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# **The Buddhist Code of Discipline**

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**BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY**



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by

**Soma Thera**

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# The Buddhist Code of Discipline

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he Buddha's message consists of the Doctrine (Dhamma) and the Discipline (Vinaya). The Discipline has to do with conduct, virtue, morals, the ethical side of the message; the Doctrine with the rest. In the threefold division of the Noble Eightfold Path, the Discipline comes under the aggregates of virtue (*sīla*); the Doctrine belongs to the aggregates of concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*). The Discipline concerns the activity of speech and bodily behaviour; the Doctrine is connected with the activities of the intellect and of the understanding. Mental clarity and penetration leading to extinction (*Nibbāna*) depend on the practice of virtue, which eliminates the restlessness and anxiety due to immoral action and speech and provides a necessary element for right thought and understanding. Thus the Discipline is an essential factor for the attainment of the Extinction of Ill.

The salient feature of the Buddha's message is its freedom from exaggeration, immoderate thought, and extreme action. The Buddha himself says in the

instruction of the Setting in Motion of the Law (Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta) that his teaching is the Middle Way, *majjhima paṭipadā*, balanced and serene, free from the practice of clinging to sensual enjoyment and self-mortification, and from the erroneous notions of eternalism and annihilationism. This freedom from extremes is the best test for distinguishing the genuine teaching of the Buddha from the spurious attributed to him. What is extreme, extravagant, irrational, exaggerated, whatever it may be found, cannot be the teaching of the compassionate, Fully Enlightened One.

In the diffusion of the Dhamma in the world no coercive method or force of any kind was used. The Dhamma spread itself quietly, unhurriedly, gently, with dignity, and by clean means. The message of the Buddha, wherever it went, pacified the hearts of men with its cooling waters of compassion and peace. The history of the propagation of the Dhamma is innocent of cruelty, persecution, and bloodshed. There is enough to warrant the statement that the first disciples of the Blessed One who published his message went from place to place, bearing in their hearts the image of his gracious, kind, and noble personality and mindful of these words of his to them: “Wander forth for the good of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the profit, welfare and happiness of divine

and human beings. Make known the teaching, good in the beginning, in the middle, and good in the end, endowed with meaning and proper verbal expression, and complete in everything. Proclaim the purified way of the excellent life.”

A follower of the Buddha cannot resort to violence to gain his ends. Not only is violence wrong in the Buddha’s teaching but so also is anger, which is near to violence. For anyone who appreciates the moderate way of life, the life that is free from extremes, it is a sign of failure in right practice to fall into ill-will, anger, or indignation. Hate of every kind clouds the mind, hinders clear understanding, and deprives one of the power to reach sane decisions. Anger has an intoxicating quality. The man who is angry is in some respects like a drunken person. He is not sober. Seeing the danger and futility of anger for one in search of the truth, the Buddha said “Bhikkhus, if outsiders speak ill of me, or of Dhamma, the Teaching, or of the Sangha, the Community of Bhikkhus, there will not be in you on that account discontent, ill-will, or malice. Should you on that account be angry and offended, you would (spiritually) be in danger. Bhikkhus, if, when others speak ill of me, the Teaching or the Community, you feel angry and offended, would you be able to see the difference between the good and the bad speech to others?”—“No, venerable

sir.”—“Bhikkhus, when outsiders speak ill of me, the Teaching, or the Community of Bhikkhus, the false should be explained by you as false thus: ‘This is a falsehood for this reason; this is an untruth for this reason. This is not in us; this does not exist in us.’”

“Bhikkhus, if outsiders speak in praise of me, the Teaching, or the Community of Bhikkhus, there should not be in you, on that account, joy or pleasure or elation. Should you on that account be joyful, pleased and elated, you would thereby be (spiritually) in danger. When others speak in praise of me, the Teaching, the Community of Bhikkhus, the true should be acknowledged by you as true thus: ‘This is true for this reason; this is a fact for this reason. This is in us; this exists in us.’”

