we are together with someone for a long time we cannot help being influenced by him. If we have foolish friends who do not know the value of kusala, who act and speak in an unwholesome way, it is to our decline. We may not notice that we are under their influence, but gradually we may find ourselves following their ways. If we have friends who know the value of kusala, who are generous, perform good deeds and speak in a wholesome way, it encourages us to more wholesomeness. The Buddha pointed out the dangers of wrong friendship and the benefit of righteous friendship.

Fools do not know what is wholesome and what is unwholesome. They praise what should not be praised and do not honour to those who should be honoured. For example, high esteem is given to the most beautiful woman in the country or the world, or to persons who have the greatest skill in the field of sports, or to the best actor or musician. Should we disapprove of people who have beauty, strength or skill? We cannot force ourselves not to admire them, but if we have right understanding of kusala and akusala, we will know whether it is wholesome or unwholesome to be attached to beauty, strength and skill. We will know whether these things lead to the welfare of ourselves and others or not.

How confused is life if one is ignorant of the Dhamma. One does not know what is wholesome and what is unwholesome; one does not know about cause and effect in life. When one suffers one does not understand why this has to happen. In everyone's life there is at different times the experience of pleasant objects and the experience of unpleasant objects through the senses; there is the experience of the vicissitudes of life. We read in the Gradual Sayings (Book of the Eights, Ch I, par 5, Worldly Failings) about the "worldly conditions" (lokadhamma):

Monks, these eight worldly conditions obsess the world; the world revolves around these eight worldly conditions. What eight?

Gain and loss, fame and obscurity, blame and praise, contentment and pain. . .

How susceptible we are to those worldly conditions. We are so sensitive to the way people treat us. We attach great importance to blame and praise, to honour and dishonour. If we do not receive the honour we think is due to us we feel slighted. We have feelings of bitterness towards those who treat us badly. If we do not make the career in life we were hoping for, or if work is assigned to us which we consider to be beneath our dignity, we feel frustrated. There are many things in life which cause us to feel irritated, depressed or

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angry. Is there one day when everything goes according to our wishes, one day of perfect happiness? When we do not have right understanding we are obsessed by the “worldly conditions”; we are foolish people.

The Buddha pointed out the dangers of being enslaved to these worldly conditions. To what does such enslavement lead? It leads to an unhappy rebirth. Devadatta, who caused a schism in the order and who separated from it with five hundred monks, was a fool; he was obsessed by the worldly conditions and corrupted by evil friendship. We read in the Gradual Sayings (Book of the Eights, Ch I, par 7, Devadatta) that the Buddha, while he was staying on Vulture’s Peak, not long after the departure of Devadatta, said to the monks:

.. Monks, mastered by eight wrong states, Devadatta, with his mind out of control, became one doomed to suffer in hell, in perdition, dwelling there a kappa<sup>2</sup>, irretrievable. By what eight?

Mastered by gain..by loss..by fame..by obscurity..by honour... by lack of honour..by evil intentions..by evil friendship, with his mind out of control, Devadatta became one doomed to suffer in hell, in perdition, dwelling there a kappa, irretrievable...

Fools like Devadatta who are obsessed by worldly conditions cannot teach Dhamma. They want others to follow them blindly. They do not lead people to the Buddha’s teachings so that they can investigate the truth for themselves. If we associate with fools we cannot develop right understanding of our life. We will become more obsessed by the worldly conditions and there will be no way for us to eradicate defilements.

The Buddha, “Teacher of devas and men”, taught out of compassion for the world, not in order to have “gain, honour and praise” in return. He pointed out that it is the Dhamma which is important, not the person who teaches it. We read in the Kindred Sayings (III, Khanda-vagga, Kindred Sayings on Elements, Middle Fifty, Ch IV, par 87, Vakkali) that the Buddha visited Vakkali who was sick and who was so attached to the sight of the Buddha. Vakkali said:

“For a long time, lord, I have been longing to set eyes on the Exalted one, but I had not strength enough in this body to come to see the Exalted One.”

“Hush, Vakkali! What is there in seeing this vile body of mine? He who sees the Dhamma, Vakkali, he sees me; he who sees me, Vakkali, he sees the Dhamma. Verily, seeing the Dhamma, Vakkali, one sees me; seeing me, one sees the Dhamma.

As to this, what do you think, Vakkali? Is body permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, lord.”

“Is feeling..perception, the activities, is consciousness permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, lord.”

“Wherefore, Vakkali, he who thus sees...he knows ‘...for life in these conditions there is no hereafter.’ “

Further on in this sutta we read that Vakkali took the knife in order to kill himself. The Buddha told the monks that Vakkali had attained arahatship before he died. He could become an arahat because he had developed insight to that degree.

<sup>2</sup>A “world-period” or aeon, an inconceivably long space of time.