The follower of the Buddha, in upholding the truth and rejecting untruth according to his understanding, will not go beyond clearly stating what he believes to be true, and not subscribing to and not supporting in any way what he has found to be untrue. He will not hate those who hold views different from his. He will always act free from resentment even under the most difficult circumstances. Adherence to the truth is a most important thing for the good life. It will always keep the ways of reason free and clear, and produce the readiness to acknowledge error and to change a course of action that has been found to be wrong. This

malleability of spirit, this humility, tractability and freedom from pride can be seen in all who have the open mind, which is most needed for the attainment of inner peace.

As the Buddha's teaching is one that inculcates the idea that every man is responsible for his deeds and for what he is, no one can blame another for his own unhappiness, misery, feeling of insecurity or anxiety. Every man is the heir of his own deeds. His deeds are his possession, his relative, and his refuge. Due to his own deeds, a man continues in *samsāra*. All good depends on nobility of character. It may be justly said that the Buddha's teaching, which tells us to seek security and freedom in ourselves, in our own minds purified by virtue, is the best of all conceptions of human liberty, based as it is on a realistic view of life.

The Buddha sees not only suffering but also the transcending of suffering. He teaches us to avoid what produces unhappiness and to do what produces happiness. He says that the evil-doer suffers here and hereafter and that the doer of good rejoices now and afterwards. The transcending of evil by mundane good and the transcending of both evil and good later through attainment of the supramundane constitute the path to freedom proclaimed by the Buddha.

This path is a gradual one, free from harsh and

violent methods, as it must be since it is a teaching of moderate principles suited for practice by all intelligent beings. In the Ganaka Moggallāna Sutta, the Blessed One says that just as a horse-trainer having got a good thoroughbred, first accustoms him to the bit and then trains him in what further training he must get step by step, so the Master leads the tameable human being who comes to him by stages, along the way of purity.

Unlike the paths of other teachers, who believe that happiness has to be reached by suffering, the Blessed One's path is a turning away from what is unhappy to what is not. When according to the Buddha's instruction a person sees the world's ill, he is not depressed by it, because the Buddha also shows him the happiness possible of attainment here and now, and so he gains confidence in the Master's teaching. Such a person, through such confidence, gains joy, calm, gladness, concentration and the vision of things as they really are. Then turning away from the happiness connected with the temporary to that which is unconnected with mundane perception, he reaches dispassion, freedom, and the knowledge of the supreme bliss of the extinction of ill. After that, he lives untouched by the world as an extinguished one, just as the lotus, which, having risen above its native pond, stands untouched by the water in which it has

grown.

The Buddhist layman's Code of Discipline is contained in the Sigāla Sutta which deals chiefly with the cultivation of virtues necessary for preparing the mind of the householder for the extinction of ill, Nibbāna. This sutta teaches the layman the art of establishing himself in the fundamental qualities implied in the term 'Discipline' as it is understood in the Buddha's message. These qualities cannot be developed without being endowed with self-control, propriety of conduct, modesty, mildness of manners, and freedom from crooked behaviour, which form the basis of a noble character and which are closely connected with all teachings of virtue in the Buddha's Dispensation. Instructions given by the Buddha for the welfare of laymen in particular are found in other suttas too. Among these are the Parābbava Sutta, Mahā-maṅgala Sutta, Dhammika Sutta, and Vyaggapajjha Sutta, which set forth teachings related to the basic principles of Buddhist ethics for the layman as made explicit and implicit in the Sigāla Sutta.

The carrying out of the moral principles taught by the Buddha needs a friendly mind on the part of the practitioner, and so the Buddha's Path of virtue, which leads to concentration and wisdom, may be called the way of friendly feeling, Mettāyana Magga, since one who practises virtue (*sīla*) bestows on all living beings

freedom from fear, hatred, injury, and distress. As the feeling of amity impels the understanding Buddhist to be virtuous, kindness becomes the dominant note of the Buddhist way of life.