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The wise person does not want others to follow him blindly, but he helps them in such a way that they can realize the truth themselves, without being dependent on him; this is the most effective way one can help others. He leads them directly to the Buddha's teachings and encourages them to study the "Tipitaka", the three Collections of the Vinaya, the Suttanta and the Abhidhamma. Then they can have wise consideration of the teachings and verify the Dhamma themselves. He points out the way by which they can realize for themselves the truth of impermanence, dukkha and anatta. The aim of the Buddha's teachings is to see realities as they are. So long as we have not realized the truth we take for permanent what is impermanent, we take for happiness what is not happiness, we take for self what is non-self.

We read in the Kindred Sayings (IV, Salayatana-vagga, Kindred Sayings on Sense, First Fifty, Ch III, par 26, Comprehension) that the Buddha said:

Without fully knowing, without comprehending the all, monks, without detaching himself from, without abandoning the all, a man is incapable of extinguishing dukkha.

Without fully knowing, without comprehending, without detaching himself from, without abandoning what (all) is a man incapable of extinguishing dukkha?

It is by not fully knowing the eye..objects..eye-consciousness... eye-contact...that pleasant or unpleasant or indifferent feeling... the tongue...savours...the body...touches...the mind... mind-objects...<sup>3</sup> that a man is incapable of extinguishing dukkha. This is the all, monks,

without fully knowing which... a man is so incapable.

But by fully knowing, by comprehending, by detaching himself from, by abandoning the all, one is capable of extinguishing dukkha.

The Buddha pointed out the impermanence of seeing, hearing and all the other realities which can be experienced through the six doors, in order to remind people to be aware of the seeing at this moment, of the hearing at this moment. If we are not mindful of seeing-consciousness which appears at the present moment or of the other realities appearing now, there will not be a precise understanding of their characteristics and thus we will not be able to see them as they are. The wise person does not teach a Dhamma which is different from the Buddha's teachings. He does not point out things which do not lead to the goal. He does not discourage people from study and he does not discourage them from being mindful during their daily activities. He encourages them to be mindful of the reality appearing at the present moment, no matter where they are and what they are doing. It is essential to find out whether the person with whom we associate is the right friend in Dhamma or not. If he is not the right person he cannot point out to us the way to see things as they are. We will know that he is the right person if he helps us to understand the characteristic of seeing which appears now, of hearing which appears now, and of the other realities which present themselves through the six doors. This is the way the Buddha taught as the one and only way to eradicate the clinging to the concept of self, to see things as they are. When there

<sup>3</sup>Also the ear, sound, the nose, odour, the contacts through the ear, the nose and the other doorways, and the feelings arising conditioned by those contacts are included in the "all", as is explained in par 23, "The all".

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will be less attachment to the concept of self we will know from our own experience that association with the wise is the highest blessing.

To honour those who are worthy of honour is the highest blessing. The Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha are worthy of honour. The wise person who taught us the development of the eightfold Path is worthy of honour. How can we honour those who are worthy of honour in the most appropriate way? We feel deep gratitude to the Buddha and we want to give expression to our gratitude. We can honour him by following his last words: "Transient are all the elements of being! Strive with earnestness!" (Maha-Parinibbana-sutta, Dialogues of the Buddha II, no. 16). We should not be heedless, we should be mindful of realities. Without the Buddha's teachings we could not be mindful at this moment and there would be no way to eradicate defilements. The whole purpose of the teachings is the eradication of defilements through the development of right understanding. Therefore, each moment of mindfulness is the highest possible way of respect to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha.

"To reside in a suitable location" is among the highest blessings. We cannot meet the good friend in Dhamma in just any place; wise people are rare in the world. It is a great blessing to live in a country where Dhamma is taught and practised, so that one has an opportunity to know the Buddha's teaching. There are many factors that have to coincide in order to meet the right person. It is not by mere chance that we meet him; it is conditioned by kamma, by good deeds which have been performed.

When someone meets a wise person he may not be ready yet to receive the Dhamma. It may not be the right time for him to listen to the Dhamma; he may not be capable yet of wise consideration of the teachings. The accumulation of wholesome deeds is very helpful for making us ready to receive the Dhamma. "To have done meritorious actions in the past" is among the highest blessings. We read in the "Thera-Therigatha" that the men and women in the Buddha's time who attained enlightenment had accumulated meritorious deeds for aeons and that they had also listened to the Dhamma preached by Buddhas of former times. We read, for example, about Subha (Commentary to the Therigatha, the Paramattha-Dipani, commentary to Canto XII, 70, Subha):

She, too, having made her resolve under former Buddhas, and accumulating good of age-enduring efficacy, so that she had progressively planted the root of good and accumulated the conditions for emancipation, was, in this Buddha era reborn at Rajagaha...

Subha listened to the Buddha, developed insight and attained enlightenment, even to the stage of the arahat. When we know about the conditions necessary for wisdom to reach maturity we will be less inclined to think that it is self who develops the eightfold Path. When we read that men and women in the Buddha's time had accumulated good of "age-enduring efficacy", that they had listened to the Dhamma preached by former Buddhas, before they met the Buddha Gotama and attained enlightenment, we are reminded not to be heedless at the present time.

The Buddha taught satipatthana to monks, nuns, laymen and women lay-followers. As regards the life of the monk, the Vinaya should not be separated from satipatthana. In the Buddha's time the Vinaya and satipatthana were not separated. We read in the "Maha-Mangala-sutta that one of the highest blessings is "a highly trained discipline" (vinaya). The commentary to this sutta (the Paramatthajotika) speaks about the discipline of the

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layman, abstinence from the ten immoral actions<sup>4</sup>, and about the discipline of the monk. The monk who develops the eightfold Path will have a deeper understanding of the Vinaya and he will observe the rules more perfectly. Each detail of the Vinaya is full of meaning because the rules support the welfare of the community of the monks, the Sangha, and help the monk to lead a pure life; the rules help him to be considerate in his speech and actions, to cause no trouble to others. The Vinaya teaches the monk to be watchful in body, speech and mind. When we develop mindfulness there is watchfulness as regards the six doors. Through right understanding of nama and rupa we will come to know our subtle defilements and the danger of even these defilements. The monk who develops satipatthana will have a deeper respect for the rules of the Vinaya which remind him to be watchful, seeing danger in even the slightest faults. Thus we see that Vinaya and satipatthana should not be separated.

The monk who develops the eightfold Path and attains enlightenment will not leave the order anymore and return to the "lower life", the layman's life. We read in the Kindred Sayings (V, Maha-vagga, Book I, Ch VI, par 12, The river) that the Buddha spoke by way of simile about the monk who will not return to the layman's life; he said that the river Ganges, tending towards the east, cannot be made to change its course and tend towards the west. We read:

Just so monks, if the rajah's royal ministers or his friends or boon companions or kinsmen or blood relatives were to come to a monk who is cultivating and making much of the ariyan eightfold way, and were to seek to entice him with wealth, saying: "Come, good man! Why should these yellow robes torment you? Why parade about with shaven crown and bowl? Come! Return to the lower life and enjoy possessions and do deeds of merit" for that monk so cultivating and making much of the ariyan way, return to the lower life is impossible. Why so? Because, monks, that monk's heart has for many a long day been bent on detachment, inclined to detachment, turned towards detachment, so that there is no possibility for him to return to the lower life. . .

The eightfold Path can change the lives of monks and laypeople. It can change the relationship between parents and children, husband and wife, relatives and friends. There is bound to be attachment and displeasure or anger in one's relationship with others, but when satipatthana is developed there will be less clinging to the concept of self and this will bear also on our relationship with others. When other people treat us badly we can remember that in the ultimate sense there is no self or person who suffers, and that there is no person who behaves in a disagreeable way. There are only nama and rupa arising because of conditions.

We are still susceptible to the worldly conditions of gain and loss, honour and dishonour, blame and praise, well-being and pain. It is unavoidable that there are both pleasant and unpleasant experiences in our life: one day there is blame, the next day there is praise. However, when we learn that receiving blame or praise are only phenomena which arise because of conditions and fall away immediately, we will gradually attach less importance to them. We read in the Maha-Mangala-sutta:

<sup>4</sup>These are three unwholesome actions through the body, which are killing, stealing and sexual misbehaviour. There are four unwholesome actions through speech, which are lying, slandering, rude speech and idle speech. There are three unwholesome mental actions, which are covetousness, ill-will and wrong views.

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“If a man’s mind is sorrowless, stainless, and secure, and does not shake when touched by worldly vicissitudes this is the Highest Blessing.”

Those who are arahats have a mind unruled by worldly conditions, they are free from sorrow, free from defilements. Nothing can disturb the arahat any more. The sutta continues:

“Those who are thus acting are everywhere unconquered, attain happiness everywhere to them these are the Highest Blessings.”

We are not free from sorrow. So long as there is clinging to the concept of self there is no end to lobha, dosa and moha. Our defilements are the real cause of the suffering in our life, day after day. The Maha-Mangala-sutta tells us about the blessings of a life full of Dhamma. We read about loving-kindness in the relationship between parents and children, between husband and wife, between relatives and friends. We read about righteous conduct, diligence in virtue, reverence, humility, patience, self-restraint, a holy and pure life. When we read about all these blessings we may feel at times discouraged about the practice of the Dhamma. We are inclined to think that the eightfold Path is too difficult and that we are too far from the realization of the truth. We would like to have less lobha, dosa and moha; but can we force ourselves not to be attached to pleasant things, not to be disturbed by unpleasant things? We should always remember that the Buddha became enlightened and taught the truth for our welfare and happiness. The Buddha taught the Dhamma which can be practised in daily life. “To set oneself in the right course” is among the highest blessings. When we have associated with a wise person who can explain the Dhamma to us, when we have listened to the Dhamma and carefully considered it, we can set ourselves in the right course. Defilements cannot be eradicated immediately, but if there is less ignorance of realities we can experience that it is a blessing to have been able to listen to the Dhamma. Through the development of satipatthana the notion of self will gradually decrease until it is finally eradicated. And, thus, we will experience the highest blessings of the Dhamma.