The practice of the Sigāla Sutta, the 'Layman's Code of Discipline', will strengthen the solidarity of a community by maintaining the right relations between its members. According to the Code, parents have to guide their children, see to their education, and take care of them, and children have to honour their parents and keep up the good family traditions; teachers must train and instruct pupils properly and must be duly respected in return; a man should be courteous, true, and respectful to his wife, be unstinting in providing her needs, and be ready to hand her authority in the home in return for faithfulness and the proper performance of her household duties; friends should be generous courteous, kindly, benevolent, helpful and constant to one another; masters should assign to servants tasks according to their strength, feed and pay them, look after them in their illness, share the luxuries with them, and give them holidays, and servants should rise before and retire after their masters, be content, do their work well, and appreciate the virtues of their employers; laymen should minister to monks and brahmins by deeds, words, and thoughts of loving-

kindness, welcoming them gladly and supplying their requisites, and monks and brahmins should restrain the laymen from evil, encourage them to do good, have a kindly heart towards them, and teach them well.

Such a teaching has the wellbeing of all members of a society as its end, and is the diligent practice of friendly action, which is the mark of a truly social being. It is obvious that those who practise the Buddhist Layman's Code of Ethics will be happy fulfilling the duties that make for orderliness, peace, material prosperity and spiritual development.

The virtuous man who follows the way of the good householder will be gentile, possessed of intelligence, humble, docile, energetic, free from indolence, unshaken in adversity, modest of demeanour, wise, impartial to all, one who wants to have friends, bountiful, free from avarice, a leader, a guide, and an instructor. Such a man is clearly one who can be called a model citizen. He is driven to action by the law of righteousness, which inspires right exertion for the overcoming of ill. It is not possible for one who sees the world with friendly eyes not to exert himself for the good of others. The lives of Buddha and his Noble Disciples, and of his well-known lay followers like Dhammasoka, bear witness to this fact. Dhammasoka began to tread the way of friendly feeling after turning

away from the cruel way of the sword after he heard the teaching of diligence (*appamāda*) from the Arahant Sāmaṇera Nigrodha which began to take effect in him through his progress in right exertion or endeavour, which is one of the principal things in the Dhamma, and is the characteristic of the diligent. The opposite of diligence is negligence, sloth and indolence, which lead to death and not to immortality. This is according to the first verse of the portion of Dhamma which Asoka heard from the young saint. The verse runs thus: "Diligence is the way to the deathless; negligence is the way to death. The diligent do not die. The negligent are as it were dead."

In one who is endeavouring to do good with a heart endowed with friendly feeling, the barriers of greed, hate, and delusion, which keep men from helping one another, disappear and the will to progress towards the lofty, the true, and the good, becomes fully active. The importance of Buddha's teaching for the world's happiness and wellbeing lies largely in its power to awaken men to a sense of the reality of life and to make them energetic in the service of others. The householder's life when properly lived is one dedicated to the good of all living beings, and it is properly lived when a person is established in confidence in regard to truth, is pure of conduct, and is mindful of his own and others' welfare.

A community or society becomes great only when good men arise in it, and good men arise when they practise great virtues. But how can great virtues be practised when the great path trodden by the noblest of beings is forgotten, and men walk along paths that leads to hate and destruction? It is when there are persons with outstanding qualities of conduct and intellect that a community becomes free from the plague of fanaticism and the insecurity of extremist action, as well as from the heartless exploitation, oppression and suppression of the weak by the strong. To protect a community from the possibility of being overwhelmed by these evils, there is only one way. That is the harmless, non-violent way praised by the wise, and proved to be good by centuries of experience of mankind. That way is where through the development of men of character, intellect and vision the foolishnesses and pettinesses that are perpetrated by the mediocrities are cancelled and obliterated, and the influence of the perpetrators nullified. Closed is the way where intelligence is at a discount, dullness is enthroned, and the wise who are the living signposts to that way are neglected. The danger of such a state of affairs lies in the increase of fear and anxiety in the world, which can only be dispelled by the stability of love and wisdom.

As taught by all the great teachers of humanity, the

practice of the golden rule is the starting point of the cultivation of the liberation of the heart through love. Long before the rule was promulgated in the West, it was taught by the Blessed One. This ancient teaching of treating oneself and others equally, impartially, without distinction, is the essence of the four excellent dwellings, the Brahmaviharas, and the quicker they become generally active in a community the nearer will that community be to the abolishing of the grounds for discord in it, and for ensuring the safety of everyone in the community. It is only with the widening of the mind through the spirit of universality which the Brahmaviharas instil, that true freedom can hope to gain a foothold in this world. And it is because the Buddha saw in these practices the most potent antidote to the narrowness of the unregenerate hearts of men that he gave the practices an important place in his teaching. Non-violence which is the beginning and the end of the path of Noble Living cannot be practised without the thought of universal kindness and mercy.

Further, in a community where the Buddhist ethics are practised there cannot be any kind of regimentation. The members of the community will learn to live in a way that does not hurt anybody. In such a community the way of friendly feeling will encourage the idea of dedicating oneself to the service

of others and doing all one can do to make the lives of the members of the community happy. As such a way of life is for the wise, the intelligent, and not for the foolish, as it is for the energetic and not for the indolent, all who follow it genuinely will turn their minds to the attainment of knowledge, contentment and right effort, the basis of blameless happy living. Thus the standards in such a community will be the highest humanly possible, and by the very loftiness of the standards the dullness and boredom of uniformity will vanish and the unity of the group will be strengthened by the diversity of achievements and accomplishments of the members, according to their capacities, tendencies and temperaments.

This message of the Buddha can lead to a clear view of life and a practical way for the achievement of individual and social good, since it is a teaching dependent on reality. In such a teaching the intelligent can have trust; it can give them the necessary impetus for reaching the highest goal attainable in the world. The Buddha's message points the path to complete freedom (*vimutti*) from the shackles of superstition, wrong understanding, discontent and conflict.

Buddha showed that the idea of God or gods was not necessary for practising the good life or for explaining the reason of offering or for overcoming it. As Paul Dahlke says, "Man belongs to himself. The

self is the lord of self. No God sits in judgment on him ... Buddhism is atheism in the ordinary sense of the word. The ordinary atheist is a man whose atheism is an excuse for licence ... For the Buddhist there is no God who can absolve him from sin. For the Buddhist there is only action and the result of action."

In this connection H. von Glasenapp says, "Buddhism ... is outspokenly atheistic in respect to its denial of an original creator of the world and of an omnipotent omniscient God." Further he says that for the Buddhist "the world is not governed by a personal God, but an impersonal law..."

The Buddha teaches that man is responsible for what he is and does, and as Dahlke says, "It is a religion for men who know that in the realm of reality nothing is given for nothing." Buddhism shows that in the realm of the spirit man is utterly free, that he is bound only because of craving, and that if the delusion that hides his craving is dispelled, he breaks loose from the bonds that bind him to the world of suffering and is liberated from all ill.

The Dhamma, as already indicated above, is a teaching of right exertion. It is the active man of indomitable energy who blesses the world with material wealth and wisdom. It is impossible to come to know the Dhamma closely and not be impelled to

go forth to reach the highest. The Buddha's teaching when it is admitted wholeheartedly into any mind brings about radical changes for good in the character of the individual who entertains it. The message of the Buddha can make the cruel compassionate, the lazy active, and the selfish selfless, through its immeasurable wisdom which can transmute what is base into something noble and precious.

When the message of the Buddha permeates a society, men can no longer be servile; they have to be free and governed by love, sympathy and the voluntary restraints of righteousness. With the message of the Blessed One ruling the lives of men, there will come into being the fully reasonable code of conduct in which the compassionate outlook, the essence of a cultivated mental life, becomes predominant. This teaching will train men to be careful about their actions and impart serenity and calm to the human mass. The kinship of blood, or race, or language is feeble in comparison with the kinship of the noble ideas in action, which spread wide the spirit of a genuine culture. The kinship of noble ideas springs from the pure consciousness of a man and transcends the bounds of family and nation. Great and pure ideas by their wisdom and sublimity unite people in a way that nothing else can. That is the power of goodness; and in entering the ocean of the

Dhamma, people resort to a wealth of great ideas that are incomparable for their potency and usefulness in producing a happy world within and without.

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